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Humanity's Footprint:

Reading *Rings Of Saturn* and *Palestinian Walks* in an Anthropocene Era

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Abstract

Through readings of two "walking memoirs"—W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* and Raja Shehadeh's *Palestinian Walks*—this article considers the implications of the geological concept of the Anthropocene era for the field of life writing studies and its understanding of the human. It considers the ways these and other authors imagine the human, and the costs of the human pursuit of freedom for other species and things, from a planetary perspective.

. . . walking is a subversive detour, the scenic route through a half abandoned landscape of ideas and experiences.

—Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust* (12)

This article approaches the fruitful contradiction suggested by "posthuman lives" from the perspective of the "Anthropocene era." Introducing this geological concept to the public in 2011, the German magazine *Der Spiegel* proclaimed: "Global warming, rising sea levels, mass extinction of species: Mankind is changing the planet to such an extent that an increasing number of scientists wants to proclaim a new geological epoch" ("Dawn"). Humans are no longer simply biological agents; they are now recognized as "geological agents" who are shaping the planet's future (Chakrabarty 206). Climate scientist Walter Dodds cautions readers that an "insidious explosion of human population growth and resource use is creating a shock wave that is reverberating through our global environment for the first time in the history of humanity" (xi). He uses the metaphor of "humanity's footprint" to describe the "cumulative effect of these influences" (xi). The magnitude and gravity of the current environmental crisis, which includes but is not limited to climate change, challenges the anthropocentrism that has traditionally underwritten the humanities. The concepts of the Anthropocene and the posthuman, to which I will return, have originated in distinct fields of knowledge—the sciences and humanities. Yet, both concepts invite humanities scholars to rethink the place of the human in relation to non-human others, and ultimately to the planet and to the planet's future. Posthumanism is a useful designation for critical work on these matters. **[End Page 170]**

As an anthropocentric genre, autobiography, and the approaches critics develop to read it, could play a critical role in rethinking the concept and place of the human, and humanistic understandings of "the world." Since its emergence in the Enlightenment as a modern genre concerned with narrating the development of a unique self, autobiography has contributed to the "generalized presumption of human exceptionalism" that underpins the humanities (Pettman 30).¹ It is now widely recognized that the presumed autonomy of "man" has been achieved through oppositional thinking in which one term in a dualism—mind/body, nature/culture, human/animal, male/female—is valued and naturalized, while the secondary term is repressed. In the past forty years, feminist, working class, ethnic, postcolonial, and disability studies approaches have all attempted to extend the "bios" of autobiography to include categories of humans (women, non-whites, working class, disabled) who have traditionally been excluded. But the challenge posed by the global environmental crisis is of an entirely different order—it extends beyond the human to encompass non-human species, living organisms, things, and the earth itself. Animal studies scholar Cary Wolfe proposes developing a mode of inquiry that rejects the oppositional thinking of self and other, human and animal, human and land, in which one term dominates the other. He asks whether a new era in humanities—posthumanities—can respond to the challenges of rethinking the place of the human in the world, which appears increasingly vulnerable to technological and environmental changes. How can life writing studies, as a field traditionally concerned with the development of personhood and identity, contribute to the posthumanities?²

I propose that the lens of the Anthropocene, coupled with critical insights on ecology, embodiment, and walking as a practice, might enable us to find in the literature of memoir the seeds of an alternative recognition of the human, not autonomous, but embedded in the

natural and physical world. This conception simultaneously engages both sides of the binary—human/animal; nature/culture; mind/body. It positions the human not in splendid autonomy, but as dependent on other species and on the natural world. I use the phrase "humanity's footprint" to signal both the effects of humans on the natural history of the planet, and walking as an embodied practice of engaging with time and space. These insights and concepts concerning the Anthropocene and posthumanism will shape my reading of two "walking" memoirs, W. G. Sebald's *Rings of Saturn* (1995; 1998), and Raja Shehadeh's *Palestinian Walks: Notes on a Vanishing Landscape* (2007³). These memoirs do not use terms such as "climate change" or "global warming" or "the anthropocene"—far from it. And yet, through their rich evocation of vanishing and ruined landscapes, they capture some of the effects of humanity's footprint on the planet. In this regard, they exemplify characteristics of a posthuman sensibility, and engage the **[End Page 171]** reader in thinking differently about the human and its responsibility. They also counteract the tendency of autobiography to focus exclusively on human life, and thereby naturalize anthropocentrism. But these memoirs differ in ways that may be instructive. As Wolfe points out, there are humanist and posthumanist ways of doing posthumanism—and, I would add, of engaging with the Anthropocene. While both *Rings of Saturn* and *Palestinian Walks* convey the effects of human activity on landscapes and species, Sebald writes the Anthropocene in a posthumanist key, whereas Shehadeh retains a mode of thinking that remains rooted in Enlightenment traditions. Sebald decenters the human by gesturing towards a species view that imagines the human, like other species, as facing possible extinction. By contrast, for Shehadeh, who is engaged in an ongoing struggle for Palestinian statehood, the human remains central to the struggle for social justice. Although he embraces a planetary view of human transience as an escape from the disappointments of political losses, his commitment to Palestinian self-determination leads him to sustain humanist precepts.

Geological Temporality and Human History: Converging in Crisis

In 2001, the Dutch chemist and Nobel Laureate Paul J. Crutzen argued the case for designating a new geological era—the Anthropocene (the "age of man")—to describe the far-reaching effects of humans on the earth's natural history. In geology, time is measured by geological eras that correspond to distinct layers of the earth's sediment. The present age, the "Holocene," is dated to approximately 12,000 years ago, and represents a mere sliver of the earth's history. Among geologists, the concept of the Anthropocene remains controversial. Some geologists are skeptical of the sudden onset of a new geological era, pointing out that "the soil contains evidence of the influence of man since the Stone Age" (Schwägerl and Bojanowski). By contrast, geologists who advocate the concept of the Anthropocene generally agree that if the effects of human activity, especially in the last two hundred years, are evident in a layer of the earth's sediment, a new geological era should be designated to reflect humanity's footprint.⁴ What might, in times past, have been an obscure geological debate has migrated from the leading scientific journal, *Nature*, to high impact media outlets such as *The Economist*, *The New York Times*, and *Der Spiegel*. Scientists and journalists alike value the term because of its elasticity and capaciousness. According to geologist Jan Zalasiewicz, the term "provides a sense of the scale and significance of anthropogenic global change. It emphasizes the importance of the Earth's long geological history as a context within which to better understand what is happening today" ("Dawn"). Humanities scholars now consider the implications of the Anthropocene and the threat of climate **[End Page 172]** change for their disciplines, indicating just how far this concept has travelled. Before turning to Humanities scholarship, however, it is worth examining how "the human" features in geological discussions of the Anthropocene.

Geological debates concerning the Anthropocene reveal a tension regarding the status of humans, and human rationality. Some geologists and climate scientists stress the negative influence of humans on the environment—for instance, the growth of human populations and human activity has contributed to the extinction of other species. "Humans are causing one of the few major extinction events that have occurred over the past billion years," Dodds contends; "We are living in an ecological holocaust. . . . Extinction is forever, and humans are executioners in this current extinction spasm" (70). On the other hand, many scientists and others regard human rationality, science, and technological innovation as the source of solutions to the problems we face; *Nature*, for example, views the concept of the Anthropocene as heralding a "new era of responsibility," and adopting it "would encourage a mindset that will be important not only to fully understand the transformation now occurring but to take action to control it" (Schwägerl and Bojanowski). A similar tension regarding human rationality and technological innovation occurs in debates about "the posthuman" in cultural and literary studies. Wolfe, for instance, identifies posthumanism as coming before and after humanism—before in that it recognizes the biological conditions that enable human evolution, and after in that we are living in a moment in which the human is being decentered. Arguing that the human/animal dichotomy is achieved by "transcending the

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bonds of materiality and embodiment altogether," he is critical of transhumanism, which advocates a technologically enhanced human. Wolfe regards transhumanism as an intensification of, rather than a break with, humanism (xv). A fundamental conceptual issue in both the natural sciences and the humanities, then, is whether Enlightenment humanism, with its anthropocentrism and its celebration of reason and technological innovation, is part of the problem or the solution—or both.

The concept of the Anthropocene, embedded in the conceptual frameworks of geology and the natural sciences, confronts humanities scholars with some fundamental challenges to their conventional frameworks. In a compelling essay, Dipesh Chakrabarty considers the "profound, even transformative, implications" of scientific propositions about climate change "for how we think about human history," and particularly, the emergence of modernity (198). As a post-colonial and post-imperial historian of globalization, he acknowledges that the task "requires us to bring together intellectual formations that are somewhat in tension with each other: the planetary and the global; deep and recorded histories; species thinking and critiques of capital" (213). He argues that the Anthropocene implies a fundamental change in **[End Page 173]** historical understandings of human agency. Whereas humans have always been "biological agents," he contends that only since the Industrial Revolution have we become "geological agents": "we can become geological agents only historically and collectively, that is, when we have reached numbers and invented technologies that are on a scale large enough to have an impact on the planet itself" (206-207). Human geological agency results from technological developments in science, medicine, and material culture, which have enabled humans to develop machines and population numbers that, however inadvertently, alter and threaten the earth's natural history. Chakrabarty further contends that the recent geological agency of humans is collapsing the long-held distinction in the discipline of history between human and natural histories (207). With globalization and global warming both seeded by the technological developments of the Industrial Revolution, geological time and the chronology of human histories are now merging in the manmade crisis of climate change: "The geologic now of the Anthropocene has become entangled with the now of human history" (212). As we will see, it is precisely the convergence of the calendars of natural and human history, or global warming and globalization, that Sebald and Shehadeh map in differing ways.

Another key difference between the natural sciences and the humanities relates to the way these disciplines configure their objects of study. The natural sciences engage in "species thinking," and conceive of "the human" as a species ([Chakrabarty 213-14](#)); only recently, with the emerging field of animal studies, have humanists begun to engage productively with "species thinking." Traditionally, in the humanities, "the human" is regarded in terms of "personhood" (215). "Person," according to the Oxford American Dictionary, is "a human being regarded as an individual" who has a distinctive personality, defined as "the combination of characteristics or qualities that form an individual's distinctive character." The concept of "personhood" is of course crucial to conventional understandings of autobiography: readers expect autobiography "to deliver an 'I'-narrative with a certain kind of content" ([Eakin 74](#)). In practice, however, as Elizabeth Bruss points out: "There is no intrinsically autobiographical form" (qtd. in [Eakin 74](#)). The distinction between "species thinking" and "personhood" has implications for conceptions of temporality as well. Species thinking "is connected to the enterprise of deep history," and requires humanists to engage with a conception of historical time that is much longer than the era of recorded human history, let alone an individual's life span. By contrast, "globalization refers . . . only to the recent and recorded history of humans" ([Chakrabarty 213](#)). Of course, the differences in the temporalities of natural history and human history impact how life story is narrated, and the timescale in which human life is positioned. **[End Page 174]**

Some of the differences that follow from framing a life in terms of "personhood" or "species," with their differing timescales, can be illustrated by comparing the approaches of a literary critic and an evolutionary ecologist. Paul John Eakin uses the concept of "situated selves" to describe relational autobiographies in which the narrators position themselves as "products of a particular time and place; the identity-shaping environments within these autobiographies are nested one within the other—self, family, community set in a physical and cultural geography, in an unfolding history" ([Eakin 85](#)). While some relational autobiographies display an unusual breadth of vision, in rare cases including a geological perspective stretching back millions of years, most focus on two or three generations ([Eakin 85](#)). By contrast, a geological timescale spans millions of years, which historians refer to as "deep history."⁵ Jonathan Kingdon brings a "deep history" perspective to an understanding of the origins of bipedalism, which he regards as "the central condition on which human evolution is predicated" (2). As a natural scientist interested in human ancestry and how geography shapes evolution, he develops an "autobiogeographic" method—a self-portrait "informed by modern genetics and ecology as well as some less modern paleontology" (3). For Kingdon, the "geo" in "autobiogeographic" refers to the

effects of geography on evolution, rather than to the effects of place on social identity (Eakin's "situated selves"). From an ecological perspective the "bio" refers not to an individual human life, but as Kingdon explains, to genetics:

almost every step of our evolutionary history is written into every cell of our bodies. My genome includes sequences that date back more than 700 million years, when my ancestor consisted of no more than one cell. Locked into the genetic mosaic that adds up to a living being are huge numbers of indelible or "undeleted" genetic particles that demonstrate a patrimony that goes back not just to apes but to the start of life on Earth.

(2)

Taking a species perspective, Kingdon places the evolution of "the human" in relation to other species: "By including rudimentary vertebrates, reptiles, and monkeys in my autoportrait, I am expressing my self-awareness of *belonging* to nature, not being inexplicably different" (4). A species approach foregrounds our shared genetic inheritance with other species, but it leaves economics and politics—which often shape the meaning of place for humans—out of the picture.

In recent years, scholars working in the field of animal studies have brought the hitherto alien category of "species" into the humanities, and have used it to interrogate conceptions of the human. Wolfe argues that the "human" is achieved "by escaping or repressing not just its animal origins in nature, the biological, and the evolutionary, but more generally by transcending [End Page 175] the bonds of materiality and embodiment" (xv). Like Wolfe, cultural historian Rebecca Solnit rejects the transhumanist fantasy of escaping embodiment, seeing it instead as crucial to thinking and knowing. In that sense, she lays the groundwork for a posthuman perspective on walking memoirs. Rejecting the mind/body dualism, she proposes that the human body walks and thinks "at three miles an hour." "Walking," she proposes, "returns the body to its original limits again, to something supple, sensitive, and vulnerable, but walking itself extends into the world as do those tools that augment the body" (29). The qualities and experiences that she associates with walking include the wheelchair as a prosthetic extension of the body. Solnit's analysis of walking as an embodied practice informs my reading of memoirs by Sebald and Shehadeh, both of whom use what I call a "peripatetic method" to explore histories of forgotten, buried, or contested places.

Species Thinking in *The Rings of Saturn*

How do memoirists engage with the concerns we identify under the rubric of the Anthropocene and climate change? A tradition of environmental memoirs takes its lead from Thoreau. William Lines's *A Long Walk in the Australian Bush* is a recent environmental memoir with an Anthropocene message. Lines, an ecologist, walked the 600 kilometer Bibbulmun track, which winds through a section of ancient jarrah and karri forests of Western Australia. His memoir illustrates the convergence of the temporalities of globalization and anthropogenic change. He documents the ways in which industrial technologies and commercial greed, combined with a belief that the bounty of the earth is readily replenished, has led to wastage of trees and loss of habitats, and has permanently altered the forest in the period since colonization. Lines takes the position of the objective, rational scientist of memoir who critiques the short-sightedness of commercial logging, and the failure of government officials to manage the forests sustainably. His memoir effectively maps humanity's footprint in the region, but it cannot be regarded as posthumanist, for it does not engage in the self-reflexive "new thinking" of the posthumanities.

By contrast, Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*, a memoir of a walking tour he took in Suffolk County, England, in 1992, is infused by a sensibility that sees the natural and the human as deeply intertwined. But this is no conventional memoir. "[W]alking," Solnit observes, "inevitably leads into other subjects" (8)—an apt description of Sebald's peripatetic method. Each place he visits becomes the trigger for a historical, ecological, or philosophical reflection, moving deftly from describing the landscape of a place and memories of the feelings it evoked (horror, wretchedness, panic, or bliss) to accounts of dreams, other places, histories of colonialism, interpretations of cultural [End Page 176] figures and iconic works, and the like. The memoir displays a keen awareness of the impermanence of things and the vicissitudes of economic fortune. The first paragraph signals these themes, as Sebald reflects on his journey: "In retrospect I became preoccupied not only with the unaccustomed sense of freedom but also with the *paralysing horror* that had come over me at various times when confronted with the *traces of destruction*, reaching far back into the past, that were evident even in that remote place" (3, my italics). This coupling of destruction and horror also informs his book *On the Natural History of Destruction*, which discusses the failure of German authors to write about and thereby commemorate the devastation caused to humans, animals, and material culture by the bombing of German cities in WWII.

Natural history, which gives rise to a planetary perspective, is a recurrent thematic in Sebald's work. His invocation of "natural history" in the title of a book about the bombing of German cities invites us to consider those horrific events in terms of the struggles that occur in the natural world—an analogy that positions humanity as part of "nature."⁶ Indeed, the first epigraph to *Rings of Saturn* links it with *On the Natural History of Destruction*. Taken from a letter Joseph Conrad wrote while in the Congo in 1890, the epigraph refers to the struggle ("la lutte") and competition for survival—a recurrent trope of natural history: "ces âmes malheureuses qui ont élu de faire le pèlerinage à pied, qui côtoient le rivage et regardent sans comprendre l'horreur de la lutte, la joie de vaincre ni le profond désespoir des vaincus." Viewed through the lens of natural history, the bombing of Germany is representative of the destruction that humans inflict on other humans and species—a theme Sebald takes up in a chapter titled "The Natural History of the Herring." He takes a planetary rather than a global perspective on destruction, as signaled by his second epigraph, which concerns the destruction of a former moon that was too close to Saturn, and fragmented into ice crystals—Saturn's rings. A planetary perspective thinks in terms of a geological time that existed before humans and will exist after human extinction, and is consistent with the "deep history" of the natural sciences. In contrast, a global perspective, common in humanities and social sciences, is associated with terms such as globalization and global climate change, and thinks in terms of recent human history.

Published in German in 1995, *The Rings of Saturn* opens with the narrator recalling a scene that occurred a year after he completed his walking journey, when he was hospitalized "in a state of almost total immobility." The apocalyptic tone of the opening paragraph is uncannily prescient of concepts of the posthuman and the Anthropocene that only began to circulate widely after the turn of the millenium. The narrator figures himself as a hybrid creature, part-human, part-animal, that we associate with the "cyborg": **[End Page 177]**

Several times during the day I felt a desire to assure myself of a reality I feared had vanished forever by looking out of that hospital window, which, for some strange reason, was draped with black netting, and as dusk fell the wish became so strong that, contriving to slip over the edge of the bed to the floor, half on my belly and half sideways, and then to reach the wall on all fours, I dragged myself, despite the pain, up to the window sill. In the tortured posture of a creature that has raised itself erect for the first time I stood leaning against the glass.

(4-5)

To borrow a Deleuzian phrase, the narrator represents himself in the evolutionary moment of "becoming human"—as standing erect for the first time. Invoking the moment around six million years ago when humans distinguished themselves from other apes by standing upright, the narrator positions himself in a natural history of evolution.⁷

The references in the opening paragraph to a vanishing reality, and the funereal mood created by the "black netting" and dusk, suggest the precariousness of survival—not just individual human survival, but the survival of a familiar "reality." When the narrator looks out the window, he is not rewarded with a view of "the familiar city," but rather with "an utterly alien place": "I could not believe that anything might still be alive in that maze of buildings down there; rather, it was as if I were looking down from a cliff upon a sea of stone or a field of rubble" (5). This image invokes multiple histories of catastrophe: for instance, survivors walking through the ruins of German cities or Hiroshima. The thematics of destruction, decay, and death are further elaborated in the first chapter, through Sebald's recollections of the sudden deaths of two friends, his analysis of a Rembrandt painting, and his account of the disinterring of Thomas Browne's skull and Browne's own reflections on the unpredictability of the fate of human remains.

From the perspective of posthumanism, it is significant that Sebald frames his narrative by invoking seventeenth century figures—Rembrandt, Descartes, and Thomas Browne—rather than Enlightenment icons. He describes Descartes's mind/body dualism, a staple of Enlightenment philosophy and Western thought, as constituting "one of the principal chapters of the history of subjection": "Descartes teaches that one should disregard the flesh, which is beyond our comprehension, and attend to the machine within, to what can fully be understood, be made wholly useful for work, and, in the event of any fault, either repaired or discarded" (13).⁸ By contrast, he identifies in Rembrandt's painting *The Anatomy Lesson* a respect for the body as a feeling organism. The painting represents a scene in which a petty criminal, recently hanged, is laid out on a table for dissection. A "physic" has cut open the man's hand, exposing its innards, but the hand is grotesquely out of proportion to the body. A group of men are gathered round the corpse, but oddly, their gazes are not directed at the body but at an "open anatomical **[End Page 178]** atlas" at the end of the table. Sebald describes the annual anatomy lessons as a "significant date in the agenda of a society that saw itself emerging from the darkness into light" (12). Tickets were sold to this public spectacle, which was, Sebald speculates, "no doubt a

demonstration of the undaunted investigative zeal in the new sciences; but it also represented . . . the archaic ritual of dismembering a corpse, of harrowing the flesh of the delinquent even beyond death" (12). Sebald contrasts a Cartesian perspective to Rembrandt's empathic vision, which resonates with his own (see Bennett). He interprets the grotesque hand in *The Anatomy Lesson* not as a simple misrepresentation, but as deliberate—as evidence that Rembrandt rejected the unfeeling rationalist values of the Guild of Surgeons: "That unshapely hand signifies the violence that has been done to Aris Kindt. It is with him, the victim, and not the Guild . . . that the painter identifies. His gaze alone is free of Cartesian rigidity. He alone sees that greenish annihilated body" (17). Sebald interprets this painting as demonstrating that the "archaic ritual" of "harrowing the flesh" continued into modernity—a theme to which he repeatedly returns. He regards the "investigative zeal" that characterizes science as a legitimating mask for human cruelty against other humans and other species.

Sebald invokes Thomas Browne as another seventeenth-century critic of "Cartesian rigidity." Browne, a philosopher, natural historian, writer, and doctor practicing in Norwich, brings together "the most varied of historical and natural historical sources" (24). Sebald identifies with Browne's fasci nation with "the invisibility and intangibility of that which moves us" (18), and with the transience of all life: "Much as in this continuous process of consuming and being consumed, nothing endures, in Thomas Browne's view. On every new thing there lies already the shadow of annihilation" (23-24). Browne's vision is, like Sebald's, melancholy. Sebald describes a memorable image from Browne's *The Garden of Cyrus*, a view of the planet after mass human extinction: "The shadow of night is drawn like a black veil across the earth, and since almost all creatures, from one meridian to the next, lie down after the sun has set . . . one might, in following the setting sun, see on our globe nothing but prone bodies, row upon row, as if leveled by the sythe of Saturn—an endless graveyard for a humanity struck by falling sickness" (78-79). Sebald clearly shares Browne's fascination with "deep history." The timescale both men imagine in their reflections encompasses the decline of entire societies, and in this sense, engages a temporal vision usually associated with natural rather than human history. This is a planetary perspective on the species that contrasts with the local view from the ground.

Sebald wrote *The Rings of Saturn* in the early 1990s, when the concept of globalization was gaining ground in the social sciences, but before climate [End Page 179] change had become common in public discourse. Holocaust memory was just beginning to become a global phenomenon. Reading *The Rings of Saturn* nearly twenty years later—in an Anthropocene era—reveals Sebald's uncanny grasp of the convergences of globalization and global climate change, and of natural history and human history. For instance, a walk along the Suffolk coast leads him to describe the effects of man-made technologies on varieties of fish (natural history) and fishing (human history). The chapter opens with a description of redundant fishermen who camp in tents planted along the shoreline, although "today it is almost impossible to catch anything fishing from the beach" (52). Fishing continues off the coast, but is threatened by "mercury, cadmium and lead, and mountains of fertilizer and pesticides." The effects of human technologies are producing changes in the fish:

heavy metals and other toxic substances sink into the waters of the Dogger Bank, where a third of the fish are now born with strange deformities and excrescences. . . . [O]ff the coast, rafts of poisonous algae are sighted covering many square miles and reaching thirty feet into the deep, in which the creatures of the sea die in shoals. . . . In some of the rarer varieties . . . the females, in a bizarre mutation, are increasingly developing male sexual organs and the ritual patterns of courtship are no more than a dance of death.

(53)

Sebald observes that the fate of these fish is "the exact opposite of the notion of the wondrous increase and perpetuation of life with which we grew up." Our faith in technological progress, and the inexhaustibility of Nature cannot be sustained given the doleful evidence of humanity's footprint.

Sebald's posthumanist sensibility is further revealed by the multidirectionality of his empathic vision.⁹ He juxtaposes the suffering caused by humans both to non-human species and to other humans. For instance, he relates a story about a fishmonger who, noticing that some herring were still alive some two or three hours after they were removed from water, mutilated them to see how long they would survive: "This process, inspired by our thirst for knowledge, might be described as the most extreme of the sufferings undergone by a species always threatened by disaster" (57). The description of the "harrowing of the flesh" of the herrings, legitimated by "investigative zeal," is followed by a double-page photograph of human corpses lying in a forest, limbs and heads protruding from the sheets that cover them—presumably a massacre during WWII. Through the juxtapositions of narrative and image Sebald brings ecological holocaust and human holocaust into the same frame,

decentering the human by drawing it into relation with the suffering of nonhuman others.

Sebald's awareness of the linked histories of globalization and the Anthropocene is revealed in the convergences he articulates between natural and human history. He observes such convergences, for example, in his narrative [End Page 180] about the human destruction of the earth's forests for fuel. The history of Suffolk, he explains, "is closely connected . . . with the steady and advancing destruction, over a period of many centuries and indeed millennia, of the dense forests that extended over the entire British Isles after the last Ice Age" (169). The destruction of the forests, he contends, enabled the success of the human diaspora: "Our spread over the earth was fuelled . . . by incessantly burning whatever would burn" (170). The destruction of forests (and the resulting loss of habitats and species) also provided the enabling conditions for technological innovation, wealth, and the freedoms of modern civilization: "From the first smouldering taper to the elegant lanterns whose light reverberated around eighteenth-century courtyards . . . to the unearthly glow of the sodium lamps that line the Belgian motorways, it has all been combustion. Combustion is the hidden principle behind every artefact we create" (170). Sebald's narrative of the "freedoms" enabled by burning forests illustrates Chakrabarty's insight that "[t]he mansion of modern freedoms stands on an ever-expanding base of fossil fuel use" (208). This leads him to ask: "Is the geological agency of humans the price we pay for the pursuit of freedom?" (210). As we saw earlier, William Lines is also concerned with the ecological impact of the destruction of the forests. But we can now see, with Sebald's linking of anthropogenic change and the achievements of modernity, that Lines's analysis remains limited from a posthumanist perspective, for he fails to develop that wider sense of being and matter that Sebald, for instance, powerfully suggests by bringing the history of humans and herrings together.

Seeking Liberation in an Anthropocene Era: *Palestinian Walks*

In reflecting on the implications of the Anthropocene for our understanding of modernity, Chakrabarty defends Enlightenment faith in human rationality as essential to resolving the challenges we face. He acknowledges that politics, however, "has never been based on reason alone . . . and in a world already complicated by sharp inequalities . . . is something no one can control" (211). The environmental challenges of the Anthropocene, as well as rationality, politics, and the pursuit of freedom, all come together in *Palestinian Walks: Forays into a Vanishing Landscape*. Raja Shehadeh, an embedded Palestinian lawyer and disillusioned human rights activist, gives an account of his role in the struggle for land and freedom between Israelis and Palestinians, both of whom see themselves as rightful owners. He contends that in the late 1980s, Israel implemented, "under the cloak of law, a highly discriminatory, segregated town-planning reality" (99). He dedicated himself to challenging the legality of the Israeli schemes. With the signing of the Oslo Agreement in the 1990s, which he regards as rejecting a legal resolution to the conflict, he feels [End Page 181] that the struggle for Palestinian statehood has been lost. His memoir weaves together three narrative threads: political, environmental, and personal. This is a narrative about a conflict over land, about irreversible changes to a landscape that had been undisturbed for centuries, and about a struggle to manage the self in the face of grief. It is a lament for lost wilderness, for the loss of "ideals of liberation, both personal and political" (157), and for a personal loss of optimism that rationality would conquer politics.

Palestinian Walks is in many ways a deeply humanist work, grounded in a belief in freedom, rationality, and progress understood in humanist terms. Although Shehadeh writes from the "foreign" context of the West Bank, the narrating "I" and the narrative structure of the memoir are familiar, even conventional. The narrative voice is surprisingly intimate, as he explains his devastation following the Oslo Agreement: "I had perceived my life as an ongoing narrative organically linked to the forward march of the Palestinian people toward liberation and freedom from the yoke of occupation. But now I knew this was nothing but a grand delusion . . . claiming and holding on to the belief that there was a higher meaning to the suffering" (123). Shehadeh's account of the struggle against the Israeli occupation as a source of personal meaning signifies a liberal humanist subject. Moreover, the chapters are plotted in a narrative of personal progress: struggle, loss, and a gradual coming to terms with anger and grief.

Palestinian Walks consists of six chapters, each of which describes a walk Shehadeh took in the hills around Ramallah from the early 1980s until 2006. What inclines me to introduce it here, in a discussion of the posthuman and the Anthropocene, is first, Shehadeh's use of a peripatetic method as a means of witnessing and testifying to humanity's footprint in the West Bank—that is, the changes to the landscape and Palestinian livelihoods as a result of the intensive building of Israeli settlements on the Ramallah hills. Second, Shehadeh loses his faith in legal rationality and human rights, and instead embraces a planetary perspective on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, which enables

him to come to a personal reconciliation and to continue living in the land that he loves. Read alongside *The Rings of Saturn*, *Palestinian Walks* provides an opportunity to consider how humanism persists in shaping self-understanding and understanding of the world, alongside posthumanist perspectives on geological temporality and planetary futures. It also throws into relief the politically and ethically charged issue of struggles for freedom in an Anthropocene era: how should these struggles, which so often extend humanity's footprint through military and industrial technologies, and cycles of destruction and building, be viewed? How will such struggles be judged and waged as the knowledge of the Anthropocene looms? **[End Page 182]**

The theme of "vanishing" is central to *Palestinian Walks*, as it is to *The Rings of Saturn*. The introduction provides a historical perspective on aspects of the present crisis: Shehadeh critiques Western travellers' accounts of Palestine for their failure to recognize its inhabitants or to appreciate the beauty of the landscape. In "vanishing" the Palestinian inhabitants, nineteenth and twentieth century narratives prepared the way for the current Israeli occupation. Like Sebald, Shehadeh begins his memoir of a "vanishing landscape" with the trope of illness: "Ever since I learned of the plans to transform our hills being prepared by successive Israeli governments, which supported the policy of establishing settlements in the Occupied Territories, I have felt like one who has contracted a *terminal disease*. Now when I walk in the hills I cannot but be conscious that the time when I will be able to do so is running out" (my italics). Shehadeh lives with the sense of transience and annihilation— what Sebald calls "the shadow of death"—which arises from a particular political struggle. His description of the occupation policy recalls another meaning of dis-ease: as a result of the new settlements, Shehadeh is no longer at ease in the land, but instead feels like an intruder in his own country. Like the crisis of climate change, politics also produces "anxieties precisely around futures that we cannot visualize" (Chakrabarty 211).

In *Palestinian Walks* it is not climate change, but the occupation of land that is the immediate source of anxiety about the future. The question of the future is powerfully signified in Shehadeh's dedication of the memoir to his nephew Aziz and his niece Tala, "with the hope that they will be able to walk in the hills of Palestine." What will the legacy of Palestine hold for them? The landscape is currently littered with the potentially lethal detritus from various skirmishes and wars. Shehadeh describes a walk he takes with his ten-year old nephew to a site where his great uncle had built an arash—a chair carved out of a massive rock. When they arrive, they discover that someone had vandalized the arash, and turned the heavy rock on its side so it is no longer usable. On the return journey, his nephew investigates an abandoned police station: "We trudge slowly through a field speckled with the carcasses of destroyed cars, garbage, rubble, mangled metal, aluminum . . . the detritus of years of neglect, dashed hopes, resistance and war" (38). The child inadvertently picks up an unexploded missile, which Shehadeh, horrified, is able to retrieve. In *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald also describes "wandering about among heaps of scrap metal and defunct machinery" at an abandoned military research facility. Imagining himself "amidst the remains of our own civilization after its extinction in some future catastrophe," he finds that "the beings who once lived and worked here were an enigma, as was the purpose of the primitive contraptions and fittings inside the bunker" (237). For those living in the **[End Page 183]** over-crowded West Bank, however, abandoned military sites do not occasion speculation about future human extinction, but about death in the present.

Shehadeh uses a walking method to map humanity's footprint in the West Bank. Simple pleasures of walking in public space, and the increasing difficulties of doing so unimpeded, produce reflections on the everyday effects of the Israeli settlement policy in the West Bank. He contends that, with its settlement master plan, the state of Israel aims "to take control not only of the land but also of Palestinian time and space" (47). By walking, Shehadeh asserts a Palestinian presence in the hills, much of which is considered by Israeli authorities to be "unoccupied," and thus available to be claimed by the Israeli state. He details the relentless Israeli expropriation of allegedly abandoned Palestinian land, the rapid development of settlements and the associated infrastructure of roads and buildings, and the building of a twenty-six foot wall that divides these settlements from Palestinian villages.

The history of walking, Solnit contends, is also the history of public space. It must account for places where "there is no public space and the landscape is being paved over" (*Wanderlust* 12). Shehadeh is deeply concerned with the erosion of public space, and the building of a separation wall and roads that restrict inhabitants to defined and policed spaces. He details the legal maneuvers through which the Israeli courts determine that Palestinian land is "vacant" or has been abandoned, and it is then declared "public space." But this "public space," used for Israeli settlements or turned into nature reserves, is strictly off limits to Palestinians. Shehadeh describes the building of "Israeli only" four-lane highways that cross the hills to connect settlements, bypassing the Palestinian villages

below. Palestinians must use rugged, unmaintained tracks to access their properties, and in many cases, they are cut off from their own agricultural lands: "Many villagers can only pick the olives from their own trees with the protection of sympathetic Israelis and international solidarity groups" (xix). "As our Palestinian world shrinks," he observes, "that of the Israelis expands, with more settlements being built, destroying forever the wadis and cliffs, flattening hills and transforming the precious land that many Palestinians will never know" (xx). All of this documents the sharp decline in public space accessible to Palestinians from the early 1980s until 2006.

Shehadeh is a keen observer and reporter of changes to the landscape as a result of settlement building, which he regards as destructive rather than as legitimate "development." His observations over a thirty-year period reveal his growing awareness of the impact of humanity's footprint on the landscape of his childhood. He implicitly recognizes the "geological agency" of humans, and the technological speed at which the landscape is being changed: "It was [End Page 184] as though the tectonic movements that had occurred over thousands of years were now happening in a matter of months, entirely redrawing the map. The Palestine I knew, the land I had thought of as mine, was quickly being transformed before my eyes" (173). On a walk that takes him past an abandoned monastery, he observes that "[t]he wilderness behind Jerusalem is now mainly settled . . . the transformation is permanent. Whatever the resolution of this intractable political conflict, this area will never return to being the wilderness it once was" (154). He shares with writers as diverse as Dodds, Lines, and Sebald the understanding that extinction—whether of species or of wilderness—is forever.

Shehadeh recounts the moment when his sensibility begins to shift from the immediate present of politics to a longer view of human and even geological history. Struggling with his extreme sense of loss, which is exacerbated by a walk with a friend who sees the Oslo Agreement as creating a positive "new reality" for Palestinians, he finds himself standing on a promontory overlooking the Dead Sea. He recalls "contemplating the horrifying future and the end of a narrative of struggle I had thought I shared with others, which had given meaning to my life for so many years. . . . I looked at the receding waters. An ecological disaster was looming here. The drop in the sea level . . . was causing hundreds of sinkholes to appear along the shore" (124). Shehadeh gradually embraces a geological perspective as a refuge from the political disappointment of the present. Embedded in a conflict zone, he finds relief in the transience of things:

For a long time my enjoyment of these hills had been impaired by a preoccupation with the changes in the land law relating to them. But such man-made constructs can be diminished if looked at in a particular way. Viewed from the perspective of the land they hardly count. A road makes a scar in the hills but over time that scar heals and becomes absorbed and incorporated.

(167)

Whereas for Sebald the transience of life and things seems to produce melancholy, for Shehadeh it points to the durability and survival of the land beyond human struggles: "Thinking in the long term made it possible for me to separate 'the present' from the rest of time and thereby realize that what Palestine and Israel are now would not necessarily be forever. I was here on earth for a relatively short period and after that time passed, life would go on without my points of view, biases and fears" (168). Articulating his emerging geological perspective, he quotes *Carmel Point*, by the environmental American poet Robinson Jeffers. Published in 1938, the poem declares the transience of human endeavors and human existence, and calls for what we now identify as a posthumanist theme—the "decentering of the human": [End Page 185]

. . . the people are a tide
That swells and in time will ebb, and all
Their works dissolve. Meanwhile the image of the pristine beauty
Lives in the very grain of the granite,
Safe as the endless ocean that climbs our cliff.—As for us:
We must uncenter our minds from ourselves;
We must unhumanize our views a little, and become confident.

(168)

Shehadeh finds solace in the poem's celebration of a geological perspective, and the survival of the landscape beyond human life. What should readers make of his quotation of this poem? Can *Palestinian Walks*, with its belated embrace of a planetary perspective, be considered "posthumanist"?

While Shehadeh cares deeply about the land and environment, he does not so much acknowledge the threat posed by the Anthropocene as embrace a geological perspective as emotional and psychological relief from the immediate intensity and disappointment of the Palestinian struggle for freedom. This perspective minimizes the significance of human

life by placing it in the deep history of a geological timescale. Of course, what the Anthropocene teaches is that we do not have a choice about whether to substitute a geological perspective for that of the shorter timeframe of human struggles for freedom. Rather, we are facing the collision of these two perspectives with their competing demands—to species survival, to human freedom. Shehadeh is aware of the consequences of ecological holocaust for humans as a species. His "man," however, is specific and political—for him, it is Palestinian temporality and embodiment that are under siege rather than the species more broadly. This specificity reveals his humanism, distinguishing his invocation of a geological temporality from Sebald's. Nonetheless, the co-presence of "Man" and "man" in his memoir—of humanism and posthumanism—challenges the entrenched either/or way of thinking on these issues. It indicates the persistence of the human in the posthuman, but also suggests how struggles for freedom may be conceptualized in an Anthropocene era.

Conclusion

What can the field of life writing studies, with its focus on the development of a human self, contribute to new modes of thought that will help us understand and respond to the challenges posed by the Anthropocene? The study of the Humanities in general, and literature in particular, is often defended on the ground that "the works we value are not merely beautiful objects from some lost past but tools for thinking and feeling, ways of understanding the world and its people" (Scholes 731-32). Taking the concept of the Anthropocene seriously means that "the world"—a key concept in the humanities— [End Page 186] has to be thought of not only in political, social, and economic terms, but in geological and environmental terms. The memoirs I have discussed here embed humans in a much larger "world" than the world that is typically portrayed in life writing.

Neither of the texts I have read would be classified as "environmental memoirs." Yet, it should come as no surprise that memoirs which are grounded in a walking method—a literal example of "humanity's footprint"—should also reveal a heightened sensitivity to the impact of humans on the planet and on its inhabitants. For it may be the experience of one's own intimate interaction with place, and one's embodied vulnerability and exposure, that invites a conception of the human as one species among others. If so, walking memoirs may provide a particularly fruitful opportunity for beginning a conversation on life writing, the Anthropocene, and the posthumanities. But Sebald and Shehadeh bring something more than an awareness of ecological imperatives to this conversation. Their works convey a sense of the ruins of history, the impermanence of human and non-human lives and potentialities. Bringing their works together throws into sharp relief the competing demands on conceptions of the human and human futures in our contemporary moment, which is understood simultaneously as an era of universal human rights and as the Anthropocene. How will the discourse of human rights, and the pursuit of social justice, be shaped by the conditions of the Anthropocene? Does the Anthropocene signal a shift in priorities, from a politics grounded in individual rights to one that pursues collective (human and non-human) futures? From this perspective, the value of *The Rings of Saturn* and *Palestinian Walks* is that they enable readers not only to ask these questions, but to see them as imperative for future humanities research.

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Notes

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1. As Louis van den Hengel points out elsewhere in this volume, the "bios" of autobiography has typically referred to the figure of the rational, autonomous man rather than to zoe, an inorganic force encompassing humans, animals, technologies, and things.
2. See Slaughter for a discussion of the concept of personhood in the context of post-Enlightenment genres of the bildungsroman and human rights.
3. Published in the US in 2008 as *Palestinian Walks: Forays into a Vanishing Landscape*.
4. For an account of this debate, see Schwägerl and Bojanowski. [End Page 187]

5. See Chakrabarty for a discussion of the temporality of "deep history" versus the temporality of "human history."
6. See Étienne Balibar's discussion of the paradox of humanism: in Social Darwinism we find "the paradoxical figure of an evolution which has to extract humanity properly so-called . . . from animality, but to do so by means which characterized animality (the 'survival of the fittest') or, in other words, by an 'animal' competition between the different degrees of humanity" (qtd. in Wolfe xiv).
7. Kingdon reminds us, however, that human bipedalism must be viewed in the context of the many now extinct bipeds.
8. Following in the Cartesian tradition, today's transhumanists value the body as a machine that can be extended and perfected (see Wolfe).
9. I adapt the term "multidirectionality" from Rothberg.

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