

**Book Review*****Apology to a Whale: Words to Mend a World*****Cecile Pineda****(2015, Wings Press; ISBN: 978-1-60940-440-6)****Reviewed by****Mira Lieberman****University of Sheffield, UK****E-mail: [mlieberman-boyd1@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:mlieberman-boyd1@sheffield.ac.uk)**

How did mankind become so destructive towards the only system that sustains it? The nuclear disaster in Fukushima leads Pineda to investigate language and speech as, according to the author, it is the distinguishing feature between humans and other animals. Before setting out to answer the question, Pineda begins with a short introduction that attempts to pinpoint the origin of the global environmental crisis: with the discovery of speech and language, mankind lost an essential component for their survival.

With the sixth mass extinction currently underway (Maroun and Atkins, forthcoming), *Apology to a Whale* is a timely literary work joining a growing academic and public discussion on Earth's existential crisis. Violence and inequality is the theme running throughout, underlining the current environmental destruction. The author correctly observes the interconnectedness of various levels of political, social and economic systems which contribute to the extinction of species: not only do ecological systems depend on all living organisms for survival, but humanity, as Pineda argues, needs to collaborate and value one another in order to survive. The interconnectedness between animal exploitation and suffering is aptly linked by Pineda to gender inequality, patriarchal society, and the economic-political system prevalent in the Western world. While these notions have been raised by several scholars previously (Adams, C. J. (2006), Birke, L. (1994, 2002)), Pineda's creative background in the performing arts writing and directing theatre plays provides a locus for meaningful praxis for the exploration of gender roles, women's voices and patriarchy.

While the book presents a cross-disciplinary account of human activity and its impact on intra and inter-species relationships weaving various fields such as archaeology, linguistics, animal behaviour studies, natural history, botany, sociology, environmentalism, anthropology, women's studies, and politics (p. 203), it is precisely this breadth that undermines the author's aim for this study, specifically to investigate the link between the development of language, language use and human activity. The resulting work is an ill-fitting patchwork that could be further supported by cohesive, evidence-based arguments.

Anthropocentric hegemonic domination inherent in all human activity is heavily criticised in the book in a poignant literary tone. Chapter 1 is a powerful setting of the scene that aptly draws the reader from her mundane city-dwelling activities towards the imminent environmental looming crisis. The criticism is directed at both country leaders as well as readers of the book: humans have insatiable needs, but it is also the climate negotiators who are to blame.

However, Pineda's overarching view could be said to be dichotomous in which the world is reductively divided between forces of 'good' and 'evil' and the notion that there is a handful of people (mostly men) who are to blame, a position that could be said to devalue women's agency and responsibility as citizens, and is in contrast to the author's avowed position as a feminist. For example, taking a strong stance against nuclear weapons, Pineda suggests those responsible for the development of the nuclear bomb amounted to twelve Jewish men, refugee scientists from Nazi Germany. They are marked for their religion (no other people in the book are modified by their religion). They are also marked for being men, and alluded to have cowardly fled Nazi Germany. It is important to mention Marie Sklodowska Curie who contributed the first stages of nuclear energy discovery. This contradicts Pineda's systemic argument of holistic interconnectedness and fails to acknowledge the operationalization of individuals within a constraining system.

Chapter 2 begins with an overview of the historical emergence of language as used by *Homo sapiens* today and the ability of humans to communicate with animals. The lost human connection and communication with animals is exemplified through Lawrence Anthony's protection of elephants in his work *The Elephant Whisperer*, and Farley Mowat's *Never Cry Wolf*, illustrating how this loss leads to conflict and misunderstanding between human settlements and animals.

As mentioned earlier, Pineda argues for collaboration over individualism as currently prevailing in Western society, emphasising the importance of developing awareness of the manifestation of patriarchy and male dominance in all domains. However, Pineda supports matriarchy (chapter 3, p. 119), standing in contradiction to her call for gender equality.

Despite the author's aim to examine the connection between language development and environmental destruction, the linguistic discussion proper only begins in chapter 4. Pineda follows linguistic determinism which claims that language determines the way we think, determines different world views and cultures. The implications of this is that if a sign (Kress, 2001) is not available, we cannot think the thought; we cannot think outside language, as she writes: "It is language which perpetuated our world view, ordered our existence, governed our interactions, and imprinted our identity [...] because it has been handed down, like some epistemological DNA..." (p. 104). Pineda goes on to illustrate different languages such as Wintu, of the tribe of Northern Californian Indians whose language does not mark for possession. However, Pineda's deterministic view is difficult to reconcile with her radical activism as this approach minimizes individual and collective agency. In other words, if language determines world views, would we still have agency and the ability to change?

Pineda, in the last chapters (5 and 6), does not reconcile this challenge and delineates ways in which to create new stories to live by (Stibbe, 2015). Although the author frequently draws on her personal, familial and cultural background, thus situating herself as an ecofeminist and radical political activist, there is little reflexion on the author's own language. Furthermore, as an activist it is surprising that only a short section of the book is dedicated to action and praxis. For example, one of the solutions as envisaged by the author is to change language mechanically and prescriptively to reflect a new worldview. In order to "free ourselves from the unconsciously assimilated constraints imposed on us by the languages we speak [...]" we need to reclaim 'us' and "de-capitalize 'I'" (p. 175), in an effort to make our individualistic society more of a collective. In light of the above, it would have been useful for the author to elaborate on possible solutions to environmental destruction.

Regarding scholarship, throughout the book Pineda draws on radical political views, for example, controversially touching on traumatic societal events such as the 9/11 attack, alluding to the United States government's involvement albeit without providing evidence. Finally, although the linguistic exploration does not go beyond historic linguistics and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, the book makes for a pertinent reflection on the way languages contribute to the construction of worldviews, the stories we live by, that lead to environmental degradation, and ways to create new stories.

## References

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