The Nerves and their Endings: Essays on Crisis and Response by Jessica Gaitán Johannesson (review)

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ariel: A Review of International English Literature, Volume 55, Number 1, January 2024, pp. 132-134 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/ari.2024.a915997*

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Jessica Gaitán Johannesson. *The Nerves and their Endings: Essays on Crisis and Response*. Scribe, 2022. Pp. 3–184, GBP £9.99.

Jessica Gaitán Johannesson's incisive, introspective essay anthology, *The Nerves and their Endings*, was published at a particularly pressing global moment. The year Johannesson's collection was released, the United Nation's annual Conference of the Parties (COP) summit on climate change took place against the backdrop of extreme expressions of this crisis, from the record number of wildfires and heatwaves in the United Kingdom and Europe (the highest in recent history) to the Horn of Africa drought, the most protracted of its kind that continues to threaten food security in the region. The world was also dealing with the continued fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought into sharp relief the asymmetrical affordances of health and valuation of lives across international borders. "The climate crisis is an illness of severed connections, on a colossal and intimate scale," Johannesson writes (22); this contemplation of connections translates formally onto the page, with Johanesson interspersing each essay with anecdotal reflections on the roots of her relationship with her body and the land, which map onto broader provocations about the ties between individual and planetary health, of relationality and responsibility.

These political reckonings are rooted in personal introspections, a formal but also deeply visceral and embodied narrative gesture that drives Johanneson's writing. Johannesson comes to view her body as a barometer, or perhaps even a cipher, for environmental degradation, though this is not simply a metaphorical gesture; she remains attuned to its material resonances. Her personal experiences with an eating disorder open up a broader set of questions about the cultural ecology of food and legacies of colonial resource extraction. Planetary and individual health become enmeshed, as the body is in many ways "disciplined" through lifestyle changes (21). She places the relationship between the individual and the collective, between the private body and the body politic, under scrutiny. But who does the burden of

environmental protection fall to, and whose interests are most often protected? Her collection necessarily presses the fault lines and cracks in the conceptualization of what exactly collective responsibility means. How, Johannesson asks, are the boundaries and terms of access to this sense of solidarity socio-politically mapped?

Johannesson's prose is at its most provocative and powerful in its contemplation of "home," where the boundaries between the public and the private are challenged. As she muses, "I had my body but no body politic in which to make sense of it" (137). Having lived in Sweden, Colombia, and Ecuador throughout her life, she grapples with a sense of un-housing—both bodily and culturally. Her sense of becoming detached from a home is ironically heightened by her naturalization as a citizen of the UK, a process that affords a certain in-group membership, mobility, and access to resources but ends up fomenting a profound sense of unease. As this collection makes clear, environmental collapse may be a planetary condition, but its effects are not universally encountered; they are asymmetrically distributed along the intersecting axes of space and place. Bodies occupying multiple marginalities are exposed to amplified vulnerabilities and, as a result, the climate crisis is felt less as an event than an endemic condition of life. Thus, Johannesson grapples with the guilt of her hyphenated identity, which affords her a particular set of privileges that offer relative protection—perhaps even immunity—from particular experiential realities. In a powerful anecdote, she recalls covering her eyes when her schoolteacher screens a documentary in class about the effects of the drug trade in Colombia. It is in these moments of retrospective unpacking that Johannesson's work most intelligently demonstrates how the self is embodied and environmentally embedded, a complex composite of inter- and intra-cultural encounters.

I particularly appreciate Johannesson's candid confrontation with her own inconsistencies and her ability to dwell in that discomfort as she cautiously unravels her personal unease and what she diagnoses as structural, global disease. This slippage between self and the systemic, societal scales finds striking expression in her reflections on reproduction. With her involvement in the former Birth Strike activist group, a movement underpinned by an ethos to limit population growth to tackle climate change, Johannesson is all too aware of how the body might become a political vehicle expressing ideological principles about population and climate. Pushing an empty pram on a train after a Birth Strike protest, she is confronted by a white man who calls her "pathetic" (90). The racist, sexist encounter taps into her insecurities about family and fertility; in this particular essay, she maneuvers through the discordance between principle and practice, the fear of not being able

to change her mind when the narrative act itself is a performative process of self-formation, one that projects onto her personal body (and body of work) a larger sociopolitical charge.

Johannesson is highly attuned to narrative form, to how the act of writing can radically re-form modes of being and relating to each other as nodes within a broader networked ecosystem. I also see her writing as a means of working through, if not resolving, her sense of the complex co-mingling of personal culpability and self-compassion. Her retrospective regret mobilizes her reflections on the notion of responsibility. This form of writing relates to the reader, speaking to—but not speaking for—foundational human fears, and this body of work chronicles the climate crisis while contemplating the dissolution of boundaries as response. Subtitled "Essays on Crisis and Response," the collection provokes without ever veering into manifesto territory. There is a deep sense of co-implication with the environment, attuned as Johanesson is to how structures—and structural violence—can quite literally seep under the skin, how the political permeates the personal, and how health is embedded within a broader sociocultural ecosystem, much in the same vein of Susanne Antonetta's acclaimed environmental memoir, *Body Toxic* (2001). Even in Johanesson's moments of introspection, the prose never becomes insular, and she offers a profound acknowledgement of relationality, of the interconnectedness between personal and political responsibility toward the environment and how care needs to be a communal act. The ultimate response to these intractable reflections seems to be this acknowledgement and celebration of relationality even in endemic conditions of crisis.

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Works Cited

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