

Book Review

Patricia MacCormack, *Posthuman Ethics: Embodiment and Cultural Theory*

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168 pages

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EARLY IN PATRICIA MACCORMACK'S *Posthuman Ethics: Embodiment and Cultural Theory*, she explains “*Posthuman Ethics* could have been called *Posthuman Bodies*” (1). This switch, from ethics to bodies, is important. It lets the reader know that the book is not going to be concerned with a normative understanding of ethics. Instead, ethics here is a Spinozian ethics, in other words a moral physics, a relationship of bodies to each other and how they affect one another. If that is the ethics, the posthuman should be understood in two senses. First, it means a position that exists, as Cary Wolfe has put it, “both before and after humanism.”¹ In this sense, MacCormack’s work should be read as part of a long line of posthumanist theory, including Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” and *When Species Meet*, N. Katharine Hayles *How We Became Posthuman*, Cary Wolfe’s *What is Posthumanism?*,

1 Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: Minnesota, 2010), xv.

Speculations VI

and Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman*. However, posthuman should also be understood as the ways that all sorts of bodies, including non-human ones, end up entangled in and with each other. In this sense, we can see *Posthuman Ethics* as being part of a continuation that includes Mel Chen's *Animacies*, Beatriz Preciado's *Testo Junkie*, and Jasbir Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages*. MacCormack forces us into the vortex of what Felix Guattari has referred to as "affective contamination," which is the process by which other beings "start to exist in you, in spite of you."² Thus, we are treated to examinations of our entanglements with art and inhuman ecstasy, tattoos and the skin, nonhuman animals, marvelous monsters, mystic queers, and the nation of the dead. So far, so good. But also, I am sure you are asking, how is this book new? Is this just another book of posthuman theory combined with the author's preferred more-than-human objects of inquiry? This is where things get interesting, because despite MacCormack's protests, there is still a normative ethical argument that is slowly developed throughout the present work. MacCormack is concerned with how "regimes of signification" create and produce domination (94). What emerges, then, is an ethics that cuts to the very core of what it means to do philosophy and theory.

The tension that motivates *Posthuman Ethics* is navigating the tightrope between our entanglements with other beings, and the epistemic violence that can occur when we seek to comprehend these nonhuman actors. Édouard Glissant reminds us that *comprehend* is rooted in the Latin for seizing, grasping, and taking. For Glissant, against this colonialist comprehension, we have to have a Relation that respects the right of opacity of "the margins, the rebels, the deviants, all specialists in distancing."³ While Glissant is not mentioned by MacCormack, we can understand *Posthuman*

2 Felix Guattari, *Choasmosis*, trans. Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis, (Bloomington: Indiana, 1995), 92-93.

3 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing, (Ann Arbor: Michigan, 1997), 156.

James K. Stanescu – Review of
Posthuman Ethics: Embodiment and Cultural Theory

Ethics as an attempt at extending Glissant's argument in a non-anthropocentric registrar. Furthermore, MacCormack displays how the human is quintessentially a being of violent comprehension:

Posthuman Ethics has consistently sought the silencing of what is understood as human speech emergent through logic, power, and signification. Human speech makes the world according to the human, tells the world what it is and speaks for the world, that is, to other humans and to the gods of human speech—religion, science, capital. Silencing human speech opens a harmonious cacophony of polyvocalities imperceptible to human understanding, just as human speech has the detrimental effect of silencing unheard, unthought expression. (144)

Thus, the posthuman is also the world outside of the representational matrix that humans produce.

Though never denounced by name, we can understand that a posthuman ethics exist in tension with a Hegelian or Butlerian ethics of intersubjective recognition. And MacCormack is serious about this rejection, both politically and ethically. So, on the issue of gay rights, MacCormack argues that “by gaining recognition homosexuals (and inevitably all ‘deviants’) lose as much, if not more, than they gain” (105). On the issue of our ethical duties toward other animals, she takes a strong animal abolitionist standpoint, arguing that the only truly ethical relationship comes from “the grace which can only come from leaving alone” (68). Even something that might take us out of the human, the study of the monster, is fraught with peril because “this relation, to know and name the monster, is an act of violence” (92). For MacCormack these are the right political and ethical stances to take because the ethics of intersubjective recognition is not just wrong, it is actively harmful and violent. Intersubjective recognition is a mode of thinking that falls under what MacCormack calls necrophilosophy.

Necrophilosophy is a type of philosophical work that focuses on mourning, on turning its attention to the death of subjectivity, and on representing the world to us. In seeking

Speculations VI

to represent the world, necrophilosophy fixes the identity of the subjects that it explores. In defining these subjects, in comprehending these subjects, necrophilosophy turns the living identity of these beings into something that is already dead. Necrophilosophy turns the living into the dead, even as it seeks to do the opposite. “Necrophilosophy attempts to make sense of death, perhaps in order to deny it, but ethics should be preventing the non-volitional asymmetrical deadening of things rather than transcendently enlightening their being” (123). The only resistance necrophilosophy can offer is the “ineffectual mourning of the dead who are numbered” (133). Against necrophilosophy, MacCormack argues for a vitalistic philosophy. This “vitalistic post-structuralism takes on the seemingly impossible urgency of addressing the unthinkable, responding to the other as an encounter without seeking, needing, or being able to know or nomenclature its singularity, but thinking it nonetheless” (118). Vitalism here refers to something so in excess, it is unthought and unthinkable, it is unspoken and unspeakable. It is, as Deleuze puts it, “a vital power that cannot be confined within species, environment or the paths of a particular diagram. Is not the force that comes from outside a certain idea of Life, a certain vitalism [?]”⁴ Vitalistic philosophy is MacCormack’s attempt to posit a relation to the outside that is still non-transcendental. Again and again in *Posthuman Ethics*, we run into terms that are usually understood to be transcendental in nature, but that MacCormack is repurposing to be taken as immanent. Thus, she writes about angelic and demonic becomings, about queers as mystical, and about art as a type of ecstasy. All of these are figures of events and experiences whose intensities are meant to undo us in some way. More important, these vitalistic forces from the outside are supposed to allow a mode of relation that refuses comprehension. “Relinquishing the powers of comprehension for ecstatic potentialities of thought interiorizes the outside while the outside interiorizes the self” (56).

4 Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Sean Hand (Minneapolis: Minnesota, 1988), 92-93.

James K. Stanescu – Review of
Posthuman Ethics: Embodiment and Cultural Theory

What MacCormack is arguing for is a type of relation and thinking that is fundamentally liminal, and that can interact with the other-than-human world in a perpetual becoming and in-betweenness. Another way she presents this subject position is, following Irigaray, as being mucosal:

Mucosal relations configure the encounter event between self and other as one where ethics is found in the viscous connectivity between the two and where each escapes identity [...]. That the materiality of the relation is mucosal reminds us that opening to the as-signifiable other can be conceived as unpalatable, that even when we flee residue remains, that there are escaping leaky elements which exceed the two within the relation and most importantly, that thought is material and materiality is a thought event. (109-110)

Immanence here becomes rethought of as slime and ooze, and the posthuman body is reconfigured as a porous membrane. In this formulation, there is but a fragile surface separating inside and outside, self and other, and which moving through this world means leaving part of yourself constantly behind while unintentionally picking up bits and pieces of the world with you.

Now, maybe you are still doubtful that a fully liminal and perpetually becoming subject position is possible. And while the average human produces around a liter of mucous a day, maybe you are still suspicious that you cannot figure out how to live in a mucosal relation. I wonder if MacCormack shares these fears, because despite producing several figures of liminality, she ends her book on a radical proposal, a “perversely literal interpretation of Deleuze and Guattari’s call to becoming-imperceptible” (141). Her radical proposal is that we work to end humanity. Not through some sort of transhuman dream of cyborg futures, or some theoretical move to understand ourselves as all animals and end the notion of humanism. No, her argument is all of us who are putatively human beings should, voluntarily, not reproduce. We should try to make this the last generation of humans, and make humanity extinct in the universe. If, as I said in the

Speculations VI

beginning, that this work is motivated by a tension of walking a tightrope between our entanglements and epistemic violence, MacCormack thinks the right choice can be to cut the rope itself, and fall without a net to catch us. This is not her descending into the necrophilosophy she critiques, rather she sees the end of humanity as a celebratory and life-affirming impulse. If we all suffer, as Adorno puts it, from the “guilt of a life which purely as a fact will strangle other life,” then this is a way out of the guilt. ⁵No more mourning, no more melancholia, just one last party, and then *shhh*....

I am tempted to let this review end on that note. After all, it is kind of a beautiful image. And there is much that I am sympathetic to in *Posthuman Ethics*, and that calls to me. But there is also a lot that I am hesitant about. Though I am also hesitant about this very critique, because in a part of the book I underlined three times and put stars in the margin around, MacCormack writes:

Majoritarian culture fuels these issues [in-fighting and disagreements] (particularly academically) to deflect the becoming of these activists. These disagreements annex themselves to majoritarian practices, where thought is founded on consistency and homogenous conformity which is called ‘logic’. In majoritarian logic if an argument or issue is logical it would not include disagreeing elements. (134)

I agree entirely with that statement, and believe that often the most radical move is to figure how disparate elements can co-exist in a broader assemblage. What Freud called “the narcissism of minor differences” has pulled apart more than a few social movements. And yet with all of that said, here we go.

I worry about her easy binary between necrophilosophy and vitalistic philosophy. In particular, vitalism, maybe especially in its Spinozian formulation, seems to produce a kind of biopolitical thinking.⁶ In short, it seems to indicate

5 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 364.

6 For more on this, see Peter Gratton’s “Spinoza and the Biopolitical Roots

James K. Stanescu – Review of
Posthuman Ethics: Embodiment and Cultural Theory

that here are the bodies and relations that are acting lively and produce pleasure in my subject, so I should help those flourish, and these are the bodies that are not doing that, and I need to get rid of. This is of concern because vitalistic philosophy seems to operate as a get out of jail free card to the very issues of opacity and regimes of signification that MacCormack takes so seriously. Take in particular the issue of other animals. She insists strongly that we can never know other animals, and that they will always remain removed from our comprehension. And at the same time she argues that species is a construction that does not exist. If so, how do we know what are other animals and what are humans for her abolitionist position? We need to come to understand both other humans as more opaque, and nonhumans as more affective communicators. Our entanglements and affective contaminations give us both more certainty and less certainty than MacCormack's posthuman ethics seem to allow. And because of that, I doubt there is a way to escape the guilt, mourning, and melancholia that can come from just existing with other living beings. Instead of the innocence of escape from this world, we are just left with the messy and difficult task to construct a different world.

MacCormack's *Posthuman Ethics* is a daring book, and her arguments need to be taken seriously by anyone interested in posthuman and posthumanist theory. Her argument that thinking is material, and as such, already a relationship that requires ethics needs to be recentered at the heart of doing philosophy. If we aim to produce an ethics of posthuman bodies, it will have to done riding the turbulence created by MacCormack's thought.

of Modernity," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 18:3 (2013), 92-102.