

BOOK REVIEWS

MacCormack, Patricia (ed.), *The Animal Catalyst: Towards Ahuman Theory*, Bloomsbury, London and New York, 2014. ISBN: 9781472534446 (Paperback) / 9781472526847 (Cloth), 224 pp., US\$ 34.95 (Paperback) / US\$ 104 (Cloth).

The ‘Animal Question’ has occupied Western philosophy for more than a decade now. Whether inspired by the rising urgency of the problem of violence towards and exploitation of nonhuman animals perpetuated by science, technology and culture broadly speaking, or by an enthrallment with otherness, an increasing number of theorists engage with the concepts of the animal and human–nonhuman relations. These notions become an incessant impetus for creative and critical inquiry and the exploration of philosophical, political, ethical and artistic thinking. What, however, needs to be asked in the first place is: how can we, as humans, relate to the nonhuman, and more specifically, to nonhuman animals ethically? Is it possible at all?

The question of ethics is one of the main driving forces behind *The Animal Catalyst: Towards Ahuman Theory*, edited by Patricia MacCormack. The book is an absolutely unique and beautifully crafted collection of eleven essays which in manifold ways experiment with undoing the human through the multiplicity of (inhuman) affects and movements, thus opening up a possibility to think the nonhuman ethically, that is, without subjection to signification and human interest (in both an epistemological and material sense). (Re)thinking animals in contemporary theory has been, more often than not, premised upon the neutral and untouched figure of the human. This premise only reinstates old schemes and hierarchies. The only way to create hope and genuine change, to think otherwise, as MacCormack emphasises a number of times, is through a different mode of ethics: ‘the only gracious ethics of nonhuman relation is to absolutely cease all thought which includes animals and rethink the humanity that constitute thought itself’ (2014: 7).

Somatechnics 5.2 (2015): 255–264

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This consideration of humanity, however, cannot be reduced to the simple equation ‘humans are just/also animals’, she argues, as such a gesture ‘would erode the histories of violence for which we must be accountable’ (7). Instead, MacCormack offers the concept of the *ahuman* defined as an ‘absolute abolitionist refusal of the human’ (2), the refusal of epistemological and ontological structures that lie at the base of speciesist hierarchies and power relations, which tend to haunt contemporary theories, including posthumanist engagements with the animal. The withdrawing and undoing of the human in ethical terms can be described through Michel Serres’s concept of *grace*, understood as ‘stepping aside’, making room and giving up one’s place (6). In other words, refusing human structures opens up an ethical space where different, other-than-human forms of life may flourish and express themselves through affects without the demand for reciprocity or subjection to the epistemic violence of categories. This ahuman gracious account may also be framed as ‘the *I will not* which creates the *I am not* thus *I am not, so the other may be.*’ (4).

The Animal Catalyst consists of three parts, each of which approaches the nonhuman animal, the ahuman and the question of ethical relation in its own original way. The chapters, as MacCormack notes, can be seen as ‘unbelongings...designed to be a humble intervention into the wondrously difficult project of our own extrication from the value of belonging to this constructed concept of the human species’ (11). The first part of the book, *New Abolitionist Approaches*, brings together three different contributions which in a meticulous manner examine the position and framing of the nonhuman animal in legal as well as ethical and political theories. What becomes clear through both Carol Adams’ chapter on compassion in a historico-political context, and John Maher’s detailed analysis of the ways in which animal rights are positioned and presented in a variety of legal systems, is the fact that the human urge to give the subject or subjectivity a structure and to employ it as a universal template when dealing with the question of nonhuman animals in the legal and political spheres constitutes an obstacle to genuinely engage with otherness.

The second part of the volume, *Animal Mediators: Philosophy, Film, Literature* takes yet a different path. Four essays, which all to varying extents are in conversation with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of becoming-animal, and the transformation and movement of doing away with human-ness, the human and its illusion of autonomy, take the reader on an experimental adventure, creating spaces of metamorphoses, enacting affects and taking them seriously.

The section opens with a particularly important contribution from Charles Stivale who, through an attentive and close reading of both Deleuze and Guattari's work and Donna Haraway's comments on becoming-animal, draws attention to the actual potential of the concept, which has nothing to do with the fetishisation or appropriation of animal for human ends. Instead it is always already about the disavowal of human-ism, and the critique, creation and different practices of life.

Finally, the closing part of the book *Ahumanity: A Liberation of Life* brings us to the core of *The Animal Catalyst's* argument: it is only by repudiating both human identity (always defined in the opposition to nonhuman animals) and human material presence (in the parasitic form that we know and perpetuate), that a non-anthropocentric world – a world where nonhumans and ahumans exist and express themselves through ethical relationalities and affects, where 'connective life' (11) is actualised – will be possible. The authors, or rather, experimenters, as MacCormack (7) prefers to say, ask how the disavowal of humanism, human subjectivity and identity may open up new ways of thinking: art in its ahuman materiality and in relation to suicide (Colebrook); pedagogy as an anti-speciesist and non-anthropocentric practice no longer aimed at the production of the human (Wallin); self-harm as a potential site 'of meaning-making itself' and 'a practice of expansion and multiplicity' that contributes to 'a dismantling and recreation of the social world and our place within it' (McPhee; 176); and eventually, ahuman ethics as ecosophical, 'material, affective and activist' (MacCormack; 177). Ahuman ethics thought as 'leaving be' draws attention to human extinction as a form of activism.¹ The awareness of human contingency and finitude

makes us live differently, life configured in wondrous unthought of ways which benefit nature through our becoming more hospitable, less parasitic, more creative and productive in our connections and the opportunities of expressivity we encounter from a world territorialized constantly anew (MacCormack;184)

The cessation of human identity and absence of the human open up a space for the expressivity of all forms of life, where 'love is gracious acknowledgement of the relations we have made and those we must inevitable continue to make' (187), thus placing love at the very heart of the question of ethics.

Although the volume kept me captivated throughout, I asked myself if each attempt to mobilise the ahuman also succeeds in leaving

nonhuman animals be. In her beautifully written chapter *The Taste of Living* Chrisanthi Nigianni discusses Clarice Lispector's novel *The Passion According to G.H.* (1964), and more specifically, the main character, G.H.'s encounter with a cockroach, during which she smashes the insect with a door and subsequently tastes its flesh. This event initiates G.H.'s transformation and allows her to relate to the world in a different, non-humanistic and a-human way. As much as this figure catalyses the liberation from and the refusal of the straitjacket of humanism, one may question if it indeed evades any claims to knowledge of the nonhuman animal body (that also happens to be culturally marked as 'abject'). Yet, both the editor and the contributors are aware of the 'fatality' of their experimentation that consists in 'its own compulsion to speak' (7) and while acknowledging this entanglement in the structures of language and signification, they seek to engage with the multiplicity of voices that do not have the human as their ultimate measure.

In the diversity of its discussed themes and issues, *The Animal Catalyst* is a fascinating, original and ground-breaking project that not only influences the surface of our thinking, but, most importantly, genuinely touches the very foundations of our being and becoming in and with the world.

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DOI: 10.3366/soma.2015.0164

Note

1. Extinction as a form of activism may take three different forms: firstly, 'accounting for the life we live even though it was not chosen' (178) and expressing it through creative engagement (as the book itself does); secondly, a 'more extreme form of activism' which acknowledges that life may 'control its finitude, through suicide' (178); and finally, choosing not to reproduce (both in a material and discursive way).

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome (ed.), *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory beyond Green*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2013. ISBN: 978-0-8166-7998-0, 349 pp., US\$25.00 (paperback).

Why do we associate nature and the natural with the colour green? And what impact does this monochrome imaginary have on how we think