

Anthropocene Afterlives, or: Burial Rites for the Twenty-First Century

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In this paper I address the irreducibly fictional nature of narratives of personal and social identity. In this way, I attempt to uncover the performative element at work in narratives of post- and transhumanism, with the aim of shifting how critical engagements approach these speciesist and eugenicist discourses. Taking Michel Houellebecq's *The Possibility of an Island* as exemplary of the posthuman genre, I argue that we must admit the impossibility of dismissing the 'immortality' of his protagonist, Daniel¹. Only when we admit as much, I conclude, can we begin to imagine alternative modes of negotiation with these pernicious visions.

'Anthropogenic landscapes', write Tsing, Bubandt, Gan, and Swanson in their introduction to *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, 'are also haunted by imagined futures. We are willing to turn things into rubble, destroy atmosphere, sell out companion species in exchange for dreamworlds of progress' (2017: G2). I begin with this remark because it echoes a common refrain identifiable throughout Anthropocene literature: Namely, that the problem with forming a global response to the climate crisis has no less to do with social imaginings, than it does with technical acumen. Indeed, it may have far more to do with the former, than the latter, given that the anthropogenic forces that have contributed to this new geological epoch are, as Thomas, Williams, and Jalsiewicz

observe, consequences not of technological advances, per se, but in each case of the prevalence, or rise in use, of given technologies (2020: 74-76). It is not the fossil-fuel powered automobile that, in and of itself, contributes to global CO₂ levels, but the mass production and exploitation of vehicles powered by petrol engines that does so. If, then, 'responding' to the Anthropocene means less inventing novel technical fixes, than it does reconfiguring the 'dreamworlds' in which we currently exist, so that we may amend our exploitative and extractive practices, then the question becomes *how* a given dreamworld is constructed and *what* can be done to modify, or annul, this or that 'imagined future.'

Now, I would be remiss not to mention the many notable efforts currently underway to reconfigure the structure of social imaginings and, beyond that, the very possibilities for action, politics, and thought, *in* and *of* the Anthropocene. I will, however, restrict myself to commenting on only one such recent effort, notably that found in Colebrook and Weinstein's edited volume, *Posthumous Life: Theorizing Beyond the Posthuman*. The task that Colebrook and Weinstein give to themselves and their contributors is, precisely, to imagine what a truly posthuman world would look like, which is to say, not a world featuring humans *after* modification, enhancement, and intensification, but a truly *post*-human world, one, in other words, after the death, decay, or demise of humanity. To contend with such a future possibility, to confront the *inhuman*, both within and beyond the human, they assert, is one way to open new perspectives on the present.

Though theirs is certainly an interesting approach, capable of generating novel outlooks on the Anthropocene, it is

less clear whether it is able to speak, convincingly, to current advocates of the posthuman future that they reject. In other words, what is not evident is whether such a radical point of departure can persuade those today who are still caught up in fantasies of modification, enhancement, and intensification, including the bulk of our scientists, technocrats, and tech moguls, for whom the threats of anthropogenic global warming and climate change continue to be calls to arms for survivalist efforts ever again made in the name of 'the human.' If Colebrook and Weinstein's thought experiment wagers, in a sense, that new thinking requires abandoning the figure of the human, or at least thinking 'outside' the human, with its correlate notions of progress and exceptionalism, then I remain skeptical that such an approach can actually be effective in speaking to, and thereby modifying, the dreamworlds that so many members of our global society still inhabit.

For this reason, the problem that I would instead like to confront is the following: If, as ecologically-inclined critics and biologists such as Donna Haraway, Scott Gilbert, Anna Tsing, Margaret McFall-Ngai, Merlin Sheldrake, and so many others teach: *All life is entangled life; we have never been individuals; life is a planetary phenomenon; we are compost; and the human body is itself constituted by as many non-human cells as human ones*, well, this situation of non-individuality and radical multiplicity has, evidently, nevertheless somehow given birth to the possibility of its own misrecognition, in so many iterations of identity, sovereignty, ipseity, and immunity. How, then, to account for the possibility of this fundamental misunderstanding? My wager is that in order to contend with the most pernicious visions of post- and transhuman futures, aided and abetted by anthropogenic forms of extractive

capitalism, we must first account for the structures that makes this denial possible, rather than simply appealing to the truth of our in- or non-humanity, or even to the time of our (perhaps) inevitable future extinction. I will attempt to do this by reading one such Anthropocene 'dreamworld of progress', by way of Michel Houellebecq's exploration of posthuman immortality, in his 2005 novel, *The Possibility of an Island*.

It is worth noting that the situation of this quintessentially posthuman vision of *extended, enhanced, and immortalized (human) life* bears a direct analogy with that of the Anthropocene as a whole, which is to say: Posthuman and transhuman visions of what comes after the human, and be they in Bostrom, Sandberg, Kurzweil, Harris, or De Grey, invariably present themselves as matters of pure technical innovation, when, in point of fact, of no less and, in many cases, of vastly greater importance than such technical capacities, are the social imaginings and dreamworlds that underly the implementations of given technologies. While this point may seem obvious when it comes to openly eugenicist appeals to 'enhancement', I think it is less easy to perceive when it comes to proposed technologies of immortalization. To read Bostrom, Sandberg, and Kurzweil is, in a sense, to believe that human and posthuman survival simply is a matter of inventing the right tools, so that we will finally be able to 'upload' our brains or bioengineer away the physiological necessity of death. What these accounts invariably miss, however, are the economies of credit that are always at work in such visions of technical progress, and which allow these accounts to become legible, *as solutions* (to death), in the first place. Only because one has already accepted a certain notion of 'death', or, what always goes hand-in-hand with such a

notion, one of 'life' and 'self', can the informational or biological solution appear *as one*.

In point of fact, the texts of Bostrom, Sandberg, Kurzweil, Harris, and De Grey (but also Chalmers and, I would argue, transhumanism in general), can and should be read as speculative fictions invested not only in performing the possibility of what they promise—*as possible*—but also actively effacing the traces of this performance, precisely by appealing to 'empirical' evidence or 'scientific' fact, as though 'brain uploading' could ever be reduced to questions of purely technical nature. So, in order to demonstrate the performative element at work in these texts, I will turn to an avowed fiction author, Michel Houellebecq, who, I will argue, is more attuned to the textual operations of transhuman philosophers than the philosophers themselves. What is of note in Houellebecq is not simply how he exhibits the fictional dreamworld of posthumanity, but also how he reveals the very process through which a given dreamworld takes shape.

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The Possibility of an Island is a novel told through the multiple voices of what we are led to believe are different iterations of the same man. On the one hand, there is the commentary of Daniel1, our contemporary and the novel's protagonist. On the other hand, there are the commentaries of Daniel24 and Daniel25, the neo-human descendants of Daniel1, who later come to replace and reincarnate him, in a future time in which most of the earth has reverted to a 'wild', post-apocalyptic, anthropocenic state. At the most basic level, *The*

Possibility of an Island tells the story of the birth of the Elohim cult from the perspective of Daniel1. It tells the story of the cult's transition, from an essentially fringe faction, promising an immortality it can in no way furnish, to a global power with sufficient financial backing and technical know-how to spawn genetic clones of its adherents. At a more complex level, *The Possibility of an Island* tells the story of the participation of Daniel1 in this cult and of his transition from non-believer to believer. This transition, which runs contemporary to the cult's financial and technical progress, is, I would argue, the text's true interest.

I should clarify that the afterlife that is promised in *The Possibility of an Island* is not one of an eternal, immutable soul, or of an indefinite biological survival, marked by the continuity of the single aging body. Nor is it one of a substrate independent, uploaded, digital brain. Instead, it is a ruinous form of immortality, which is to say, it is a form of 'immortality' that reveals the fractures inherent to the very concept. For this 'immortality' is attained through cloning, which necessarily entails death *and* rebirth: In Daniel's world, after 'I' die, a genetically similar clone will be spawned, and that clone will be tasked both with internalizing the commentaries that were written by each of its prior generations, and with penning its own contribution for its future descendents. In theory, this testamentary act of writing is intended for the clones that follow, but, in practice, it also serves to inscribe the writing individual within the 'communal' whole. Each clonal self thus signs the same pact that is signed by all the others. And, in this way, each admits and acquiesces to the fiction of their mutual identity:

When I consider the night sky it occurs to me to think of the Elohimites, of this strange belief that must, finally, through circuitous paths, unleash the Great Transformation. Daniel1 lives again in me, his body knows a new incarnation here, his thoughts are my own, his memories my own; his existence is genuinely prolonged in me, much more than any man has ever dreamed of being prolonged through his descendants. My own life, however, I think about this often, is far from being one that he would have liked to live (2013: 383).

Now, a moment ago, I called the avowed identity of each of Daniel's clones a 'fiction', but, let me be perfectly clear on this point, I do not use the term disparagingly, as if this 'fiction' of identity could be opposed to some 'non-fiction'. When it comes to relations of identity—and be it the so-called identity of the 'self' or of the 'human', in its biological or anthropological conception—there is no *non-fictional*, which is to say, no *pre-contractual* nor *pre-prosthetic* referent, the reality of which might at last supply us with a firm foundation. In a sense, it is because the 'dreamworld' of my survival in my clone is not one that can *simply* be opposed to another (non-fictional) survival, in a 'non-dreamworld', that the proliferation of fictions of immortality, be they of god, the soul, the poetic text, or the biological child, are able to get going in the first place and enter circulation, beginning with the most minor intimation of self-identity and running up through fictions of clonal self-re-production, indefinite biological survival, and whole brain emulation.

While, then, it takes Daniel1 some time to buy into the 'fiction' of his immortality in his clone(s), once he does, it ceases to be evident by what standard this 'belief' could simply be discredited. Survival, in the other, we could say,

is always a matter of credit. The question, then, is whether there is ever any survival *that is not in and of the other*. If there is not, if survival is only ever a matter of economies of difference, of a self-othering that is also an othering-self, then one only ever exists in ‘dreamworlds.’ Which is of course not to say that we should, for this reason, simply condone any vision of the self, of survival, or of the future, however noxious, humanist, sexist, racist, or speciesist. To the contrary, this is the very ground—the groundless ground—that dictates that we must participate in the *shaping* of the fictions of survival that we wish to propagate: both for and by whom they shall be. The mistake would be, to the contrary, to believe that we could finally awaken from the dream, once and for all, and in this way realize the reality of a self-present ipseity.

In Houellebecq’s fictional world, then, it is the combination of genetic, historical, and testimonial continuities, between the generations, that is supposed to assure the preservation of identity and, as a result, warrant the use of the figure of ‘immortality’ for the individual. ‘Testimonial’, in this sense, does not refer to the so-called sheer continuity of the presence of experience (in consciousness), but instead to the *decision*, or *opting for*, appropriating the alterity of the other, as part of the same. The determination of my immortality—or my *survival*—is, consequently, nothing that I can know immediately, or absolutely. It is instead a knowledge that is only available through complex ratiocinations—as, it should be noted, it has always been, be it for Homer, Plato, or Descartes—and this is surely why Daniel¹ has the tendency to forget it:

In all likelihood the idea was too new. To be honest, I forgot myself most of the time that I had become

immortal. It was necessary to make an effort in order to remember (2013: 325).

My immortality—or, to be precise, the promise of my survival in my clone, or of my predecessor’s survival *in me*—can therefore only affect ‘me’ as a form of cultured knowledge, produced through complex discursive operations. In Daniel1’s case, these operations consist in the formation of a new cult that marries cutting-edge science with age-old propaganda. Yet while Houellebecq’s is an essentially cynical vision, more likely to dissuade than to persuade one from embracing such a form of existence, it is cynical in an importantly complex way: *The Possibility of an Island* is about the self-deception inevitable for every dream of life extension, but also about the *inevitability* of such forms of self-deception. What we read, in reading the novel, is the process through which Daniel1 gradually sells himself the promise of an immortality that is not one, or, at any rate, the promise of an immortality that is one *only because he buys into it as one*. Self-deception is therefore the very currency of this transaction. And yet—and herein lies the supplementary interest of the novel—it is not, for all that, an any less powerful engine of future dreamworlds. Thus, as external observers, we may be primed by Houellebecq to dismiss Daniel1 and his immortalist self-conceit on any number of grounds (just as we may be primed to dismiss Bostrom, Kurzweil, the Catholic church, or any number of other cults). Yet such a judgment—on our part—can do nothing either to affect the felicity of the performative declaration—namely, that he *is* immortal—or the actions that he takes on the basis of this belief. And this is, I think, the novel’s most important lesson:

Fox's [Daniel's dog] genetic code had been preserved, he reminded me, and we had become immortal; we, but also, if we wished it, our pets.

He seemed to believe it; he seemed absolutely to believe it, and I felt suddenly paralyzed with joy. With incredulity, also: I had grown up, I had aged, in the idea of death, and in the certainty of its empire. It's in a foreign state of spirit, as if I had been on the point of waking up into a magical world, that I awaited daybreak. Day broke, colorless, over the ocean; the clouds had disappeared, a miniscule corner of blue sky appeared on the horizon (2013: 359).

Daniel¹ becomes a believer in his own immortality. He comes to believe that he will be—indeed, that he already is—immortal, at the very moment when the technical hurdles to human cloning are overcome. And, perhaps, he does? Which is not to say that his vision *is* or *is not* valid, but only that we are here touching on the mystical foundations of a claim that is, to a significant extent, self-grounding. We may opt to reject this claim. We may opt to ratify laws for or against its possibility. We may choose to mobilize arguments and evidence that reveal its implicit conceits, either as valid or invalid. Yet—and this is the critical point—because immortality and the human it is supposed to affect have never had a stable referent; because the lines of descent that constitute self and other are forever in flux, the *possibility* of such a claim, however idiomatic, isolated, and insular, remains.

Where Sandberg, Bostrom, and other transhumanists fall short, then, is in failing to perceive the fictional limit of their own discourses. Convinced of the validity of the forms of survival they put forward—or, perhaps it would be better to say: invested in *proving* the validity of the

forms of survival that they themselves wish that they could fully affirm—they fail to see how, like Daniel¹, they too have become adherents. They too have sold themselves a story of self-continuity that is no more grounded in ‘reason’ than any other. Such a realization, however, does not function simply to dispel the immortality in each case dreamt of. And this is, I think, what most critics of post- and transhumanism miss. Realizing that these dreams of human immortalization are fictional does not serve to eliminate the allure of such dreams, just as understanding that one’s works or one’s children will *not* preserve one’s ipseity after death, does not stop anyone (or most people, anyway) from investing in them as forms of survival. Instead, such a realization merely situates this performance and alleged identity within its field of production. But while the novels of Houellebecq and others are still able to reflect on the fictional statuses of their texts, and in this way to reveal the performative force of their claims to immortality, it is precisely the function of the texts produced by Kurzweil, Bostrom, Harari, and Harris to efface the fictions that underly them and, in this way, to become convinced, at last, of their own fantastic fabrications.

The well-known MIT computer scientist, Marvin Minsky, famously concluded his 1994 essay, ‘Will Robots Inherit the Earth?’, by responding in the affirmative: *Yes. Yes, they will inherit it, for ‘they will be our children’* (1994: 113). What we miss, however, in declarations such as this one, by preeminent STEM intellectuals, is that the robot, the artificial general intelligence, or the cyberbrain’s ‘inheritance’ of the earth, will not be, and, in fact, is never, a simple matter of the continuity of a self-same ‘identity.’ Such entities will *not* inherit the earth because they somehow *are us*, or because they somehow represent the

evolutionary extension of a ‘human’ that, I must note in passing, never existed in the first place. Rather, if and when such entities do, in fact, inherit ‘the earth’, it will be because we dreaming ‘humans’ will have given it—or, what’s left of it, anyway—to *them*. It will be because we will have bought into the fiction of their identity, of their extension, or of their continuity or continuation, *of us*. But this is a decision that, if not exactly in ‘our hands’, is nevertheless one that ‘we’, whatever we are, continuously participate in. It is one that, therefore, calls for thought, lest we wake up one day to learn that we can no longer even conceive of the necessity of dreaming.

References

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