

“If the world is dystopic, why fear an apocalypse?”

MacCormack, Patricia. *The Ahuman Manifesto: Activism for the End of the Anthropocene.*

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In our posthuman, pre-apocalyptic Anthropocene epoch, as political radicalization, constant violation of human and non-human rights, environmental breakdown, and climate crisis increasingly become our daily reality, the mere number of potential reasons to be terrified of appear to be overwhelming. Preceded by acclaimed academic books such as *Posthuman Ethics: Embodiment and Cultural Theory* (2012) and *The Animal Catalyst: Towards Ahuman Theory* (2014), London-based academic Patricia MacCormack’s latest work, *The Ahuman Manifesto*, is in many ways a book about fear; fear—as well as its counterpart, hope—features prominently in it, albeit often in surprising configurations. It claims that we are afraid of all the wrong things: we are “afraid we are not as special as we think we are” (189); “afraid we won’t have lived enough, . . . consumed enough, been free to experience the fleeting life we have” (189); “afraid of being treated how the anthropocene treats every aspect of the earth” (189). Many of these fears share as their core the fear of death or human extinction, ironically enough, the one thing we should not be afraid of, according to the author, in fact, we should embrace it instead.

The tenets of “ahumanism,” an alternative philosophy of life that MacCormack proposes, are indeed extreme, even if they are not completely without reason. At this point in history, we can no longer deny that human presence is proving to be overwhelmingly detrimental to Earth; the rise of militant animal liberation movements, Extinction Rebellion, and the spread of ecofascist thought demonstrate that there is an increasing awareness of the havoc humanity has wreaked, often coupled with a considerable sense of guilt. Still, while most of these forms of environmental engagement aim to negotiate a balance, MacCormack is not

interested in steering humanity towards “sustainability,” but towards extinction. The primary paths of action she presents are antinatalism (remaining voluntarily childless) and abolitionist veganism (being “against all use of animals acknowledging that . . . we can never know modes of nonhuman communication” [24]), while also emphasizing the grace in “not knowing and in leaving be” (22), so as to give all living things freedom to express themselves on their own terms, independent of the imposition of human constraints and systems of significations. *The Ahuman Manifesto*, as its title suggests, is first and foremost a call for action that goes beyond traditional academic works in inviting readers not only to discover and contemplate, but eventually also to become “ahuman,” that is, to leave anthropocentrism behind by forsaking human privilege and cease reproduction, with the ultimate aim of slowly but steadily eliminating the human species—considered by the author to be the only way of ensuring that everything else may thrive.

In formulating her arguments for becoming ahuman, MacCormack builds on theories of ethics, eco- and social criticism, vegan studies, and ecosophy, but also reaches back to queer and (eco)feminist thoughts. The philosophies of Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Baruch Spinoza, Michel Serres, Luce Irigaray, and Carol J. Adams serve as crucial foundations for the ideas developed in the book. MacCormack, however, constructs many of her contentions in opposition to certain theoretical movements, criticizing them primarily because they continue to exhibit and maintain the idea of human exceptionalism. Ahuman theory distances itself from several theoretical movements and branches of activism that would seem natural allies, such as posthumanism, identity politics, animal studies, and animal rights. Animal studies, for instance, is condemned for “speaking for and of the nonhuman other, [which] is no different to speaking for and as the human minoritarian other, except there will never be any space for consent or a truly reciprocal dialogue even negotiatively” (26). The analogy between nonhuman animals and the human minoritarian other may strike one as strange, in light of MacCormack’s advocacy of

voluntary human extinction; this apparent contradiction is, however, resolved by the author's insistence that humans, while giving up reproduction, should also live out the lives they have left, caring for and entering into ethical encounters with the other, whether it be human or nonhuman. MacCormack's manifesto does not oppose striving for freedom, nor does it deny justice for the minoritarian other; but it "repudiates hierarchy, . . . refuses that some human rights should be privileged over others, and that human rights should be privileged over nonhuman" (9). One of the main questions raised by the book is how to criticize and combat anthropocentrism without remaining within anthropocentric discourse and methods, "without having to resort to its tools and its terms" (118), for, in pursuing the ambitious goal of "dismantl[ing] the dominance of the human" (8), the author attempts to "no longer argue like a human, with other humans" (8).

The critique of human privilege is a prevalent theme of *The Ahuman Manifesto*. One of its most decisive arguments is the one that posits knowledge as negation, exposing scientific inquiry's anthropocentric lens—" [a]ny knowledge, all knowledge, whatever it is 'about,' is human knowledge and serves human interest" (38)—while also problematizing humans' claim to knowledge and understanding which is still adamant, despite the unknowability of the other, be it either human or non-human animal. MacCormack argues that instead of pursuing recognition, one should become entirely selfless through maintaining difference rather than reaching equality, which—employing Luce Irigaray's thoughts—"only demands inclusion through mimesis and assimilation so that included others are lesser but passable mimics of the dominant" (28). Chapter One, "Wither identity?" is an explicit call for the self to wither and die, opening the path to the literal death of humankind, as well as being a means of "affirmation" which, aligned with unknowing, amounts to "letting go of our use of the other" (42), contrasted with the "negation" of (the claim to) knowledge. Although many might consider her assertions radical, and even hateful, compassion and empathy, as MacCormack explains, are key features

of her manifesto, which is ultimately “optimistic and life-affirming; it simply sees the distribution of the value of life differently to the anthropocentric understanding of the world” (16). Her last chapter, “The future in the age of the Apocalypse,” reflects on how many, non-human animals and humans alike, are living their own apocalypses right now, and poses the unsettling question: “Is the idea that we are not already within the apocalypse a luxurious one, and always has been for anyone not privileged enough to be within a certain economic, gendered and racial percentile? If the world is dystopic, why fear an apocalypse?” (171).

Several of MacCormack’s ideas are so bewildering and extreme that it might be tempting to read her manifesto as a satire, perhaps in the vein of Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* (1729), although, contrary to the heavily ironic intentions of Swift, *The Ahuman Manifesto* takes the idea of consuming humans, quite literally, as a solution to their demand for meat. MacCormack, however, dismisses such an understanding as misguided: “Only an anthropocentric evaluation of the claims and demands made in this manifesto would see the human apocalypse as negative, as performative (surely she can’t be *serious?*), as ultimately a manifesto advocating for death” (184, emphasis in the original). Irrespective of how we evaluate her advocacy for extinction, the author broaches many other controversial topics: contentious points include “thinking differently about death by advocating for suicide, euthanasia, antinatalism” (25), the “transgressing [of] the corpse taboo” (166) by re-negotiating cannibalism and necrophilia as practices “which offe[r] possibilities that pervert both the dominance of the human and the need to queer our relationship with death and corpses” (152). Yet, what is perhaps most disturbing about the ideas discussed in the book is what is left unsaid: for, while ahuman theory draws heavily on the tenets of deep ecology—a holistic view of the ecosphere which rejects any hierarchy of living beings, and thus condemns anthropocentrism, preaching the inherent value of forms of life, independent of their benefits to human beings—it fails to distance itself from, in fact, it even alludes to an alarming, radicalized “offspring” of

deep ecology: ecofascism. An extreme ideology which posits humanity as the bane of the world, ecofascism names human overpopulation—a racist myth with colonialist overtones that has been debunked by numerous scientists and experts—as the main cause of environmental degradation, which often involves shifting responsibility and blame to (primarily) Asian and African countries, endorsing some sort of population control. By rejecting “humans first” arguments, asserting that “[a]humanism has no signifying lens so all humans should be neutered; this is the polar opposite of eugenics” (156), she appears to avoid the “dubious moral territory” of deciding “who reproduces and who doesn’t” (150). However, the statement that all “reproduction is production of the same” (168) seems to negate differences between humans, thus effacing the traumatic experience of oppressed groups, who are often those already suffering from the effects of climate change, while being the least responsible for it. Also, the manner and language used by the book to promote antinatalism and abolitionist veganism often display a severe lack of sensitivity: on one occasion, the author resorts to an unfortunate metaphor (strongly associated with ecofascist discourse) which describes ahumanism as “an inoculation of the earth against the virus of humans” (156), while earlier she also mentions the phrase “nonhuman holocaust” (58), a deeply disconcerting comparison between a traumatic historical event and industrial animal agriculture, in a defensive context.

At the same time, however extreme or absurd MacCormack’s stances may seem compared to other, similar branches of philosophy, she occupies a rather moderate position. Even if to a degree she allies herself with the Church of Euthanasia (which “has as its four stations of the cross sodomy, suicide, abortion and cannibalism” [146]), she certainly does not endorse pro-mortalism (“the view that it is often prudent for individuals to kill themselves and often right for them to kill others, even without their consent” [Metz 2]) but rather advocates for a slow, voluntary and dignified end to the human race, and until then, “a good life/care of the living over biotechnologies [*sic*] drive for immortality” (25).

Many of the topics discussed by *The Ahuman Manifesto* prove uncomfortable or frightening for the reader, as the book takes it upon itself to subvert deeply ingrained taboos linked to death, eating, sexuality, and reproduction, meanwhile adhering to the ahuman logic of writing and reading. Certainly, the manifesto's challenging language must be noted; although it might seem justifiable, considering the equally challenging themes and ideas presented by the book, it could still prove difficult even for those well-versed in ecosophical thought and the philosophies MacCormack gained inspiration from. Some sections, or indeed whole chapters, turn out to be so abstract as to hinder understanding: although intended as "a call to affects" (12), the manifesto's already divisive ideas are even harder to digest due to the alienating style of their expression, which might repel even those more inclined to identify with them. At several points, MacCormack makes clear that she is aware of the controversial nature of her book, owing to both its ahuman way of writing and to its transgressive claims concerning selfhood, reproduction, religion, identity politics, and death: "I am not convinced of the imperative for self-preservation to come before the equality of others. And here is where I may lose the reader" (65). Yet she also emphasizes the deliberate choice of recording her thoughts in the form of a manifesto, as she does not "search for a balanced, logical, emotionless evaluation of how human exceptionalism is perpetuating destructive impulses" (8), but rather "seeks to catalyse" (12). And while many of her ideas—extreme at best, ludicrous at worst—prove challenging to process, and often impossible to embrace, the aversion and indignation they might provoke are certainly worth pondering. The author herself implies that these responses arise from a fear of being deprived of choice (180) and a fear of death or extinction. *The Ahuman Manifesto* indeed asks for a lot: it calls for a reconsideration and suspension of one's worldview, values, and ethical stances when confronting readers with uncomfortable and often outrageous ideas. However, by approaching its extremities critically and carefully, one

might find value in its fearless, passionate advocacy of “the end of human exceptionalism” (25) and selflessness, a little more of which all the humans of the world could do with.

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Work Cited

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