

life trajectories on an experience-based, bodily level. She criticizes theoretical discussions that reduce mediumship to pathology, belief, or neurological aspects. Accordingly, she clarifies:

This analysis is not intended as an exhaustive explanatory paradigm of what is a complex process of spiritual healing. I rather intended to focus upon embodied knowledge to illuminate specific dynamics that emerged from my interlocutors' narratives upon the therapeutic uses of mediumistic development; and I did so in the light of my approach to the processes of initiatory learning as a multilayered experience – which is embod-

ied, intuitive, performative, conceptual and intersubjective, articulating particular notions of the body and the self. (224)

HELMAR KURZ, Münster

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JENNY HUBERMANN 2021. *Transhumanism. From Ancestors to Avatars*

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JENNY HUBERMAN is Associate Professor of (Cultural) Anthropology at the University of Missouri, Kansas City, USA. She investigates practices, values, and visions among US-American Transhumanists who imagine a future where science and technology will enable humanity to overcome alleged biological, mental, and physical limitations for the sake of creating a somewhat posthuman species and society. To start with, she shares her observation that experiences of loss, mourning, and memorialization are changing and that our contemporary digital age might promote mind cloning technologies as a new step in human evolution, an idea that she imagines as rather alien and horrifying:

Did I really want to live in a world where my great, great grandmother's digital avatar would join me for Thanksgiving dinner? Or my grandparents would be cared for by "cyberconscious" robots? Or my mindclone digital offspring called "bemans" would "stage civil rights movements" to ensure they "win the same status that flesh-and-blood humans enjoy" [...]? [...] This is completely crazy! (1)

However, HUBERMAN sovereignly approaches the field as an anthropologist who enters new terrains and throughout this rich monography, she repeatedly refers to classical ethnographies to frame her investigation of this contemporary cultural phenomenon that appears to sustainedly

shape human future – not to say that it is already reengineering the human species to usher in a posthuman future:

[...] I came to realize that transhumanists are interested in using science and technology to reconfigure conceptions of the person, the body, kinship, cosmology, the social and political order, and the physical environments in which our future descendants will dwell. (2)

She, therefore, pursues to answer the question of "[h]ow does the transhumanist understanding of the world; of human nature, the person, kinship, cosmology, the good life, and so on, *compare and contrast* with the way human beings, living in other times and places, have conceived of such things" (3)? HUBERMAN understands transhumanism as a sociocultural movement to enhance capabilities and to overcome limitations toward a "humanity+". She aims to investigate

[h]ow are new forms of technology reconfiguring human life in the twenty-first century? How are technologists assuming an ever-greater role in shaping the future of our species? And more specifically, how does 'the technological imagination' [...] become a powerful force in the making of social lives and futures? (5f)

Other topics are radical life extension, colonialization of space, achieving immortality through mind cloning, developing robots with a full range

of human cognitive abilities, using technology to achieve eternal bliss and new forms of body augmentation, acquiring powerful capabilities, and counteracting the deficiencies of aging, illness, and death. These ideas have had an impact on TV series and movies, but also on the industrial development of self-driving cars and military technologies to augment the bodily and cognitive abilities of soldiers. Accordingly, transhumanist projects are already real in remaking the social, material, and imaginative worlds we live in. Body- or bio-hackers use chips to enhance their sensory capacities and promote a defective understanding of human nature and the substituting possibilities of neurobiology, computer sciences, and artificial intelligence. HUBERMAN observes that the transhumanist movement mainly consists of highly educated, predominantly white, male elites, who share libertarian outlooks in the US with a robust commitment to capitalism, whereas, e. g., in pre-1989 Russia, divergent political perspectives would have shaped techno enthusiasm alongside alleged future social(ist) approaches. Thus, one question to state is on how visions of transhuman technologies would serve the existential needs of populations or, once again, the economical greed of a few (as we may also observe in contemporary biomedical technologies).

HUBERMAN's declared aim of the book is to provide 1) an anthropological exploration of transhumanism as a contemporary socio-cultural movement and its visions, values, practices, and projects and 2) to introduce students to new fields of anthropology by using classical anthropological comparative methods. She discusses the diverging and converging frames of religion and science in the context of "late modernity" (12), where new religious movements advance technoscientific ideologies and science-based cosmological visions. Accordingly, she does not perceive transhumanism as antithetical to religion but instead discovers blurred lines with secular interests of economic and cosmological significance: a new form of capitalism that is allegedly dedicated to species salvation and new ideas of social organization. Methodologically, she implements approaches in digital ethnography to explore discussion forums, blogs, websites, and other related media that discuss the use of science and technology to improve human life. Complementary, she

reports of public events where she has participated in and conducted (narrative) interviews.

Apart from her introduction and conclusion, HUBERMAN structures this monography in seven chapters. Chapter 1 (*Is Transhumanism a Revitalization Movement?*) juxtaposes the religious and social natures of transhumanism by integrating ANTHONY WALLACE's (1956) work on revitalization movements. HUBERMAN considers explanatory models of responses to social stress and attempts of creating a more satisfying culture where available technologies would eliminate the distress of aging and enhance human intellectual, physical and psychological capacities. This perspective predicates a profound dissatisfaction with the current human condition and the biological chains that keep human beings from actualizing their fullest potential. According to the author, this mind frame developed throughout the cultural distortions of the Cold War where apocalyptic dreads would nourish divergent responses from evangelicalism to transhumanism in the USA.

Chapter 2 (*Ancestors and Avatars: Immortality Transformed*) focuses on immortality initiatives of mind cloning and compares them to practices of dealing with human existential dilemmas such as reproduction and survival. By referring to MEYER FORTES (1987), HUBERMAN compares practices of "making avatars" to those of "making ancestors". Accordingly,

[a]ncestorhood has thus been a desirable means of constructing the afterlife because it reaffirms relationships and practices that are widely recognized as maintaining sociality and vitality among the living (55).

Making avatars, in terms of mind uploading and/or a transfer of consciousness, involves robotic bodies, body replètes, or holographs to construct the afterlife but even more reaffirms core values of a late capitalist society that envisions a post-human age instead of a continuity of humanity's wellbeing.

In Chapter 3 (*Happily Ever After: Transhumanism and the Hedonistic Imperative*), HUBERMAN elaborates on a related aspect of a "good life" and "happiness" as being framed by specific social contexts and values of what transhumanists perceive as worthy. In reminiscence of RUTH BEN-

EDICT (1934) and MICHAEL JACKSON (2011), she addresses the topic of how socio-cultural rather than biological needs shape individual desires and accordingly elaborates on how the hedonistic imperative shapes visions and attempts of living “happily ever after” by promoting rationality, scientific progress, evolutionary biology, and materialism. I cannot help myself to think about the cyborg species of the *Borg* within the *Star Trek* universe here. Instead of addressing class inequality, racism, sexism, bigotry, nationalism, and all other forms of structural violence producing human suffering, the solution for human affliction is sought in synchronization, rationalization, consumption of perfecting drugs, and other forms of biochemical engineering.

Subsequently, Chapter 4 (*The Social Skin, the Antisocial Skin, and the Pursuit of Morphological Freedom*) critically explores the pursuit of “morphological freedom”, that is, the individual’s right to modify their body according to one’s desires. With reference to TERENCE TURNER (1980), it reflects on “social skins” as bodies being betwixt and between a unique self and shared meanings and values they reproduce. To make things more complicated and even have the reviewer reflect on how much he already might be a transhumanist himself, HUBERMAN introduces TURNER’s student ROSENBLATT (1997) who investigates so-called “modern primitives” and their forms of body modification (tattoos, piercings, scarifications, etc.) as a means of communicating estrangement from modern society, expressing resistance, and performing an “authentic self” in terms of a symbolically represented nonconformity to standards of Western capitalist society (even though I want to add that many related practices have been commodified in recent years and nowadays it almost seems to be a symbol of enhanced nonconformity *not* to apply to these practices). Interestingly, HUBERMAN even in this context of an alleged asexual optimization of human existence detects gender discourse in terms of “technomascularity”: “We’re not a bunch of hippy, dippy bongo players with dreadlocks hanging out and having fun, we actually make shit, we get shit done!” (110)

These stereotypes guide me to Chapter 5 (*Decoding the Self*) where HUBERMAN deconstructs conceptions of self within this informatic, quan-

tified, and databased cross-fertilization between neurosciences, computer sciences, and AI in comparison to HALLOWELL’s (1955) notions of personhood and self-awareness beyond other-than-human scopes. How do we conceptualize the self and how do conceptions influence behaviors and practices? Is the human body the seat of consciousness and self? HUBERMAN does not explicitly address but implicitly touches on the reviewer’s concerns: what about the senses, feelings, affections, emotions, and aesthetics? More than any other chapter of this book, this one warns of forgetting who we *are* for the sake of some alleged scientific progress that reduces to cognitive knowledge and neglects the impact of sensory experience. Hollywood movies (e. g., *Matrix*, *The Lawnmower Man*, etc.) have illustrated the dangers of such approaches, nonetheless “the market” urges us to increasingly apply to them, with certain computer apps that we may trust more than our gut feelings and interhuman relationships.

Chapter 6 (*Rethinking Kinship Systems*) thus addresses questions that the reviewer deems scary: does kinship in the posthuman future include digital offspring, robotic kin, or new forms of biological reproduction? What is family? How do we relate to others? Who or what are relatives and/or others? And what about gender and sex markers? Can we leave them behind for the sake of a post-human kinship that develops from biological to vitological where reproduction is not dependent on married male-female couples anymore but on “rationalized” reproductive acts that do not lead to autonomous offspring with their own identity but rather generate copies of the genitors’ selves and/or asexual duplications? Suddenly, it does not appear so futuristic anymore, once related linguistic terms already shape our concerns of “political correctness”. On the other hand, it also represents the contemporary sex industry with increasing resources of AI sex robots that imitate empathy and reproduction technologies promoting designer babies and selective reproduction. The reviewer thinks that it is not too much mental gymnastics to imagine what comes next, and has already been before: how to deal with alleged biological “abnormalities”? HUBERMAN addresses all these questions and remains quite objective on these troubling issues. She communicates her

discomfort but steps back to analyze both: the transhumanist discourse *and* her personal bias.

In chapter 7 (*From Original Affluence to Posthuman Abundance*), HUBERMAN summarizes values, visions, tensions, and reflections on what a posthuman future might entail for cultural anthropology. Wondering how transhumanists would imagine the future in economic terms, the author imagines divergent approaches among postscarcity, radical abundance, and related socio-political impacts that may or may not direct toward “affluence without abundance” (183). She reflects on SAHLIN’s (1972) elaborations on hunter-gatherer-societies and questions regarding the democracy of property, productivity, division of labor, environment, and technological innovation (185ff), outlining that affluence such as poverty results from social structures and relations (187). Accordingly, we must question how health and wealth interrelate, especially when transhumanists pretend to be technophilanthropists while at the same time performing as profit-oriented social entrepreneurs (202ff). How does consumption negotiate individual, socio-political, and economical needs (205f)? Does the promise of technology apply to forces of equality, that is, does it serve social needs or individual satisfaction, or are both interrelated (215)? Does technological progress involve human progress in terms of democratic socialism (216) or does it simply regress into radical capitalism where the gap between rich and poor increases, and the former invest in their immortality by vampyrizing the latter?

In her conclusion (*Back to the Future: Reflections on a Discipline and a Movement*) HUBERMAN does not provide answers to these questions but stresses the fact that transhumanists as a “radical other” challenge future anthropological research to do so (217) by “listening to ancestor anthropol-

ogists and their approaches” (222) for the sake of understanding the posthuman future envisioned by transhumanists where technology plays a paramount role in the constitution and organization of both the species and society (224):

The technological imagination, therefore, does more than provide an entertaining diversion from the “reality” of life. It inspires people, in this case very powerful ones, to create realities in accordance with particular visions of the world as it “could or should be”. (235)

To the reviewer, it also involves to further critically exploring biomedical hegemony as an alleged means to improve human wellbeing, including discourse on the obligation to live (on), forced vaccination, reproduction technologies, and, last but not least, plastic surgery for the sake of responding to social expectations of maximum performance.

HELMAR KURZ, Münster

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