Missing Links and Non/Human Queerings: an Introduction

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Missing Links: Non/Human Queerings

In recent years, questions regarding the ontological status of the human have been raised with renewed interest and imagination within various fields of critical thought. In the face of biotechnological findings and increasingly advanced technologies that connect as well as disturb settled boundaries, whether geographical or bodily, not to mention philosophical questionings of traditional western humanism, the boundaries of the human subject have been contested. The human body, traditionally imagined as closed and autonomous, has been opened up to a world of forces and agencies that are strange, other and often deeply disturbing when viewed from an anthropocentric standpoint.

Rather than close down anxieties concerning such boundary transgressions and ontological uncertainties, scholars – not least within areas such as feminist, posthumanist and queer theory – have argued that here lie possibilities as well as an ethical urgency to rethink the human subject, its world(s) and its others. Indeed, what might it mean to view the world from positions that do not take the pure and autonomous human form as its starting point? And what ethical considerations does such a viewpoint demand of us?

This issue of *Somatechnics* is inspired by the International Somatechnics Conference, 'Missing Links: the Somatechnics of Decolonisation', that was held at Linköping University, Sweden, in June 2013. Rather than present a broad overview of the many and exciting themes that were discussed during the conference, we will here take the opportunity to hone in on a strand that was present,

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yet not the primary focus of the conference itself, namely the question of the queer potentials of a somatechnics of the non/human. As such, we have kept the title of 'Missing Links', which points to how the non/human as a concept and tool for thought is full of more or less illicit, disturbing, pleasurable as well as anxiety-ridden (missed) connections. Or, to put it in a short and sweet way: queer relations. We are therefore grateful to Patricia MacCormack, who has granted us permission to use parts of the title of her article included in this volume, 'Nonhuman Queerings', which brings out the agency of such queer connections. We have introduced the slash to the non/human in order to make more visible some of the bolts and screws that keep categories of human and nonhuman together as well as apart. In other words, we wanted to show the somatechnics at work when it comes to practices of dividing bodies and matter into categories of the human and the not quite human.

Somatechnics explores the technologies of bodies; how they come to be through both disturbing and anxiety-inducing, as well as beautiful, thrilling and unexpected connections. This challenges the traditional, western notion of a clearly defined, autonomous human form and sheds light on the constant negotiations and renegotiations that take place when boundaries between human and nonhuman corporeality are constructed. Such (re)negotiations have serious political, ideological and not least ethical implications for those who do not quite measure up to the standards set for the properly human as well as for those who have no hope of ever entering that category, such as nonhuman animals and so-called natural matter. Engaging with the somatechnics of the non/human brings the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion to the forefront, asking why and how bodies are made and unmade. As such, the workings of the somatechnics of the non/human are queer, in the broadest sense of the word; they disturb neatly set boundaries, hierarchies and categories, drawing surprising connections and missing others. They make links appear where before there were none, and they deconstruct already existing ones.

Ethics and the Somatechnics of the Non/Human

Asking about the somatechnics of the non/human always means asking about ethics, which is a demanding and delicate task. As Patricia MacCormack writes in her contribution opening this issue, 'Queering the nonhuman requires a very careful consideration of how we use nonhuman, because all thought is ultimately use in that it produces

material affects via action upon the bodies of others' (2015, p 129). Queering is a creative and critical process that opens up and re(con)figures both human and nonhuman entities, relationalities, affects and forces alike, while questioning and going beyond the imagined boundaries and divisions It is in itself multiple, differential and transformative, yet non-teleological. Ethical inquiry, in this context, does not equate with a measure of morality based on the human, but instead, asks how bodies, affects, and forces intra- and interact with one another, while always already being weaved in the queer non/human becomings of the world. Furthermore, interrogating somatechnical relations between bodies, as Astrida Neimanis points out in her contribution, requires us to begin by questioning the knowing 'we' that sets up the distinctions in the first place and the category of 'them' that is produced in the process.

The enactments and negotiations of the non/human take place on the boundary between the human and nonhuman, which is neither pre-determined, nor final – both in a biological and philosophical sense of the term, since, as Donna Haraway reminds us, 'we have never been human' in the first place (Gane 2006). On the one hand, an average human body carries up to 2 kg of microorganisms, the number of which exceeds the actual amount of human cells.[1] The latter, as much as any other animal or plant cells, are not ontologically independent. They have evolved in the course of symbiogenesis: previously free-living bacteria were incorporated into eukaryotic cells and over time were transformed into these cells' organelles (Margulis and Sagan 2002). The division between organic and inorganic does not seem to be clear either, as it is demonstrated throughout discussions on the origin of life characteristic of both synthetic and astrobiology.[2] On the other hand, the categories of the human and the human subject are historical products, the outcomes of not always smoothly working cogs of the *anthropological machine* (Agamben 2004) that could also be understood as a complex set of somatechnological, material and discursive operations through which the human and the nonhuman animal have been continuously manufactured. Throughout centuries (and today no less than before) these mechanisms have led to oppression and violence towards, as well as extermination of, human and nonhuman animal bodies alike – based on their categorisation as 'not human' and therefore 'worth less (than human)'. As such, they constitute a potent and ruthless somatechnological and political machinery that calls for an attentive ethico-political analysis and critique. Simultaneously, these procedures seek to reify two realms, nature and culture, and juxtapose them against one another. What they

endeavour to dismiss and undo is the primary character of dynamic connections, relations, inter- and intra-actions between the human and nonhuman, material and semiotic, organic and inorganic, and finally, natural and cultural, through which bodies of matter and of knowledge emerge and are perpetually (re)shaped.

The non/human, as it becomes clear throughout the following contributions and as we have already emphasised, refers to a diverse multiplicity of living and non-living entities, components and forces. They are neither autonomous nor inert, but rather enmeshed in a multiplicity of relationalities that are not and cannot be captured and limited to the straitjacket of binary oppositions. Somatechnical queerings – understood as a verb and a process – do not have a final objective or a fixed starting point. Rather, they come from the middle and unfold in an unexpected and uncontainable multitude of ways and directions, while questioning taken for granted categories and opening up new possibilities of thinking and being/becoming, and thus imagining new possible futures.

With this issue we wished to invite contributors who all in their own unique ways engage with the questions of the somatechnics of the non/human as questions of ethical relations. Some participated in the conference in Linköping, some did not. We asked these contributors what it might mean to queer the links between somatechnics and the non/human. The results are as varied as they are challenging in their engagement with the queer, somatechnical work done by the concept of the non/human: in this issue you will find articles on the erotics of dolls; the political and ethical issues of the nature/culture divide; disability and sexuality; the evolution of monsters; transgender automatons; hauntology and corpses. Here, the non/human is sculpted in flesh as well as plastic, text, desires and anxieties. The somatechnical connections are at times disturbing, at times pleasurable, yet always disruptive and critical in their ethical workings.

Ethics of (Missing) Relations: Contributions to Non/Human Queerings

In her contribution, Patricia MacCormack proposes a three-fold conceptualisation of the nonhuman: as a work of art ('a silent, unknowable falsehood'), as the thought of nature and, finally, as an ethical entity. The nonhuman, defined by her as 'ahuman', can be understood as the impetus: a becoming-nonhuman. Queering the nonhuman simultaneously queers the human: it catalyses the emergence of a ground where organisms come to being through

relations and affects, and where flesh is no longer subjugated to signification. The becoming-nonhuman of the human is also necessary for the mobilisation of a nonhuman ethics expressed through abolitionism (leaving nonhuman animals be, MacCormack 2012) and love.[3] Thus, humans form part of the world along with nonhuman animals and other elements of nature in a way that does not set them apart as an exception nor allow them to evade responsibility.

The questions of accountability, responsibility and ethics posed in the context of ecology and nonhuman nature also form a key focus for Astrida Neimanis. While drawing on feminist materialism and posthumanism on the one hand and postcolonial theories on the other, Neimanis asks if representing nonhuman natures without repeating the gesture of colonisation, that is, silencing them through our attempts to 'speak for' the nonhuman is possible at all. Instead of escaping the difficulty of the task, she suggests, we should rather 'stay with the trouble' (Haraway 2010) and seek such a technics of representation that does not privilege humans, but at the same time hold them accountable for their choices, decisions and deeds.

What lies at the heart of ethical inquiry is the issue of relationality and more specifically, the relation to as well as through difference. In her piece, Donna McCormack looks at how alternative theories of evolution (specifically Richard Goldschmidt's saltational theory) haunt the scientific imaginary enacted in the texts of popular culture: the film series *X-Men* (dir: Bryan Singer, Brett Ratner, 2000–2006) and in Hiroma Goto's short story collection *Hopeful Monsters* (2004), revealing contemporary ontological and socio-political anxieties related to the issues of difference. Yet, she argues, the texts simultaneously manifest the potential and hope for a present and a future, where humanness is not thought as an exemption, but rather, as 'an intra-relationality of the animal, the environment, the human and the monster' (2015, pp 171).

The issues of difference, differentiation and speciation also form the focus of Michael Feely's article based on a qualitative research project concerned with the treatment of sexuality in a service for adults with intellectual disabilities in the Republic of Ireland. Whilst looking at how the suspicions and accusations of sexual exploitation and abuse are continuously produced through the somatechnologies of the disability service, Feely argues that what in fact takes place is the emergence and perpetuation of a 'speciation assemblage'. Historically scientific practices have divided humans into hierarchically organised groups: 'social species', the members of which are not allowed to cross the species boundary. It is this somatechno-logic that manifests itself through the anxieties and taboos surrounding intimate

relationships with and among individuals with intellectual disabilities, and that contributes to the accompanying discourse on sexual exploitation. Only by doing away with the naturalised ideas of human essence and difference as deficiency can this logic be undermined, bringing perhaps a change in the lives of those particularly affected by the disablist classifications.

Talking about difference in non-dialectical terms and as an open-ended process rather than something fixed also means taking into account the question of time. In her piece Jenny Sundén focuses on a US-based band, called Steampunk Powered Giraffe, and more specifically, on one of its members, a human musical automaton called Rabbit. Rabbit is performed by Bunny Bennett, who recently came out as a transgender woman. While looking at the transition process of Bennett – paralleled by the transition of Rabbit becoming a transgender female robot – as well as the reactions of the band's fan base, Sundén investigates the ways in which non-linear temporality and gender intertwine and are continuously, yet non-teleologically reshaped and reconfigured in and through trans* embodiment.

Whereas gender as a temporally-entangled open-ended process forms the key concern for Sundén, the issues of sexuality, desire and identity come to the forefront in Tove Solander's contribution, which focuses on Shelley and Pamela Jackson's hypertext *The Doll Games*. Solander traces the ways in which the doll bodies employed in the girls' play are eroticised through tactile connections, manipulations, the changing of clothing as well as dismantling, and how these procedures disrupt, remap and confound the categories of the subject and object, desire and identification, animate and inanimate, and finally, human and nonhuman.

The inquiry of the relation between the human and nonhuman constitutes the main axis of Olga Cielemęcka's piece, where it takes yet a different shape. While drawing on the historical and photographic material concerning the preservation of the human remnants (for example hair) in the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, she explores how dead bodies – bodies deemed inert and occupying a space between the living and non-living as well as between the human and nonhuman – are subject to the somatechnologies of power, exclusion and normalisation. What they evoke is the question of ethics: an ethics of how one may relate to the non/human that is radically different from us in its dematerialisation, yet inherently close in and through that difference.

In critical and creative ways all the authors utilise somatechnical perspectives, focused on the questions of power and on material and

semiotic technologies: *dispositifs* and technés that carve and mould corporealities of different kinds, with outlooks characterised as posthumanist (aiming to challenge and do away with the traditional and anthropocentric confines of Enlightenment Humanism), as well as new-materialist (emphasising the agentic and dynamic character of matter and its entwinement with meaning). With this rich set of tools our contributors have taken up the uneasy task and explored the challenges, difficulties and possibilities mobilised through the somatechnical links and disconnections enacted through non/human queerings. We hope that by engaging with the issue of missing links and the somatechnics of the non/human this volume sheds special light on the always already present question of ethics beyond the human.

Notes

1. Yet, since bacteria and other microorganisms are much smaller than human cells, they take up to 1–3% of the human body weight. See: 'About the Human Microbiome Project', Human Microbiome Project, 7 March 2015, http://www.hmpdacc.org/overview/about.php.
2. See for example: Kember, Sarah, ed. (2011), 'Astrobiology', Living Books About Life, 7 March 2015, http://www.livingbooksaboutlife.org/books/Astrobiology.
3. MacCormack's own abolitionist perspective is inspired by Michel Serres' concept of grace understood as 'stepping aside' or 'giving up one's place' (MacCormack 2012: 58) on the one hand, and by the abolitionist approach within the field of animal rights, on the other. The abolitionist approach to animal rights rejects all use of nonhuman animals and relies on the principle that 'all sentient beings, humans or nonhumans, have one right: the basic right not to be treated as the property of others' ('The Six Principles of the Abolitionist Approach to Animal Rights', Animal Rights: The Abolitionist Approach, 20 April 2015, http://www.abolitionistapproach.com/about/the-six-principles-of-the-abolitionist-approach-to-animal-rights/#.VUDm-5PIf9o).

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