



Introduction to special cluster on “The body and the Anthropocene”

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The nine articles that constitute the *Neohelicon* special cluster entitled “The body and the Anthropocene” grew out of the December 2018 Institute of Body and Culture International Conference entitled “ ‘Re-bodying’ the body and the Anthropocene,” hosted by Konkuk University in Seoul. Of the many implications that fly far and wide from these articles, there are at least as many unanswered questions and new discussions awaiting attention. This much is clear however: discussions minimizing the importance of the mind/body split are (and have too long been) overrated. We may natter on about how the one constitutes the other, about how inseparable they are, about how delusional the binary is, and so on, but the simple fact is that, as an abstraction, “the mind/body split” is absolutely essential for any understanding of the body in the Anthropocene. Whatever else they say, the essays in this special cluster start from this premise.

The mind/body split premise requires some heavy reckoning with reality, and reality is startling and unsettling—at least it is when we face the fact that the consciousness we enjoy when our bodies are animated simply vanishes when the animation stops. If religious people are wrong, then we (the consciousnesses that read these words) do not go anywhere—no heaven, no hell, no greener pastures, none of that; but our bodies (whether we burn them, bury them, or sink them in the ocean) return to the planet (except for those few exceptional ones that are shot out into—or die out in—space). Ashes to ashes, funk to funky—except, of course, life goes on for the genes carried by the bodies that successfully reproduce before dying. In this sense,

Human beings are ultimately nothing but carriers—passageways—for genes. They ride us into the ground like racehorses from generation to generation. Genes don’t think about what constitutes good or evil. They don’t care whether we’re happy or unhappy. We’re just means to an end for them. The only thing they think about is what is most efficient for them. (Murakami 2011, p. 269)

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The bottom line here, really, is a genetic one; it is not bodies that replicate but genes: it is “the gene, the DNA molecule, [that] happens to be the replicating entity that prevails on our [...] planet,” as Richard Dawkins explains in his prosaic masterpiece *The selfish gene* (Dawkins 2016, pp. 248, 249). The gene is the final and irreducible unit of the bodies we prize and theorize, and indeed the Anthropocene discovery of the gene has profound implications for how we understand, conceptualize, theorize, use, inhabit, and value the body. At once throwing into doubt questions about agency and fantasies about the exceptionalism of human corporeality, the Anthropocene has not been kind to the theorizing about the body.

Siddhartha Mukherjee has described the discovery of the gene as “one of the most powerful and dangerous ideas in the history of science” (Mukherjee 2017, p. 9). Mukherjee explains that

three profoundly destabilizing scientific ideas ricochet through the twentieth century, trisecting it into three unequal parts: the atom, the byte, the gene [...] each represents the irreducible unit—the building block, the basic organizational unit—of a larger whole: the atom, of matter; the byte (or “bit”), of digitized information; the gene, of heredity and biological information. (*Ibid.*, pp. 9, 10)

It did not take long for the importance of genetics to sink in, and the twisted eugenic fantasies of people such as Francis Galton and Adolf Hitler are well known—so well known, in fact, that there has been a reflexive repulsion toward even the very discussion about the importance of genes and their influence on behaviors and so on. As Michael Beard in Ian McEwan’s novel *Solar* explains,

To suggest the possibility of genetic influence, genetic difference, of an evolutionary past bearing down in some degree on cognition, on men and women, on culture, was to some minds like entering a camp and volunteering to work with Dr. Mengele. (McEwan 2010, p. 166)

We witness here, as I mentioned in *The ecophobia hypothesis*,¹ a revulsion that Jonathan Gottschall also references in his part of the “Introduction” to *The literary animal: Evolution and the nature of narrative*:

I quickly learned that when I spoke of human behavior, psychology, and culture in evolutionary terms, their [other professors and graduate students] minds churned through an instant and unconscious process of translation, and they heard “Hitler,” “Galton,” “Spencer,” “IQ differences,” “holocaust,” “racial phrenology,” “forced sterilization,” “genetic determinism,” “Darwinian fundamentalism,” and “disciplinary imperialism.” (Gottschall and Wilson 2005, p. xx)

Although the work of scientists in gene theory, evolutionary biology, and cognitive neurology has used ideas about genetic determinism in nefarious ways

¹ The following three sentences are drawn from *The ecophobia hypothesis* (Estok 2018, p. 26).

throughout history, gene theory is not intrinsically ethically compromised. Famed entomologist E. O. Wilson is correct to argue that

[...] genes hold culture on a leash. The leash is very long, but inevitably values will be constrained in accordance with their effects on the human gene pool. The brain is a product of evolution. Human behavior—like the deepest capacities for emotional response which drive and guide it—is the circuitous technique by which human genetic material has been and will be kept intact. Morality has no other demonstrable ultimate function. (Wilson 1978, p. 167)

Yet, we have to wonder what happens when we turn around Wilson's formulation and argue that culture holds genes on a leash. Implied in such a formulation is more than simply a comment that bodies are differentially constructed (in the social sense) among different cultures but as importantly that bodies are differentially constructed (in the physical sense) depending on culture. Genes do not hold causal monopoly over the shape and contours of the body. There is something to be said for (and obviously about) our agency.

Jonggab Kim's article below entitled "The problem of nonhuman agency and bodily intentionality in the age of the Anthropocene" confronts the topic of agency very directly in its attempt to elaborate Bruno Latour's conception of posthuman agency. To dehumanize agency, Kim explains, Latour defines agency simply as the actions that a thing takes in its dealing with others. Latour then proposes that we should decouple agency from the topic of intentionality, which is far too anthropocentric in orientation. As Kim understands it, Latour sees a need to animate nature once deanimated by modernity. His plea, according to Kim, to animate nature is what the age of the Anthropocene demands. However, it is questionable for Kim whether Latour's animism is compatible with his conception of agency devoid of intentionality. Latour's rejection of intentionality seems to contradict his animistic vision of nature. This is so because according to animism, life and will, not the exclusive attributes of humans, pervade all of nature—both human and nonhuman. This does not, however, mean that nonhumans have intentionality in the form of human consciousness. There is another modality of intentionality, and this mode is preconscious and bodily: internalistic intentionality is a restricted or derived version of such bodily intentionality, Kim explains. It is not consciousness but the body itself that is intentional. Even Edmund Husserl, often mistaken to understand intentionality in terms of consciousness, recognized such bodily intentionality and deemed it to be an operative one. The body is not inert matter but is animate and intentional, for it is an endeavor to continue in its being. For Kim, it is ironic that Latour, who wanted to animate the body, denied its conatus. Kim asks what the meaning is of animism without such an endeavor and argues that animism will, in such a scenario, become identical to mechanism. What we need, Kim maintains, is not to dismiss intentionality *in toto* but to dehumanize it and see that there is bodily or material intentionality.

Ji-Yeong Yun's "The nonhuman turn and the body in the Anthropocene in Thomas Day's *Seven Seconds to Become an Eagle*" continues with theoretical

issues concerning corporeality and tackles questions about the formation process of the body in the Anthropocene. Yun argues that in Day's *Seven Seconds to Become an Eagle* (2013), there are important interconnections between human bodies and nonhuman materials. The enmeshment of human corporeal agency and nonhuman material agency, she argues, is what defines transcorporeality. For Yun, Day's work is important to corporeal theorizing because of how it deals with questions about race and class in the age of climate change. While Day's collection of short stories tends to omit the gender dimensions of climate crisis, Yun argues, feminist frameworks are crucial to understanding the formation of transcorporeality. There is certainly a lot to be said on this topic, and it is rather a pity that Yun does little more than simply make the observation about the importance of feminist frameworks, with the result that the article itself adds precious little to feminist theorizing. Nevertheless, Yun summarizes well how Day adopts a perspective of animism to overcome the anthropocentrism. As Yun understands it, animism is a means to abolish the kind of human exceptionalism that lies at the root of so many ecological crises. The purpose of Day's approach, Yun explains, is to decenter human agency and recognize nonhuman agency, an approach that both stresses physical discontinuity and metaphysical continuity between humans and nonhumans. Yun's "The nonhuman turn and the body in the Anthropocene in Thomas Day's *Seven Seconds to Become an Eagle*" also stresses the idea that the principle of resemblance in Day's work resides in interiority (memory, intentionality, and self-consciousness), while the principle of difference concerns physical attributes. Yun explains that the anthropogenic body is animistic in the sense that it hints at the possibility of a person-to-person relationship between humans and nonhumans and that animism invalidates the hierarchical dualism between nature and culture, human and nonhuman. A shift in ontological and epistemological paradigms in the era of climate change, Yun claims, implies the deconstruction of naturalism and anthropocentrism and necessitates the adoption of a feminist perspective and animism.

My own "Corporeality, hyper-consciousness, and the Anthropocene ecoGothic: slime and ecophobia" in this issue also addresses the startling gendering of corporeal matters often not thought gendered at all. Looking specifically at slime as gendered and threatening, this article argues that the phenomenological subjective body is only possible through consciousness. Theorizing about the ecophobic implications of our responses to slimic materials, the article claims that "consciousness of the body is what gives us our senses of particularity and, indeed, exceptionalism. Consciousness of real differences from every other living thing on the planet emboldens our intellect and fuels our spirit." Introducing the term "Anthropocene ecoGothic," the article argues "that an alarming result of the Anthropocene ecoGothic is that among of the greatest threats we face is both consciousness—a hyper-consciousness, in fact, that we may rightly see as phobic—and the imagined body itself." The article concludes that "gendered and threatening, slime is oddly ambivalent matter that is at times necessary for life and at other times lethal to it, a substance that pervades both the phobic consciousness of the Anthropocene ecoGothic and the mirthful fancies of children. As central to the body as it is to the ecophobic imagination, slime is a topic that requires much more theoretical discussion."

It becomes clear in the collection that there are no easy solutions to the theoretical issues here, and it is for this reason that rigorous trans-disciplinary and trans-cultural studies are so important. Peina Zhuang offers a cogent and focused discussion of corporeality through a trans-cultural lens of the specificities of "the Anthropocene" in her "Desire and the body in Zhao Defa's *The Anthropocene*." Zhuang's article focuses on the novel *The Anthropocene* by the Chinese writer Zhao Defa. Zhuang maintains that the utilization of the concept "Anthropocene" in general has inspired new literary practices for writers and that Zhao Defa is one example of this trend and that he even goes so far as to adopt the word "Anthropocene" as the title for his novel. Closely referencing traditional Chinese thinking about relationships between desire and control of the body, Zhao Defa reconsiders the status of body in the Anthropocene, and in showing the porousness of bodies and the inter-penetrations between individuals and environment, Zhao calls attention to anthropocentric notions of self-entitlement. For Zhao, these notions are at the core of unthinking gratification of corporeal desire, and he suggests that it is precisely such an unrestrained gratification of bodily desires that has produced the Anthropocene itself. Zhuang offers a nuanced examination of *The Anthropocene*, sensitive to important differences between Western and Chinese thinking about the body and the body's relation to and constitution by desire. Ultimately, as Zhuang explains, in Zhao Defa's novel, "the hierarchy of mind over body falls apart. The dissolution of the mind/body hierarchy is very clear in *The Anthropocene*."

Similarly trans-cultural, Qing Yang's article, "A comparative analysis of Western and traditional Chinese corporeal theories and their significance for the Anthropocene," provides an example and practice of cross-cultural dialogue in terms of international scholarship. Yang examines the corporeal theories contained in Wugan theory, Confucianism, and other traditional Chinese literary and philosophical theories, some of which are seldom known outside of China, and compares them with relevant current corporeal theories in Western ecocriticism and New Materialism. Yang is careful to explain the terms she uses: for instance, "Wugan Theory," she explains, "highlights nature's influence in generating responses in the human body [... and] uncovers the mutual entanglements of the processes of nature and the human body, processes of the material-stimulus-emotions that generate art—processes [...] of body-material agential intra-actions." Yang discovers that Chinese thinking about the relationship between the human body and the material world has already revealed an interchanging, integrating or integrationalist connection, which echoes, or perhaps more precisely, antedates some of body-concerned propositions of Stacy Alaimo's "trans-corporeality" and Karen Barad's "intra-action." By the mutual interpretation of Western and traditional Chinese corporeal theories, Yang reconsiders the agency of the human body as both a creative and destructive force in the Anthropocene. Finally, she argues that such corporeal views represented by the Chinese literary standpoints of "literature as pedagogy" (载道派) and "poetic inspiration" (缘情派) provide important approaches to theorizing the body in the Anthropocene.

Gilwan Seo's "Human and nonhuman bodies in a localized form of the Anthropocene: Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*" similarly offers a trans-cultural investigation of corporeal theory, giving a comparative analysis of European and South American

grapplings with the issues. The environmental crises, Seo notes, in Europe and in South America and Africa are obviously not the same. This is not to say that the discussion of the Anthropocene is meaningless but rather to point out the need to reflect on the Anthropocene situation from culturally nuanced perspectives. Seo's article is an attempt, at times sophomoric, to localize the Anthropocene. Most discussions about Anthropocene tend toward grand narratives, but Seo tries to look at Kincaid's *A Small Place* with localized perceptions in mind. Much of Seo's article summarizes Kincaid's presentation of European colonialist violence and how it impacts both the land and the people. *A Small Place*, Seo maintains, reveals the long-term process of the bodies of nature and inhabitants on the island being destroyed and dying, respectively, through a "double gaze" strategy. *A Small Place*, Seo continues, presents a natural ecosystem and indigenous bodies that are being destroyed by the strong force of consumerist travelers and European capitalism. The death of nature accompanies the death of the non-Europeans, but not of Europeans themselves, the truth of which Anthropocene as a universalizing grand discourse conceals.

Shunqing Cao's more mature and capable article "The disabled and vulnerable bodies in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*" focuses on the disabled, seemingly "abnormal," and even horrible bodies that have been damaged by a severe industrial toxic gas leakage accident in the Indo-British writer Indra Sinha's novel *Animal's People*. Through a close reading of the disabled and vulnerable bodies represented by the protagonist named Animal in *Animal's People*, this article offers an ecocritical attempt to figure out the relevance of disability and vulnerability in discussions about human corporeality in the Anthropocene. Cao re-examines the binary classification between normal and abnormal, margin and center, human and animal, constructed world and natural world, while offering compelling insights about the novel's troubling of relationships between agency and disabled bodies in *Animal's People*. The article maintains that the disability and vulnerability of the human body exposed and caused by the trans-corporeality and intra-action between the human body and the toxic environment have challenged the anthropocentrism and the false distinction between human and non-human, and Cao emphasizes the importance of recognizing this challenge when theorizing about the body in the Anthropocene.

Péter Hajdu's article "Terry Pratchett's thought experiments about the body" goes one step further and uses examples of bodies so thoroughly altered as to trouble the very category of human corporeality. Yet, while Indra Sinha's bodies also trouble the category of "the human," Terry Pratchett's are different, the result not of accidents but experiments. Hajdu takes examples from the Discworld novels by Pratchett, a fantasy writer of prodigious creativity. Hajdu interprets several strange and funny features of the narratives as thought experiments through which the possible consequences of various social, intellectual, and scientific processes can be tested. In the Discworld, Hajdu explains, Pratchett makes various intelligent species, who, though their bodies can be very different, live together—sometimes peacefully, sometimes through clashes of long-term antagonisms. The different bodies, which, as Hajdu explains, readers might find familiar from various popular genres, can be tested in various narrative circumstances. The sexless body of a golem becomes the topic of experimentation with engendering. Golems are represented as the perfect labor force, while Igors (a mountain tribe in the Discworld) are perfect servants, but both groups develop a strong feeling for independence in the long run. Igors' advanced skills in transplantation and genetic

design meet strong opposition from some religious groups, which gives Pratchett (and his characters) an opportunity to ponder the values implied in the arguments of both sides. Since optimism is encoded in the comic genres, the Discworld always manages to avoid the threatening final catastrophe, but the ethical implications and the risks of experimentation with altering the body are always taken seriously.

Young-hyun Lee's "Trans-corporeality, climate change, and *My Year of Meats*" also focuses on the altered body and how it obtains in corporeal theorizing. Lee explains that Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* shows the problems that grow out of commodification of the bodies of animals and how these problems impact human bodies. As Lee shows, the people in the novel are more occupied with seeking profit by exploiting other species, especially animals, than in appreciating their agency. *My Year of Meats* reveals how people are impacted by the diethylstilbestrol that is force-fed to animals to make them bigger. Lee examines the many implications of this, one of which in the novel is how women become mere commodities on virtually the same level as consumable livestock. In androcentric capitalism, Lee shows, media accelerates many issues deeply relevant to theories about corporeality—including climate change and environmental devastation, pollutants, and genetic engineering. She argues that by ignoring the interconnectedness of human beings, nonhuman beings, and the environment, bodies will suffer. She shows that without awareness that the body of the world and the bodies of people are interconnected, we will remain far from solving issues that our species face in the Anthropocene. Much of this awareness for Lee, as for Cao, involves recognizing the importance of material effects on and transformations of the body.

The nine articles that constitute "The body and the Anthropocene" cluster represent the most cutting edge and interesting work on the body currently being done anywhere. Trans-disciplinary, trans-national, and trans-cultural, these essays show the wide range and complexity of theorizing about the body in the Anthropocene. At once troubling the definition of both central terms (the body and the Anthropocene), these essays—far from offering the final word on their topics—open onto promising and rich new fields of research.

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