

Exposure to the Posthuman Other

Avatar Bodies: A Tantra for Posthumanism

By Ann Weinstone

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Review by Steven A. Benko

Ann Weinstone starts with posthumanism and challenges it to include those that it has pushed to the margins. The force of Weinstone's critique comes from her accusation that posthumanism, despite its efforts to protect the other, refuses to expose itself to the other by forcing the other to remain other. Posthumanism has turned towards technology as a way of avoiding contact with others. The result has been that posthuman ethics has bifurcated into being either an ethics of responsibility or an ethics of self-capacitation. Nowhere do these two strands come together to create a posthumanism that sees responsibility for the other taking the form of contact between the subject and another, or even multiple others, for the purpose of extending the subject's own capacities. Instead, posthuman ethics of responsibility force the other to remain other creating an asceticism that prohibits contact. Posthuman ethics of self-capacitation never allow the other to become familiar; the other is reduced to an object or implement along the way to the subject's greater self-realization. Both put the possibility of posthuman ethics in jeopardy. Weinstone's solution is to reveal the links between posthuman thought, especially that of Deleuze, and Tantra, specifically Kashmir Shaivism. Her conclusion is that when Tantric cosmologies and practices, which focus on questions of oneness and difference, are brought to bear on Western practices of electronic letter-writing, a situation is created in which we are exposed to the energies and possibilities of language. The encounter with the other changes the subject, but only if they are responsible to and for the other.

The most satisfying part of this study is the argument. Weinstone contends that posthumanism is more than scarred by the violence of representation; posthumanism is afraid of doing violence against the other. The response has been to turn away from others that violence might be done against, forcing them to remain other and unfamiliar, and towards technology, which the subject can take from without ever having to touch

in a harmful way. Weinstone writes:

For those specifically working under the banner of posthumanism, hopes for mitigating human violence have expressed themselves, not only as productive engagements with difference and its vector, the nonhuman, but also as an aversion of speaking to human-to-human relationships at all. The cyborg is never a hybrid of two or more *people*. [emphasis in original] (6)

Her goal is to arrive at “an altered syntax of self-other relations that is *more faithful* to the critiques of elitism and exemption that both posthumanism and deconstruction enact” [emphasis in original] (7). To achieve this end, the demand that the other must remain other has to be waived. Doing so would allow for responsibility to be spoken of as care and for ethics of self-capacitation to avoid charges of narcissism. This would be a posthumanism with friends and relations instead of a posthumanism of aliens and others. Weinstone is frustrated with posthumanism’s inability to develop a vocabulary of contact and intimacy. From her book, one gets the sense that she wants to enjoy life, wants to enjoy other people and wants to enjoy talking about them without fear of doing violence against them. She writes:

Posthumanism, thus far, has been too respectable, too reasonable, too committed to the coherent, especially to the coherency of difference. If we want to fundamentally alter our experience and conception of self, we must break the law of the other, the law of the alien, the irremediably unfamiliar, of exteriority (or interiority) as such. We need to get drunk with each other so we can become posthumanS.” [emphasis in original] (107)

Posthumanism’s insistence that the other remain other borders on the illogical: if everything were difference all the way down, wouldn’t it all be just noise? If it is more than noise, then identity and difference must exist within each other.

One of the difficulties of Weinstone’s text is her importation of Tantra into a Western philosophical framework. Weinstone prefers the Tantric perspective because it leads to an enlarged concept of responsibility. She writes that in Tantra:

There is no untouchable zone; everything, everyone touches all the way down. At the same time, touch does not dissolve into a static or final transcendental oneness. Tantra holds difference and multiplicity, and oneness or nonduality in the same thought, in the same body. It rejects nothing, it exempts nothing, and ultimately resolves nothing in favor of a general cosmology and ontology or persuasive and undecidable relation, one that delights in its own paradoxes. Thus liberation, or *moksa*, can only be realized via an intensification of our sensitivity to the relationality we always already are. (38)

Western philosophy in general and posthumanism in particular suggest a very different cosmology and anthropology from Tantrism. But this is the very problem that Weinstone has identified: the need to keep things separate in order to prevent violence. Weinstone weaves elements of Tantrism into posthumanism, highlights moments in which posthumanism and tantrism are saying remarkably similar things, and demonstrates the influence of Tantrism on posthuman thinkers. For example, both posthumanism and Tantra share an interest in the outcast and marginalized: “Tantric movement embraced people not ordinarily credited with spiritual knowledge or refinement, namely outcasts and social rejects like rag-pickers, street-sweepers, thieves, gamblers, bartenders, entertainers, and mental laborers of all types” (36). The self is a zone of relations, and Tantrism allows for a touch that is pleasurable, not violent. Tantra and posthumanism are both concerned with ethics and the ontology of relationships. Tantrism can be understood as a kind of technology of the self. In addition, both emerge as a response to the experience of the violence of exclusion, representation, oppressive social hierarchies and colonialism. However, something deeper is at work in Weinstone’s importation of Tantrism into posthumanism. The very argument of the book is contained in these moments in which Tantrism and posthuman make contact. How should we respond when something so foreign and alien touches the familiar? Should we back away lest we do violence against that other? Should we embrace it and risk effacing difference? To connect Tantrism and posthumanism, Weinstone assumes responsibility for both: aware of posthumanism, she must be responsible for Tantrism; aware of Tantrism, she knows that growth occurs at moments of contact.

Weinstone’s comprehensive presentation of Tantrism establishes Tantra as an appropriate discourse for remedying posthumanism’s unwillingness to make contact because Tantra consists of practices and techniques for creating

relationships that preserve difference:

This means a retention of the primacy of the relation as the fault line along which identity is deferred, with, at the same time, an openness to the blurrings of self and other that occur under a difference philosophical and affective regime: a regime of pleasure and capacitating porosity rather than trauma (122).

Tantra allows for the self to remain porous and open to contact with the other. However, the interruption of the self is not a trauma for which the self must sacrifice itself in order to avoid violence against the other. Instead, the openness and porosity of the self serves to welcome the other. Instead of a hospitality where the self has to take the food out of its own mouth to feed the other, Tantra offer the possibility of hospitality as reception. Via these rituals of reception, the self increases its capacities. The unity of the self is undermined even as the sense of self is enlarged.

Posthumanism reconsiders the notions of the person and the human by investigating the ways that subjectivity, the body, identity and agency come into being and are altered via mergers with technology. Posthumanism's singular focus on technology has created a situation in which the relationship with non-humans reveals more about humanity than relationships with humans. The one technology that posthumanism has not spoken of is e-mail. Weinstone brings her critique of posthumanism and invocation of Tantra to bear on a reconsideration of e-mail, arguing that e-mail is a site for correcting the posthuman mantra that the other must remain other. E-mail is between friends, lovers and colleagues. There is more tolerance for error, a mixing of genres and an informality of address. All of this suggests a familiarity between subject and other that posthumanism has been hesitant to embrace. Weinstone writes, "The nonanonymity of e-mail as compared to discussion groups or chat rooms, places e-mail within a social disposition of greater responsibility for one's interactions" (178). That takes care of the responsibility. E-mail as self-examination speaks to it as a technology of self-capacitation. Weinstone cites Foucault to emphasize those elements of e-mail that are closer to traditional letter-writing—specifically, a ratcheting up of the relationship with the self based on critical self-examination. Care of oneself and responsibility for others are linked together. E-mail makes care of oneself a social practice. Weinstone writes:

In other words, the heightened undecidable relation of e-mail texts to warrants of ownership and authority and intent, especially with respect to the diaristic exchange of e-mail between those who have never met, in conjunction with the heightened propensity toward disclosure and hybrid intimacies (intellectual, emotional, sexual and so on) tends toward heightening awareness and sensitivity to the impacts of language, to the *effectivities* of language over the significatory. [emphasis in original] (203)

E-mail is a useful relational technology to experiment with the ways we are susceptible to language. E-mail allows us to ask the ethical question of posthumanism: how do meanings get under our skin? Few understand the technology that makes e-mail possible. E-mail just appears and e-mail editing software makes it possible to cut and paste another's words and pass them off as one's own. E-mail should make us question to whom words belong. So at the same time that e-mail is a letter-writing that forces self-examination, it is also relational. E-mail is always written to and received from the other. Here, then, contact with the other prompts scrutiny, reflection and a renegotiation of self. In this way, e-mail allows for capacitation via the responsibility for the other that is intimate instead of traumatic.

One flaw in Weinstone's text is her presentation of Emmanuel Levinas. He is not mentioned often, but often enough that her failure to engage him more deeply on the issue of the third person is a distraction. At one point calling Levinas the philosopher of no contact, Weinstone seems to understand Levinasian ethics as an I-Thou relationship; however, it is never a relationship between only two people. The third party—who is another other—puts limits on the measureless obligation for preserving the otherness of the other, which would otherwise be limitless. The limit placed on the other is that he/she/it cannot harm the third party; responsibility for the third party is the birth of justice, theory, mediation and decision-making (see *Is it Righteous to Be?* 166). Levinas writes:

If there was only the other facing me, I would say to the very end: I owe him everything. I am for him. And this even holds for the harm he does me: I am not his equal, I am forevermore subject to him. My resistance begins when the harm he does me is done to a third party who is also my neighbor. It is the third party who is the source of justice, and thereby of justified repression; it is the violence suffered

by the third party that justifies stopping the violence of the other with violence. (*Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 83)

The concern for justice, which is a concern for the third party, is the beginning of community and therefore the beginning of contact. The third party, presupposing multiple others, requires contact and conversation. The subject has to relate to the third party and make decisions that bring the subject and the third party into solidarity with one another. While this does not change the encounter with the other from being a trauma and wound—there is no joy or pleasure in the encounter with the other and the third party—there is something more to Levinas than Weinstone includes in her book.

Is it possible for the problem exposed by *Avatar Bodies* to be more significant than the solution it suggests? Exposing the problem of exposure to the other in posthumanism, can the reader ever say no to the other again? Can the reader refuse to be exposed? To reject the solution is to hide behind the very walls of same/other that Weinstone is tearing down. To reject the solution is to hide from being exposed, but this exposes the scars and fears that want to stay hidden. Once exposed, one must assume responsibility for his/her/its place and the place he/she/it shares with others. It is not enough, though, to embrace her solution. One must go forward from it, expose the problem—be exposed—and find the solution again