

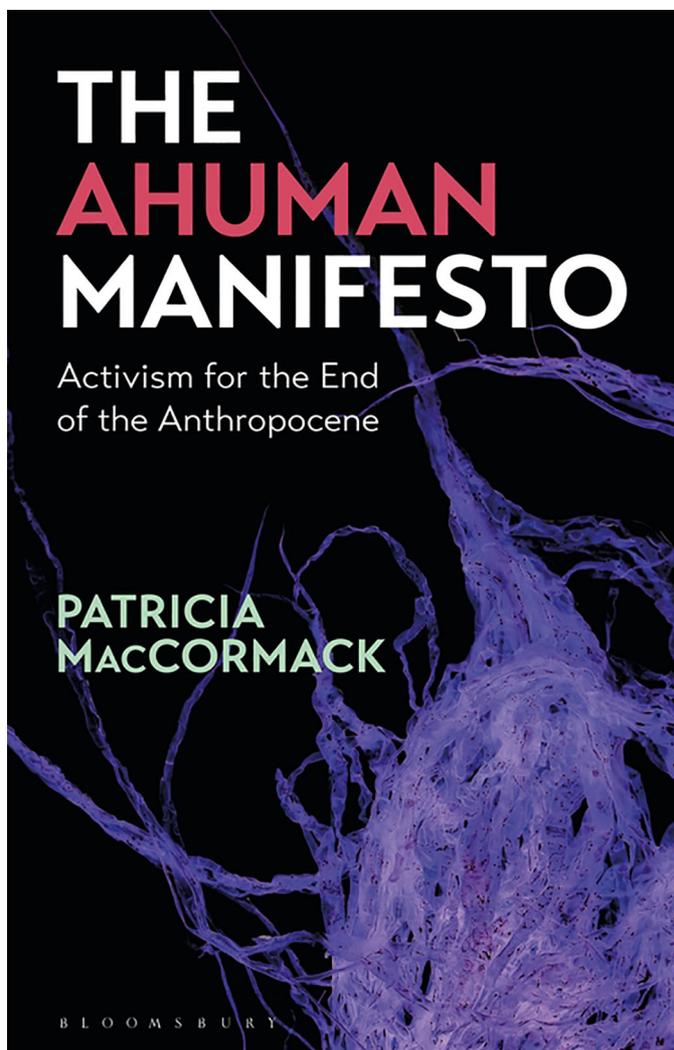
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**Book Review:** *The Ahuman Manifesto: Activism for the End of the Anthropocene*

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*The Ahuman Manifesto: Activism for the End of the Anthropocene*, by Patricia MacCormack. Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. 224 pp./\$88.00 (hb), \$29.95 (sb).



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In *The Ahuman Manifesto: Activism for the End of the Anthropocene*, Patricia MacCormack may have had the ambition of writing a searing manifesto in the manner of many second-wave feminist screeds. She acknowledges her inspirations, ranging from *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) to Dada to Valerie Solanas, among others. And she is writing in a period in which many have taken refuge in myth—whether Donna J. Haraway’s Cthulhu, Isabelle Stengers and Bruno Latour’s Gaia, or Michel Serres’s Biogea. Also in this period but in a radically different vein that usually emphasizes ruthless criticism of still existing mythologies, François Laruelle reinterrogates the resources of ancient Gnosticism. The term “Anthropocene” is itself a kind of instantly obsolescent resort to the mythic.<sup>1</sup> MacCormack’s tone is interchangeably personal, activist, academic. This may be key to the many contradictions of this book, which is steeped in Continental philosophy while extending it into chiliastic conclusions that hardly follow from many of her sources. MacCormack wagers “the inconsistent tone will help tap into the volatile rhythms of activism” and acknowledges her position “demands absolutes” while “also being deeply antagonistic to essentialist or generalizing claims. Yet, ultimately, the final claim is absolute and generalizing” (34). This is part and parcel of “a suspension of the need for consistency . . . including the demand for consistent human logic” (34). There have been a series of recent works examining or advocating antinatalism, willing or midwiving human extinction as a solution to the onrushing climate catastrophe—by Lee Edelman, Claire Colebrook, David Benatar, and Penelope Deutscher, among others. Some sort of *unwilling* human extinction may well be more in the offing, given the most recent climate prognoses,<sup>2</sup> and one would be foolish indeed to underestimate the epochal transition that moves under the sign of climate change. MacCormack’s very adamancy for human autoextinction, however, reinforces such false either/or choices of human withdrawal or collapse, illustrating perhaps despite herself that her manifesto only confirms “the impossibility of thinking revolution” (13).

MacCormack argues for a sweeping voluntarism, that of human refusal of reproduction, despite, or because of, the failure of far lesser and easier voluntarisms. MacCormack’s position is that this is not “giving up,” but is rather the ultimate ethical gesture of relinquishing the residual transcendent qualities and speciesism of the human, which continue to haunt even the most generous posthuman discourses. MacCormack is more successful at demonstrating the discursive limits of much Continental and posthuman discourse in relation to the nonhuman and the animal than she is in her prescriptions. She is in large part reliant on Serres’s recommendation of extending the “natural contract” to the rest of the sentient world, and Serres’s insistence to “step aside,” in order to provide the “grace” so that “to dance is only to make room, to think is only to step aside and make room, give up one’s place” (qtd. 46). MacCormack writes that any affirmation of the life of the nonhuman “can only come” from Serres’s “stepping aside,” or Luce

1. For a dissection of this, see Tom Cohen, Claire Colebrook, and J. Hillis Miller, *Twilight of the Anthropocene Idols* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2016).

2. See, for instance, Asher Moses, “‘Collapse of Civilization is the Most Likely Outcome’: Top Climate Scientists,” *Resilience* (June 8, 2020), [www.resilience.org/stories/2020-06-08/collapse-of-civilisation-is-the-most-likely-outcome-top-climate-scientists](http://www.resilience.org/stories/2020-06-08/collapse-of-civilisation-is-the-most-likely-outcome-top-climate-scientists).

Irigaray's "letting be" (33). Characteristically, here MacCormack slips in an absolutist, categorical imperative following the citation of some of the more open systems or philosophies one can find in contemporary thinking. Similarly, MacCormack begins her manifesto in part invoking Michel Foucault's "outside," which for MacCormack "opens up the void that is a voluminous everything and wants for nothing" (9), yet this is immediately followed by MacCormack's imperatives of "abolitionist veganism; cease reproduction of humans . . . care for this world at this time until we are gone" (10). Apparently this voluminous void, what Foucault called the "rending of the subject itself" (qtd. 9), is full of ethical absolutes.

All of which is not to deny many of MacCormack's points: the holocaust of other species, the failures of contemporary thought largely to even begin to do justice to this ongoing catastrophe, that "structuration of life itself is anthropocentric" (53). Despite MacCormack's deftness at navigating the pitfalls of what Gayatri C. Spivak once termed "strategic essentialism" and identitarian activism, her cause remains "not entirely extricable from human-focused liberation projects" (57). Her goal of "not valuing oneself," if not smacking of "martyrdom nor nihilistic despair" (57), perhaps resonates more with ancient religious tentatives than she would like. MacCormack is betting on the fungibility of queer theory, a *theoria* in Colebrook's sense that is incommensurable with its uses in identity politics (60–61). In MacCormack's version, queer means "identity is absent but a staunch commitment to minoritarianism remains" (60). According to MacCormack, queer "resists all subjectification and stratification" and "adamantly refuses to speak its own position of being," is "motiveless," and "never individual; it does not recognize a hierarchy or taxonomy of species. It is adamantly about the death of the human in order for the liberation of all life, defined in a non-discriminatory way" (60). So queer defined as constant questioning, in Noreen Giffney's sense of "continually frustrating our desire to know, opening up a space of and for desire" (qtd. 61), somehow despite its "anti-identity" becomes a positive platform for "non-speciesist ahuman activism" (61).

That which "resists all subjectification and stratification" sounds an awful lot like the notion of the "body without organs" of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (appropriated from Antonin Artaud). Yet this "body without organs," while constituting the "continual point of emergence of all forms of creativity"<sup>3</sup> according to Guattari, is also the strange attractor for capitalist being and fascist desires as well. Perhaps Guattari, even more than Deleuze, emphasized how there were no guarantees regarding the political ends and results of processes of subjectivization, although such warnings punctuate their collaboration *Mille Plateaux* (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1977/1987). Despite the often forced political directives, the better part of MacCormack's contribution is exploring what Guattari called "ontological creationism" (qtd. 191) in terms of art and occulture. In doing so, the "defacialized Bodies without Organs" (130) form only part of the psychic landscape of magickal practices. Given how contemporary "fast" or technocapitalism tends to operate on nervous systems, both above and below consciousness, a new imperative is provided for practices that exploit affect and the "irrational." Current economy is

3. Félix Guattari, *The Guattari Reader*, ed. Gary Genosko (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 98.

so headless and affect-driven that pharmaceutical activist/publisher Philippe Pignarre and Stengers, a philosopher of science, refer to it in their 2005 book as “capitalist sorcery,” no matter it is without sorcerers who see themselves as such.<sup>4</sup> To combat this, Pignarre and Stengers advocate counter sorcery. Witches, in this view, were “truly experimental technicians”<sup>5</sup> who were assiduous in testing their procedures and results. Problematically, Pignarre and Stengers do not step into the witches’ circles themselves, advocating from afar. To her credit, MacCormack makes this advocacy from inside the array of experimental occulture.

In Deleuze and Guattari’s *Mille Plateaux*, sorcerers are the conductors of the passage from human to “becoming-animal” because they have “a relation of alliance with the demon as the power of the anomalous.”<sup>6</sup> In this convolution of becoming-animal, the demon is the border or anomaly, the contact point with the pack or herd, since becoming-animal is forever a matter of joining burgeoning multiplicity. These minoritarian becomings remain “extremely ambiguous,”<sup>7</sup> subject to constant violence, repression, and reappropriation. In cultures where sorcery is practiced, the lines of black magic and white magic are usually hopelessly blurred, and undecidable in advance. Unlike many other Deleuze and Guattari commentators, MacCormack doesn’t shy away from the “demonology” that in many of its facets is central to *Mille Plateaux*, but it is difficult to say she advances it. In MacCormack’s view, art and activism already “collapse” together into a “necessary symbiosis” (72), the art without evaluation and the activism without organization—that is, “art without being an object,” and “activism without a goal or endgame” (74). This kind of unsaying or unmaking of the world poses the challenge “let’s unmake [the world] *differently*” (75, emphasis original). This artistic activism is both “based on nothing that has gone before” and has “no possibility of evaluation against which it can be measured” (77). Ironically, this Anthropocene activism evokes a “non-secular state” (76) that MacCormack summarizes in the preeminently Christian tropes of hope, faith, and belief.

MacCormack’s activism is “not informatic. It does not transmit bits of information” (81); it is rather both a contract with and an expressionism from a “nature” referred to at least fifteen times (the “natural” more than twenty-five times) but not defined. Although MacCormack’s advocacy of an art of fiction and fabulation is current with much of the activity in the contemporary art world, somehow it is also a deep ecology. Thus it differs substantially from the counter-sorcery Pignarre and Stengers call for. So many of these contradictions level what could be her most valuable contribution, her chapter on “Occulture.” MacCormack realizes this “way to think affective materializations through the joy of fiction acknowledged as such” (99) has often been thoroughly infiltrated or mined by neofascist and right-wing groups, but lines might be even more smudged than

4. Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers, *Capitalist Sorcery*, trans. and ed. Andrew Goffey (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, [2005] 2011), 40.

5. Pignarre and Stengers, *Capitalist Sorcery*, 138.

6. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1977] 1987), 246.

7. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 247.

she lets on. MacCormack enumerates the widely diverse forms of esoterica since the tenth century, while attempting to distinguish them from the “fetishistic assimilation and cultural appropriation of new-ageism” (103). Yet this occulture is a “bricolage” that “limits itself by nothing, excluding nothing” (103). What is of use to the “ahuman” activism she advocates are these magickal or occult practices that renounce power, since their goal is to change affect or perception, not “the Real” itself, and are anti-hierarchical. That many magickal practices renounce power will come as news not only to devotees of Aleister Crowley and Thelema, but many other systems as well. So what would seem a limitless soup of affectivity is full of idealistic exclusions.

What MacCormack does affirm is a “cunt chaos” (115, 117 *passim*). MacCormack seeks to differentiate this from any “will-driven magick” that aims for results (119). Not sharing so many other occults’ need to be “true” or verified, MacCormack’s “cunt chaos” finds its best “kinship” with H. P. Lovecraft’s fictional *Necronomicon*, a grimoire of “monsters . . . who adamantly wear their cuntishness of form and force with Luciferian pride—demons such as Inanna, Ereshkigal and Humwawa who incarnate as viscous, fleshly, mucosal entities” (119). In this unholy marriage of the “left-handed” path of mysticism, chaos magick, and queer/feminism, the cunt is also a “conceptual gate,” the entrance “into unnatural worlds and interkingdom, interworld and interspirit alliances in Enochian sex magick and Necronomic chaos magick” (122). Somehow, and oddly for a student of Deleuze and Guattari, all this fabulation and invention is also about rejoining and belonging to “the natural order” (122). For MacCormack, there is a Baroque infinity emanating from female genitalia. Yet the monsters she wants to summon are the most primitive if not prehistoric: the Biblical Leviathan that was possibly the Hebrew name for the Babylonian Tiamat, which in turn is associated with Lovecraft’s Cthulhu. According to Simon’s *The Necronomicon*<sup>8</sup>, the followers of Tiamat:

are to be known by their seeming human appearance which has the mark of the beast upon them, as they change easily into the shapes of animals and haunt the Nights of Man . . . and their books are the Books of Chaos and the flames, and are the Books of the Shadows and the Shells . . . and they are the raisers of the legions of maskim, the Liers-in-Wait. And they do not know what it is they do, but they do it at the demands of the serpent, at whose name even Ereshkigal gives fright and the dread Kutulu strains at his bonds. (qtd. 128)

8. Lovecraft insisted that the *Necronomicon* referred to in his short stories and novellas was a fiction of his own invention. That hasn’t stopped a counter-tradition from maintaining there is an *actual* *Necronomicon*, which indeed dates from ancient times, whose spells and rituals are highly efficacious in conjuring various entities. Given the belief systems involved, it might not matter to many involved whether such a book is a “hoax,” or not. It also receives some legitimacy from the work of occultist and Crowley-adept Kenneth Grant, who argued for the links between Lovecraft and Crowley. Avon Books published a *Necronomicon* in 1977 introduced by an author known simply as “Simon,” and there has been a series of editions published since. MacCormack’s references go back and forth between Lovecraft’s and Simon’s *Necronomicon*, although their contents are not identical. MacCormack’s quote about the followers of Tiamat is from Simon, “Book of Calling,” in *The Necronomicon* (New York: Avon Books 1977), 97.

A creature folded into both the ocean and the earth, Tiamat oversees the threshold between heaven and earth, life and death, so *The Necronomicon* warns against opening this gate, what MacCormack calls the “cunt-gate-threshold” (128), so “all that abyss [will] break forth upon the earth and the dead rise to eat the living for it is writ: And I will cause the dead to rise and eat the living” (qtd. 128). MacCormack’s appreciation of the mutability or becoming-female of Cthulhu, Humwawa, the undecidability of the sexuality of the Watchers in the Book of Enoch, becomes folded into what Lovecraft called the “eldritch contradictions of all matter, force, and cosmic order” (qtd. 134).

For MacCormack,

Lovecraft describes worlds becoming-cunt, folding this dimension to reassemble all perception. . . . The self is inherently part of the folds and foldings in with these worlds until all perception is enveloped within a plane of Lovecraftian monsters and hybrids, from which the folded self cannot escape and often itself becomes infected with the contagion of the monstrous other plane. (132–33)

Typically MacCormack moves from this “terror of the altered familiar” to disoriented multiplicity as a model for “large-scale demonstrations and direct action” (133), in that their acephalous nature surpasses anthropomorphism. MacCormack is pursuing altered states not results, yet her exploration of the “perception of the imperceptible” can yield as easily to Crowley’s right-wing philosophy of individualism, or Lovecraft’s reaction, as to some nature-affirming “letting be.”

What this welcoming of Lovecraftian feminized monsters does lead to is MacCormack’s preferred death activism. MacCormack’s celebration of cacodaemonic copulations and ecstasies and utter sacrifice of “self” segues into her argument for *actual* death, affirmation of which is a “real option for an ahuman ecosophical ethics” (141) in that the “death of the human affirms all life” (143). MacCormack admits this is still a “sparse, loose idea” (143) pursued by sometimes wildly diverging groups, ranging from the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEM) and the Church of Euthanasia, to those believing in efilism.<sup>9</sup> Even without subscribing to a particular movement, MacCormack’s ahumanism participates in the same Malthusian folly as VHEM, that overpopulation, or human presence in itself, is the cause of looming climate catastrophe, not a specific kind of socioeconomic organization<sup>10</sup> whose paradigms have run their course.

It is billed as a “real option,” but the reader who has come this far will not be surprised that human extinction is the *only* option for MacCormack other than the collapsing status quo, as MacCormack provides her own version of falling into what Pignarre and Stengers call “infernal alternatives”<sup>11</sup>—the false either/or choices typical of hamstrung

9. Efilism, or EFILism, derived from spelling “life” backward, is a form of anti-natalist philosophy that believes in extending the preference for non-life (given the pain, suffering, and death attendant upon birth) to all living, sentient beings, not just humans.

10. Continuing to call this systemic process “capitalism” might be a stretch at this point. See McKenzie Wark, *Capital is Dead: Is This Something Worse?* (London and New York: Verso, 2019). A detailed survey of post-capitalist theories (that “capitalists” are not the prime beneficiaries of the corporate economy) is found in Donald C. Hodges, *America’s New Economic Order* (London: Avebury, 1996).

11. Pignarre and Stengers, *Capitalist Sorcery*, 23–30.

mainstream discourses. The agenda of the Church of Euthanasia—with its four pillars of sodomy, suicide, abortion, and cannibalism—demonstrate for MacCormack the “affirmative” qualities of the human extinction movement, and its alignment with “human minoritarian activism” (144), whether reproductive or LGBTQI rights. Curbing the anthropocentric bias or frame of otherwise salutary direct action groups like Extinction Rebellion (whose goal in any case is preservation, not withdrawal, of human life), is indeed a difficult issue, but MacCormack doesn’t quite show why the necessary corrective is her death activism, which “celebrates” the cadaver “through its potentials as food, as lover, as an untapped fuel which offers possibilities that pervert both the dominance of the human and the need to queer our relationship with death and corpses” (149).

MacCormack insists on the “jubilation, even eroticism” of her position, the “trajectories of desire—cannibalism, necrophilia, delirium, mysticism and ecstasy” that “compose a world of wonder” beyond expression in language and “unthinkable to knowledge” (155). In league with this, alternatives such as speculative realism and object-oriented ontology, and one would assume so many others, are not so much argued against as simply rejected as too “Apollonic” (157–58). MacCormack’s is one way of processing the larger context of what has been called the “techno-ontological post-biological threshold”<sup>12</sup> in which what is organic/inorganic is hopelessly confused. But as a response, MacCormack’s “thanaterotics” is curiously anthropocentric in that, in it, only “the law murders, the law plunders” (161), as if there is no aggression, no destruction, no killing, excess, madness, or hoarding if only “Nature” is considered. This strange dimensional flattening out is also evident in the latter part of her book when her specific invocation of Guattari and Artaud’s “body without organs” immediately turns into a celebration of “the dead body” as “the limitless lover” (164)—MacCormack’s body without organs is not one of wild mutation and metamorphosis but the literal degree zero intensity of the dead body. MacCormack’s advocacy follows Nietzsche’s “that which is done out of love always takes place beyond good and evil” (qtd. 161), but her reveling in this antinomian realm is studded with yet more ethical commands—“Eat the dead human” (162)—“Go forth and love the dead!” (164). In case the reader is still confused, MacCormack continues that “Death here is not nihilism or failure but the only available creative outlet in an impossible situation” (165).

*The Ahuman Manifesto* is not a long book, but by its last chapter, one may have tired of this heavily theorized “absolute Dionysian celebration” (158). MacCormack’s *bending* of quotes becomes ever more evident—Guattari’s recommended approach to the “pre-symbolic” was not an argument for permanent psychosis. Guattari and Deleuze are full of cautionary warnings, sections MacCormack must have skipped over. Neither does such a position do justice to Foucault. MacCormack in fact misquotes Foucault as the source for what are actually Mark Seem’s remarks in his introduction to *Anti-Oedipus* heralding “ego-loss” (178). Curiously, just preceding the remarks MacCormack misattributed, Seem

12. Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Germinal Life: The Difference and Repetition of Deleuze* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 170; Patricia T. Clough, “The Affective Turn,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 221.

argued, “to be bogged down in arrangements from which escape is possible is to be neurotic, seeing an irresolvable crisis where alternatives in fact exist. And as Deleuze and Guattari comment, ‘perhaps it will be discovered that the only incurable is the neurotic.’”<sup>13</sup> Despite closing by invoking Bernard Stiegler’s discussion of the possibility of a “*wholly other era*” (qtd. 186, italics original), MacCormack’s version of the universe, despite often skillful tactical polemics, is a radically foreclosed one. Other options remain not necessarily anthropocentric, but necessary. ■

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13. Mark Seem, introduction to *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (New York: Viking Press, [1972] 1977), xxii.