Posthumanist Ethics and Organ Transplantation

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ORGAN TRANSPLANTATION is a subject that is gaining increased cross- and interdisciplinary scholarly attention. Much of my work has focused on the relationship between violence and care and how harm to individuals is intimately tied to national and familial norms. When I finished my first book on queer postcolonial narratives, I ended by speaking about organ transplantation. I insisted that questions concerning colonial violence in the family were connected to contemporary biotechnological ethics. The most obvious connection is of course the violation of bodies, often from the global south, for the sale of fresh organs, often to the global north. Nancy Scheper-Hughes (2005) and Lawrence Cohen (1999), among others, show that the demand for organs reproduces many of the structures of European colonization. Yet, transplantation also raises anxieties concerning the relationality between self and other, precisely because the organ of an other is transplanted into the self. Although the border of the body is traversed and sewn back together, the trace left by this corporeal cut is a reminder of how the self may be altered by the presence of an other inside the self. Indeed, scholars, such as Margrit Shildrick (2012), are interested in the potentiality of such crossings for rethinking our relationality with others. My research focuses on how in cultural representations this traversal intersects with anxieties around other border crossings, namely migration, immigration and hospitality to others. In short, while organ transplantation may seem to be a subject that belongs to the realm of biomedicine, it is increasingly an area that raises urgent questions regarding the meaning of the human, our responsibility to others, care and violation, and the role of technologies in prolonging life or in furthering deadly practices. Posthumanism offers one way into engaging with these difficult ethical and socio-political questions, and I am particularly interested in how it may allow us to think through the intimacy between self and other both in the body and the body politic.
In his short autobiographical text *L’Intrus* (translated as *The Intruder*), Jean-Luc Nancy engages intimately a sense of posthumanness brought about through the biotechnological intervention of organ transplantation:

*I am the illness and the medicine, I am the cancerous cell and the grafted organ, I am these immuno-depressive agents and their palliatives, I am these ends of steel wire that brace my sternum and this injection site permanently sewn under my clavicle, altogether as if, already and besides, I were these screws in my thigh and this plate inside my groin. I am turning into something like a science-fiction android, or else, as my youngest son said to me one day, one of the living-dead.* (Nancy 2008: 170)

Nancy compares organ transplantation to the imagined world of science fiction, where the human is not so human, no longer recognizable as human or even not human at all. Indeed, Nancy invites a reflection on how a biotechnological intervention alters one’s sense of humanness through body modifications and technological dependencies. If the human is sewn together through external – read: artificial – means, if wire literally keeps the flesh together, if the transplanted organ only functions through constant pharmaceutical and medical interventions, and if life only continues through the death of an other, then what is this human life form that we are witnessing and that continues to be lived, experienced and biomedically – and more generally – defined as human? What is at stake in staying attached to the category of the human for those who undergo such biotechnological interventions? And what might posthumanism offer to the study of transplantation and to understandings of post-transplant embodiment?

Speaking on what is at stake in being categorized and therefore understood as human, Judith Butler states:

>[Detained and untried terrorists] are something less than human, and yet – somehow – they assume a human form. They represent, as it were, an equivocation of the human, which forms the basis for some of the skepticism about the applicability of legal entitlements and protections. (Butler 2004:74)

Butler makes apparent how protection under the law, the right to a legal status and therefore to fair treatment within a nation state, is bound to a notion of the human. Much work in queer, postcolonial and disability studies has focused on how state technologies dehumanize and hierarchize peoples. Anna Mollow argues that «a broader project, articulated by disability studies and the disability rights movement, [is to allow] disabled people to be recognized as human beings (rather than merely the objects of the dominant culture’s fantasies, sexual or otherwise)» (Mollow 2012:305). To be recognized as human, rather than as other to the human or not quite human, articulates a political desire to challenge and rearticulate existing
structural inequalities. Anne McClintock demonstrates how a borrowing from the language of the natural sciences allowed for a categorization of humans into ‘type’, ‘species’, ‘genus’ and ‘race’ (McClintock 1995:48) and thus produced a model of human evolutionary progress where people of colour, queers and disabled people were not only represented as archaic and thus degenerate, but were also marked as closer to and therefore similar to animals. Here, being like an animal or of the animal indicates inferiority and a lacking in humanness that gives credence to colonial and neo-colonial interventions, occupations and violence. Ann Laura Stoler insists that «the theory of degeneracy secured the relationship between racism and sexuality» (Stoler 1995:189). The category of the human emerges through a political rhetoric of familialism, where sexual norms are reproductive of whiteness and propagate a desired national family of purported racial superiority.2

A turn to Frantz Fanon makes apparent the simultaneous process of racialized dehumanization and how accession to the category of the human necessitates a normativizing impossibility. He states:

*I begin to suffer from not being a white man to the degree that the white man imposes discrimination on me, makes me a colonized native, robs me of all worth, all individuality, tells me that I am a parasite on the world and that I must bring myself as quickly as possible into step with the white world […]. Then I will quite simply try to make myself white: that is, I will compel the white man to acknowledge that I am human.* (Fanon 1986:73)

Whiteness, for Fanon, constitutes humanness. His critique makes manifest the constraints and prejudices of the category of the human and in so doing calls for «a restructuring of the world» (ibid:60). While I sense that Butler, Fanon, McClintock and Stoler may not be central to the epistemology known as posthumanism, I see their work as thinking through the limits of the human in an attempt to undo the hierarchical structure of the racialized, gendered and able-bodied human. Indeed, Fanon in asserting the desire to be recognized as human goes on, as Kelly Oliver (2001) shows, to critique the technologies of recognition implemented through national familialism. He refuses to seek validation – recognition – from the institutional norms that invalidate his existence as a black man. For me, posthumanism is at its most exciting when it grapples with this nexus of race, class, sex, ability and gender in trying to imagine how the often unrecognizably human emerges to contest, undo, reiterate, challenge, reinforce or simply run parallel to the humanist, Cartesian subject. Indeed, along with some posthumanists, such as Patricia MacCormack (2012), I understand this critical analysis of human becoming as central to posthumanist thinking.

Let me return to my point of departure where I began by speaking about organ transplantation and moved through issues of embodied and symbolic violence insti-
tuted through racialized, sexualized and able-bodied norms. In literary and cinematic productions transplantation is often a metaphor for capitalistic violations of the body, where organs are easily removed from poor bodies of colour to give life to the whiter, richer bodies. One only need think of Stephen Frears’ *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002) to see how global inequalities and contemporary biotechnologies intersect to perpetuate previous colonial violence. Yet there is another major anxiety that emerges in many of these texts that concerns this very relationality between self and other. Where the humanist, Cartesian subject is founded upon separateness, boundedness, and a distinction between self and other, works on transplantation portray what we could call a posthuman body intimately tied to an other through a transplanted organ. Speaking on the «corporeal cut» of surgical interventions, Margrit Shildrick argues that it «both fails to solidify the boundaries of self and other, and enables a quite literal incorporation of otherness that cannot fail to disturb the dominance in the socio-cultural imaginary of a sovereign self» (Shildrick 2008:41). Indeed, this disturbance to the sociocultural imaginary makes manifest a specific concern with difference as it relates to power differentials. The flesh of the transplanted body that appears to be human, that is made to be human through biomedical normalization, undoes this notion of the sovereign subject. It thus offers an embodied way to think through how we are intimately and sometimes both unwittingly and unwillingly connected to others. Here, as Shildrick argues and as Nancy shows, organ transplantation opens up ethical discussions regarding what it means to be responsible for and to others when our bodies are literally tied to the flesh of dead others. To return to Butler, this posthumanist ethics demands a consideration of our vulnerability and indebtedness to each other. However, it extends her ethical considerations by insisting on a vulnerability and indebtedness for, to and with dead human body parts, animal matter and technologies of life.

If difference is often considered definitive, visible, biological or even culturally produced, organ transplantation shows that the other as different from the self can, at least in part, become integral to the self. In her autobiography, the heart recipient Claire Sylvia asks:

> And now, certain parts of [my] body – big, major, important parts – had been taken away and replaced with somebody else’s. What did that mean? Who was this «else»? And how did he, or it, fit into me? I had always known who I was, but who was I now? (Sylvia 1997:91–92)

Malika Mokeddem in her novel *L’Interdite* (translated as *The Forbidden Woman*) explicitly articulates a posthumanist imaginary that defies the continued prevalence of colonial ideologies in post-independent Algeria. Vincent, a white French man who has received the kidney of a now dead Algerian woman, states:
What a feeling to know that I had the same tissue identity as a woman and, moreover, a woman from elsewhere! Those who tell lies about the races would do well to take a glance at genetics! (Mokeddem 1998:91)

On the one hand, Sylvia’s words demonstrate a posthumanist ethics where flesh connects her to an other, specifically a dead other, and thus where this dead other in some sense continues to live on in another form and being. On the other hand, the transplant imaginary in Mokeddem’s work opens up a potential critique of power relations built on colonial structures of difference. Posthumanist ethics, here, gives space to how biotechnologies may alter colonial epistemologies and violence. Both texts invite a posthumanist reflection on our ethical relationality and our responsibility for self and others (often in ways that seeks to prevent the perpetuation of further violence).

Yet if posthumanism offers the possibility to think through our fleshy, technological and pharmaceutical interconnections, transplantation reminds of the risks of being intimately tied to others. With a constant need for immunosuppressants and for persistent care and interventions (in the way that Nancy describes in the opening quotation), organ transfer brings to the fore a posthumanist ethics of vulnerability, where the human is always already of that which might be perceived as the inhuman, the dead or the inanimate. The toxicity of such a regime of care renders apparent a posthuman world of dependence on that which simultaneously harms and maintains and sometimes destroys life. Indeed, transplanting flesh between bodies, maintaining dead yet breathing cadavers, sustaining life through cancer-inducing medication and caring for others through risky technological innovations open up the possibility for us to ask what a posthumanist ethics offers to our commitment to undoing the scientifically endorsed violence of colonial and neocolonial embodied, hierarchical differences. Where care and harm are so intimately connected, where self and (many) others live in one body, and where vitality is precisely because it is relational, then our turn to posthumanism becomes one way to work with what it means to live in a body sustained by the flesh of an other.

NOTER

1 See Margrit Shildrick 2008.
3 Immunosuppressants are the lifelong drugs that must be taken after an organ transplant in order to prevent the immune system from rejecting the so-called «foreign» organ.
REFERENCES


