

Response to Ricart's "From Being to Ontogenetic Becoming" (AAQ v.34 n.3): Athena McLean

Ender Ricart, in her exceptionally creative piece, argues in favor of ontogenetic becoming against the limitations of ontologies that fail to escape dualistic essentialism. Even scholars who have attempted to do so, e.g., Scheper-Hughes and Lock in their Mindful "Body" model of three bodies, and Haraway, through her Cyborg model, have failed, she argues, to move beyond ontologies that do more than serve as bridges between the essentialized entities of individual and society, and an interior-self from an exterior-social world. For Scheper-Hughes and Lock, the body is subject to the disciplinary scripts between the social and political; for Haraway, the body and the technology are vehicles of social and subjective meaning and control. The implications for aging bodies are what concern Ricart. For example, while technology provides a means for an elderly person to reclaim some control of a failing body, and purportedly, preserve social independence, the technology simultaneously signifies a departure from normalcy.

Ricart is drawn to the ontogenetic processual model of becoming as a way of moving beyond the ontological limitations of the models she critiques. Drawing from Gilbert Simondon, she embraces ontogenesis as an ongoing complex embedded process of relations. The process involves the being, not as substance, but as an extended and "supersaturated system." The focus is on matter-taking-form "when two or more previously disparate and incompatible 'orders of being' or 'disparate realities' come into relation and simultaneously begin negotiating and navigating difference through shared change," thus forming something new and emerging.

As described, the ontogenetic process holds tremendous promise for, among other things, approaching and dissolving the alterity of radical Otherness associated, e.g., with impairments of advanced aging. It holds the possibility by means of mutual transformations involving both a caregiver and a radically Other elder, e.g., with severe dementia. The ontogenetic process in this case promises far more than simply bridging the gap of alterity between two “disparate realities.” The very offering of systemic dissolution of alterity can simply not be disregarded.

At the same time, I have concerns that give me pause about the nature of ontogenetic becoming. It eerily draws us to a system that assumes a life of its own, using the language of adaptation, equilibrium, however shifting toward “meta-stable things” embedded in unique histories of becoming toward new futures. But how do such processes proceed? Is there merely, as suggested, a neutral “coming into relation” of two or more “disparate realities”? Is the future progressive, yet indeterminable? How are differences in power among beings treated by the model? Are all beings and environments (political, economic, e.g.,) seen as equally influencing all others? How might vulnerability of older beings affect the particular form of the matter-taking-form? And where do power and power differentials in the system figure in? How, for example, might this model treat the political injunction of Japan’s finance minister that elderly people should “hurry up and die”? It does not seem accidental that the concept of emergence has been associated with a convergence of biotechnology, systems theory and neoliberalism, as Melinda Cooper (2008) has suggested (Fische 2013:325). Such associations unsettle the idea of a neutral “organizing principle” of a new becoming in which aging bodies are incorporated into disinterested systems. These need more elaboration, I believe, before we should move to embrace such emergence.

Cooper, Melinda. 2008. *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Fische, Michael. 2013. Tokyo’s Commuter Train Suicides and the Society of Emergence. *Cultural Anthropology* 28(2):320-343.