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On Somatic Capitalism

The Child to Come: Life after the Human Catastrophe by REBEKAH SHELDON

University of Minnesota Press, 2016 \$25.00

Reviewed by **NATHAN TEBOKKEL**

Rebekah Sheldon's first monograph is a tour-de-force of heterodox close readings of science fiction, post-apocalyptic novels, contemporary films, and environmentalist writing. With suggestive one-word titles such as "Face" and "Future," her chapters trace the omnipresent figure of the child between novels and world, between fiction and fact, and use literature as a proxy for culture, as a means to understand what we do when we figure the child, reproduction, and the future.

The introduction analyses Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and William James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) to assert that the child "exited the nineteenth century as the nexus point coordinating life, species, and reproduction with history, race, and nation" (3). The child became both the sign of future harm and the sign of future hope and human persistence, she whom we must save but also she who must save us.

Sheldon's first chapter analyses popular environmentalists, such as Rachel Carson and Al Gore, to extend this dual figure of the child: simple, linear, generational, and closed, but camouflaging complexity, chaos, mutation, and openness. The child, packaged in this deceptive way, is repeatedly used as a symbol for arguing that our only defence against catastrophe is to preserve and sustain the forms and relationships we have now—a popular belief Sheldon challenges because it reproduces the problems it seeks to prevent.

Sheldon's next four chapters follow the child-figure through Joanna Russ's *We Who Are About To ...* (1976), Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003–13), Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006), and YA fiction to arrive at her key idea: *somatic capitalism*, a kind of neoliberal biopolitics. No longer the discipline of individuals, the determination of life and death, the regulation of sexuality and population, all guided by the rhetoric of concern, biopolitics is becoming the amplification and extraction of sub-individual capacities and the management of forced enclosures of reproduction, via the emplotment of algorithms and employment of databases, all guided by the rhetoric of speculation. It is a resurgent, globalised Taylorism fused with Big Data. For example, individual chickens are de-differentiated into a welter of numbers and aggregate data, which are then re-differentiated into mechanisms that can be isolated and optimised—in the *MaddAddam* trilogy, the chickenless, lab-grown meat, "ChickieNubs." Perhaps the difference between old biopolitics and somatic capitalism is the difference between breeding a tastier grape over decades and inserting a flavour-enhancing gene, between aerobics videos and creatine or collagen injections, between street-level detective interviews and online click-tracking. All this is not to say that the optimisation of sub-individual capacities never existed before or that the regulation of individuals will stop existing, but that somatic capitalism and its "enclosures of reproduction" are becoming more prevalent and are thus powerful terms for thinking through our times.

This book's greatest strength—its rigorous, theoretical close reading—is also its greatest weakness, if the following can

count as a weakness in a book of literary criticism: somatic capitalism is rarely elucidated outside a literary context. This elucidation might not be Sheldon's job; it might be the work of theorists following in her footsteps. But for a book whose jacket professes to bring together queer theory, ecocriticism, and science studies, there is often tangential queer theory and no science studies. Sheldon follows an emerging trend in ecocriticism's use of queer theory by associating anything nonhuman or not filial, and many things deformed and moribund (e.g. her reference to Russ's "nameless narrator's queer deathliness" [60]), with the label "queer," opposing queerness to heteronormativity but also to masculinity and to life in general, possible reifications that Jack Halberstam and Andil Gosine have questioned.

Further, sweeping condemnations of agriculture like "farming is fucking" (100), offhand references to all the usual targets from cloning to stem cells (16)—and one gloss of biotechnology patents, GMOs, and genetic use restriction technologies (GURTs, one type of which is known as "terminator seeds")—are not studies of science. These references, Sheldon's confusion of sexual selection with inheritance in bees (51), and her conflation of GMOs in general with terminator seeds in particular (171–72, 220 fn.61) are possibly troublesome for humanistic and public understanding of science.

These factual errors may also contradict some of Sheldon's own arguments. What she labels "GMOs" are a varied class of genetically modified organisms, from mice used to study tumours in laboratories to fruits that produce more nutrients to plants that resist insect damage or herbicides. Some of these are better or worse than others, politically, ecologically,

and so on. So-called terminator seeds—cultivars modified to be sterile, thus forcing farmers to buy more seeds—are one kind of GMO, one that has not (yet) been marketed. While it is nevertheless true that, as Sheldon writes, "their vitality comes from elsewhere" (171), vitality coming from elsewhere seems to be precisely what she advocates *for* earlier in the book, because it would exemplify an alternative to "linear causality structured by filiation and patrimony," and a way "toward mutations and nonorganic becomings" (31). I am not arguing for the use of GURTs; I am merely showing that there may be an overlooked nuance here. Perhaps Sheldon laments GURTs' negation of both filial and queer reproduction in plants, but her negative view of terminator seeds could also translate into a negative view of nonlinear generativity, which troubles her earlier assertion that there is "futurity outside of [heterosexual] reproduction" (58).

This nuance may raise questions about certain premises and methods in the book, though it seems merely to be the result of Sheldon's breadth of range and attempts to include a host of relevant work. And more importantly, it is relatively minor in a book whose larger project—questioning our uncritical adoption of the child as the flag-bearer for the future, deconstructing this child-figure, and offering a set of terms with which to critique and understand the society who figures the child in this way—is provocative, pertinent, and precise. As the deconstruction of the child-figure proffers new critical engagements, somatic capitalism provides a cogent and timely update to Foucauldian biopolitics.

NATHAN TEBOKKEL is pursuing his PhD in English at UBC, where he studies poet-farmers from Robert Burns to Gary Soto. Drawing on his background in poetics, genetics, melon farming, and food safety audits, he examines the aesthetic motivations behind biotechnological research, agricultural practice, and government legislation.