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Dustin Purvis
West Virginia University

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Contaminated Metaphors

The Microbial State: Global Thriving and the Body Politic by STEFANIE R. FISHEL

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\$26.00USD

Reviewed by **DUSTIN PURVIS**

Stefanie R. Fishel's *The Microbial State: Global Thriving and the Body Politic* is an illuminating interrogation of the dated bodily metaphors that are employed to imagine a "healthy" sovereign state. While Fishel's personal specialization, International Relations (IR), is dependent on an abundance of corporeal metaphors that are highlighted throughout the book—in war, for example, military "operations" become hygienic in nature, performing "surgical strikes" intended to "clean out" enemy fortifications (49)—she claims that the field generally excludes actual bodies from its political analyses.

To complicate IR's conception of the human subject, Fishel draws from medical biology, political history, and posthuman theory to collapse notions of the liberal, self-contained universal "man," which is replaced by entangled assemblages of material bodies perpetually transforming, and being transformed by, various human and non-human actors. This untidy vision of the human is illustrated through extended discussions about the changing scientific perceptions of our genes, immune systems, and the microbial communities living in our guts. Here we learn that the thriving human bodies that metaphorically structure so many political practices are not in fact aseptic fortresses, ever-vigilant against outside threats, but rather swarms of diverse relationships that she has dubbed "lively vessels," where the fluidity between

traditionally hierarchical classifications, such as that between parasite and host, make such identifications arbitrary. A healthy immune system, for instance,

does not just keep foreign material out, it regulates a complex system of flow and exchange with the wider environment (77).

Fishel is not interested in eliminating bodily metaphors from political discourse altogether, however. She maintains that the use of bodily metaphors can still be a productive tool that contributes to social and political change, explaining that metaphor "can *create* a reality rather than just explaining the current state" (71). Once the human body is reconsidered as a mesh of fluctuating agential actors, Fishel asks us to imagine an analogous body politic, characterized as the "contaminated state," which is "a nested set of permeable bodies rather than hard-shelled nation-states competing in anarchical conditions ruled by fear and exclusion" (113). It is a compelling alternative to the customary language of IR, offering possibilities beyond the field's limited, antiquated antidotes for ailing bodies, which merely need "more national security, or expanded trade regimes, or democratic institutions more closely aligned with the general will" (10) to be rid of their disorder.

In the process, *The Microbial State* situates itself among recent books of new materialist scholarship, sitting comfortably alongside the works of prominent theorists, such as Stacy Alaimo, Rosi Braidotti, and Jane Bennett (with whom Fishel studied at Johns Hopkins University). Portions of the book's introduction and first chapter will be somewhat repetitive for readers already familiar with the premises of new

materialist theory, but they are nonetheless helpful distillations that are always interwoven with rich discussions of historical and contemporary political phenomena.

More importantly, Fishel's book does quite a bit more than demonstrate the tenets of new materialism—that human beings are inextricably embroiled in, and connected to, their environments; that ontology is flat; that nonhumans display agential qualities, etc. It accelerates the field by integrating these often overwhelming ontological examinations with direct suggestions for unorthodox governing policies, harkening back, perhaps, to Bruno Latour's "Parliament of Things." Fishel even goes so far as to provide a list of metaphors whose usage she has recontextualized to function more appropriately in a multitudinous contaminated state, such as "border," "competition," "symbiosis," "health," and "parasite" (96-97).

By revising some of the bodily metaphors that have been thoughtlessly repeated, in some cases since Hobbes, in both mainstream and specialized political discourse, Fishel provides building blocks with which we might go beyond simply acknowledging the precarious conditions of the Anthropocene. *The Microbial State* makes a lucid and convincing case that in the face of seemingly impenetrable transnational quandaries involving "refugees, migrants, criminal activity, climate change issues, and pollution" (10), it becomes imperative that we develop new, better ways of communicating that account for, and utilize, the complexities of actual human bodies.

DUSTIN PURVIS is a PhD student and Provost Fellow in the Department of English at West Virginia University, where he studies 20th-Century US fiction and the environmental humanities.