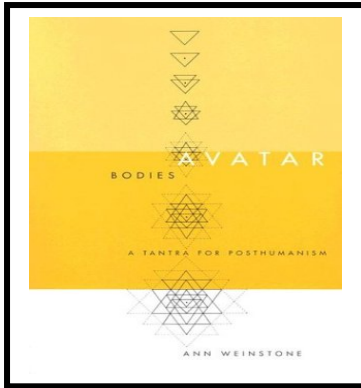


Avatar Bodies: A Tantra for Posthumanism. By Ann Weinstone. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004; 227 pp. \$53.95 cloth, \$17.95 paperback.



Ann Weinstone's intriguing new book approaches the subject of identity formation, contestation and expression within a digital context from a transdisciplinary perspective. Situating her study of posthumanism within ethical, metaphysical, philosophical, linguistic and literary discourses concerning pleasure, desire, agency and difference, her exploration of selfhood and "otherness" draws from a mixed brew of referents and influences. Weinstone weaves these separate themes and traditions together with Indian Tantric beliefs and practices- a set of devotional techniques aimed at achieving greater self-awareness and communality. Her rigorous exploration of identity formulation processes with regard to cyberculture adds to the impressive range of topics covered by the "Electronic Mediations" series published by the University of Minnesota Press.

Early on in the book Weinstone describes her mission in the following way: "What I want to arrive at is an altered syntax of self-other relations that is *more faithful* to the critiques of elitism and exemption that both posthumanism and deconstruction enact" (7). To this end, she posits an alternative (Tantric-infused) ethic of human relationships that attempts to alter the course of posthumanistic thought towards inclusion of human to human interactions as central points of study. Weinstone's mode of inquiry stresses the interconnected nature of human relations in which notions of the self are inextricably tied to understandings of "otherness". In fact, she interrogates the self/other binary classification, stating: "I am concerned with events that suspend the terms self and other and with the ethical consequences that flow from these events-in-common" (27). She then goes on to cite trauma, pleasure love, devotion, illness and inebriation as examples of such events.

Weinstone's mission to re-write posthumanism along more inclusive and ethical lines appears to be driven by her own (very personal) spiritual quest. In many ways *Avatar Bodies: A Tantra for Posthumanism* reads like private recordation of her emerging consciousness. I was immediately struck, for example, by the inclusion of various autobiographical materials in the work (diary entries, e-mail correspondence, letters and other communication with real and imagined partners). While I take these selections to be part of Weinstone's desire to expand the boundaries of academic writing to embrace new communication forms, these entries often served to disrupt the flow and rhythm of an argument. Also, the many references to the teachings of her guru, Dharmanidhi Sarasvati, as well as the anecdotal accounts of previous teachers, therapists and mentors colored the text with a "New Age" sentiment that may have inadvertently undermined the seriousness of her intellectual project. This is not to say that fictional and autobiographical content should be excluded from an academic text; rather their placement in this particular work proved to be problematic due to the subject matter's close association with "self-help" modes of spirituality.

It must be noted, though, that the personal and experiential nature of the work infused questions of identity with vigor, immediacy and purpose. Also, Weinstone's emphasis on interconnectivity was a welcome departure from recent theoretical writing that has tended to stress difference, marginality and separateness, rather than commonality.

Given the study's ontological scope and transdisciplinary breadth, I was surprised by the deceptive simplicity of the text's structure. The individual chapters (totaling more than seventy-five) contained, at most, four pages. At first, I was puzzled by this formation as I had come to expect that theoretical arguments require a lengthier developmental form. I now understand these sections to be meditations on themes presented whose structure may adhere to a multiform style of narration (one containing a branched structure which, like hypertext, can be linked together nonsequentially). In other words, it is possible to read the text in a nonlinear fashion.

Regarding the work's dense theoretical content, Weinstone assumes that readers are conversant with complex posthuman and poststructural precepts, in addition to being comfortable with speculative thinking in general. At the same time, though, she marks certain phrases or words in italics to emphasize their importance and relevance to her argument. Weinstone's generous use of italics causes the reader to feel that she does not trust our ability to identify and process information without her assistance. Thus, the respect she pays to a reader's intellect is contradicted by her action of interpreting material on our behalf.

I was impressed, though, by Weinstone's application of various theoretical models of study (particularly her sophisticated understanding and use of performance theory throughout the work). She is able to recognize and comment upon the performative aspects of everyday life experience (such as language, letter writing, even e-mail correspondence). Weinstone's synthesis and use of performance-based theory is all the more impressive in that she resists the temptation to cite specific theorists, at the expense of others. Rather, it appears that her project aims to integrate performance models of study into the theoretical framework of the book as a whole.

In sum, Weinstone's cross-pollinated methodology has the potential to bridge ideological divides, and, in doing so, to offer a holistic approach to the study of selfhood and "otherness" in the contemporary world. The downside of her posthuman experiment, though, is that in reaching across the disciplinary terrain in an attempt to break down barriers of thought her work may slip into the crevices between existing departmental structures and programs of study that can neither accommodate nor take up her transdisciplinary cause. In this way, *Avatar Bodies: A Tantra for Posthumanism* is burdened by Weinstone's lofty and somewhat naive ambitions.

-Kathryn Farley



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