Review

Embryos and Alphabets: A reproductive history of the nonhuman

Ruth A. Miller

Oxford University Press, New York, 2017, 190 pp.,
ISBN 978-0190638351

Contemporary Political Theory (2020) **19**, S243–S246. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-019-00367-3>; published online 18 November 2019

Ruth A. Miller's *Embryos and Alphabets* starts with her diagnosis that both post-human studies and biopolitical theory have become fatigued. She moves beyond the innovative reconsideration of biopolitics, reproduction, and sexual violence presented in her last book (2007) by offering a non-human framework for reproduction. This framework is fashioned from her idiosyncratic understanding of the term 'nostalgia,' which is expansively redefined in support of a non-human biopolitics.

Miller argues that all nostalgia bears a complex, simultaneously retroactive, and anticipatory temporality, to which human representations and affects are not always adequate. Through a number of critical gestures (both described and performed in *Embryos*), nostalgia's dimensions as non-linear and transformative proliferate in this project, contributing to a political and philosophical reconsideration of its time. The book demonstrates also that the status of nostalgia changes according to the times. The argument has a distinctively enfolded structure. For example, Miller shows how nostalgia is always environmentally reconfigured, and she also defines nostalgia as a form of environmental re-configuring.

In the chapter most closely connected to the biopolitics of reproduction explored in her previous work, Miller offers an account of fetal materiality as formally nostalgic in the innovative sense she develops. She is in dialogue with contemporary critical theorists whom she sees as having relished the archives and museums of pre-twentieth century natural history and biology. The collection principles lingering in handsome wood cases, plate glass, preserved biological specimens, and antiquated modes of classification allow a contemporary immersion in the curiosity of past orders of things. But she answers with a different kind of relationship to the archive. She derives historical accounts of reproduction as non-human nostalgia by conceptually re-rendering writers such as Buffon, Demangeon, Flourens, Deschamps, Hément, Preyer, and Şakir. She produces a trove of antiquated theories of reproductive environments as non-brain-based thought

systems, theories of environmental memory, theories of embryonic transformation of the reproductive environment, theories of embryonic assemblages of organic molecules intra-acting with mutually responsive surroundings, and theories of 'embryonic intuition' understood to be non-human rather than prenatal. By describing the non-brain-based reproductive atmosphere as algorithmic, as archival data hoard or as liquid form, she defuses morally or politically sentimental depictions of embryos. That sentimentality is exchanged for an understanding of the embryonic *as* a nostalgic form. By foregrounding its a-human temporality, she defines it as existing 'only in the future (as potential) or the past (as parts of the bodies that . . . produced them)' (p. 140). She then shows how her definition of this jumbled temporality as non-human nostalgia can be attributed also to digital proliferation and debris.

The multiple senses of the embryonic also allow Miller to rethink nascency, linearity, and natality in a number of contexts, including political and national imaginaries. Addressing the attribution of embryonic political status to alphabets (p. 141), she extends her critique of nostalgia to the politics of replacing Arabic with European script in Turkey.

Alphabets have been associated with the origins and futures of peoples, their conservation, traditions, national futures, and progression towards modernity. The embryo becomes biopolitically embroiled, as do national alphabets. Accordingly, they are redefined by Miller as archives of automatic proliferation, of assemblages 'processing without awareness, of memory without self-consciousness, of contemplation without cognition, and ... of nostalgia without coherent narrative' (p. 139).

Miller's reconceptualization of nostalgia's temporality and materiality extends to a number of diagnoses of contemporary critical theory exemplified by her critical response to Rosi Braidotti. Miller includes Braidotti with those philosophers, cultural critics, and political theorists who 'despise nostalgia' as if it were a kind of 'sweet, sticky syrup' (p. 45). She reassesses this aversion, given her interest in the affective circulation of theory. Does the tendency to dismiss all-too-human variants of nostalgia reflect the critic's lingering humanism? Does the antipathy presuppose, too hastily, the contours and limits of this repudiated nostalgia?

The characteristics of Miller's own form of critique are particularly evident when she revises Braidotti's work as anticipating this intervention. Braidotti will have already shown that to understand thought as material, cellular or organic is also to transform how thought is understood, not just to broaden its application. So, responds Miller, couldn't nostalgia be reconceptualized through a parallel intervention?

Braidotti reconfigures consciousness at a more fundamental level ... [it] must be approached obliquely, sideways via 'flows of variations, constantly transforming within patterns of continuity' [It] cannot be apprehended by simply re-configuring the mind, on the one hand, and the body, on the other, it

must be transplanted, embedded, allowed to creep and grow across ‘processes, flows’ and the ‘in-between-status’ (p. 36, citing Braidotti’s *Metamorphoses*, 2002).

In other words, rather than attributing to putatively non-conscious matter, historical process or biological form what we think we understand of psychic nostalgia (or mental process more generally), the radicality with which we understand nostalgia should be intensified and transformative. Non-human nostalgic form can be found in anonymous processes and flows that do not comply with a rigid distinction between the material and the conscious. For Miller, this is also a more affirmative understanding. Repudiation too readily reduces nostalgia to the misrecognition of phantasmatic loss by backwards-directed subjects. Rather, Miller is attributing a redefined nostalgia to the complex temporality and developmental form of cellular process, to fetal growth, to the proliferation of data systems, and to the politics of alphabets.

As seen in her response to some strands of contemporary feminist, new materialist, Foucauldian, and biopolitical theory, Miller is reluctant to impose the most constraining understanding of their capacities on texts or contexts. Her productive revision and expansion of nostalgia is extended to contemporary critical theory, whose potential can wax and wane according to environmental conditions that include over-familiarity.

Accordingly, Miller’s diagnosis of biopolitical theory’s exhaustion gives her grounds for drawing differently on its resources. Rather than extracting a confirmation of his androcentrism from Foucault’s politics of life, she retrieves a Foucauldian biopolitics of the non-human, of data and interconnected environments. She chooses to broaden the types of material and reproduction (of embryonic material, of data, of language, of theory) understood to be nostalgic in a non-human sense.

But this interest in theory’s tendency to become exhausted also leads her to a different mood. Reflecting on the affective and rhythmic dimension of theory’s circulation (its anticipation, production, retention, and release), she considers theory produced with such velocity that its imminent decline is already palpable in its first articulation. Characterizing the fatigued mood of some contemporary theory (‘we already know this,’ p. 3), she refers to the ‘countless’ conferences on biopolitics, to Agamben’s consideration of the camp as biopolitical paradigm as ‘now likewise passé’ (p. 6), and to theorists of biopolitics turning to thanatopolitics with ‘glut or gluttony’ (p. 20).

It would be better to further differentiate the moods and conduct of contemporary theory, including the biopolitical variations: are they really all equally exhausted? We’re surely listening to Miller’s own fatigue when we are asked to recognize the graduate students’ ‘half-smug, half-mortified smirks’ (p. 8).

Of course, Miller has anticipated this repudiation. But in so doing she generalizes her audience, creating a claustrophobic atmosphere.

The reader is addressed in a breach of critical theory's fourth wall: this 'periodization will happen once, now, ... so if you like that sort of thing, pay attention' (p. 16). Miller generates a retroactive circuit of affect whose irritation at once expresses, exceeds, and reflects on its own performance. She provokes the reader's repudiation and pushes back in advance at that repudiation. When she characterizes her methodology: 'this modern European history is situated in one example from the so-called center of the region, and one example from the so-called periphery,' she assumes, acerbically, that we will 'take methodological pleasure in that' (p. 16). More prickly follows: 'Go read some Pheng Cheah to figure out which example is which' (p. 16). She imagines some colleagues appreciating her historical contextualization and others welcoming her analytic attention to the 'so-called periphery.' She offers and mocks both forms of gratification.

Deliberately needling, and environmentally reactive, *Embryos* is more caustic than the marvelous *Limits of Bodily Integrity*. But declarations, such as 'this book is overwritten,' reflect more than a stylistic choice. Miller is not just anticipating criticism, she is exploring criticism's capacity to be anticipatory. The reader arrives on the scene with visceral reactions, only to find they have long since been projected, predicated, and stimulated. Miller has staged a waxing and waning of critical theory, enfolding *Embryo's* critical nostalgia by means of its idiosyncratic temporality.

In this difficult, clever, and ambitious project, Miller is interconnecting the form and the content, the embryonic development, language, interest, velocity, and the environment of theory. She anticipates, provokes, theorizes, performs, and describes the affect and time of this book's critical thinking.

References

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Penelope Deutscher
Northwestern University, Evanston, IL 60208, USA
p-deutscher@northwestern.edu