



Posthumanism, Parenting, and Agency: A Review of Naomi Morgenstern's *Wild Child*
—Jen Harrison

Morgenstern, Naomi. *Wild Child: Intensive Parenting and Posthumanist Ethics*. U of Minnesota P, 2018. 280 pp. \$25.00 pb. ISBN 9781517903794.

Posthumanism and the posthuman have become increasingly popular theoretical lenses in children's literature and culture studies with their growing focus on embodiment, which Maria Nikolajeva identified in 2016. Scholars such as Zoe Jaques, Victoria Flanagan, and Elaine Ostry have all produced convincing arguments for "the child" as a symbol of both human embodiment and humanist values, and as a site for the contestation of that symbolism. Of particular concern to such studies has been the depiction of "the child" in various historical and contemporary works of fiction and the reading of such interpretations as symptomatic of a growing social, critical, and philosophical disillusionment with humanist ideals. *Wild Child*, therefore, enters a discourse which is already producing rich and provocative material. Morgenstern takes parenting and the parent-child relationship as the focus for her study, arguing that the depiction of "wild" children within extreme parent-child relationships in literature works to contradict humanist ideas about autonomy and agency. Such depictions, Morgenstern argues, help to "precipitate a posthumanist encounter with the ethics of reproductive choice and with the figure of the wild child" (2). The lack of clearly conceptualized definitions, norms, and perspectives for key concepts such as "wild," "child," "extreme parenting," and "parenting ethics" as they relate to posthumanism limits the scope of this fascinating contribution to current discourse.

Morgenstern builds specifically on Cary Wolfe's work, which blurs the demarcation between humanism and posthumanism to posit the child as a liminal figure in humanism, hovering between the "animal" state of uncivilization

and the ideal, rational humanist subject. She argues throughout the volume for an understanding of the child as “situated precisely in [the] unstable, or wild, terrain” theorized by Wolfe to lie “between the humanist and the posthumanist” (6) and uses both psychoanalytical and deconstructive theory alongside posthumanist theory to argue that this liminal child figure serves as a locus for textual explorations of posthumanist parenting fears. Interestingly, the collection engages with ideas of the posthuman as well as posthumanist theory, exploring how modern political and technological complications—from the “designer babies” famously described by Francis Fukuyama to changing conceptions of who and what can be a parent, which Morgenstern explains is fundamentally dependent on ideas about agency—contribute to a destabilization of humanist ideologies.

The volume begins with a long introduction, laying out the theoretical framework for the application of posthumanism, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction to representations of reproduction, parenting, and ethics. Five theoretical chapters then provide close textual analysis of representations of posthuman reproduction and parenting: Emma Donoghue’s *Room* (chapter 1), Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (chapter 2), Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy* (chapter 3), Lionel Shriver’s *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (chapter 4), and Denis Villeneuve’s *Prisoners* and Alice Munro’s “Miles City, Montana” (chapter 5). An afterword works to pull these close analyses back within the theoretical framework and explain the theoretical significance of the “wild child” as a focus for representations of extreme parenting.

The fundamental weakness of this volume appears immediately in the introduction. This long, multi-section chapter draws on a range of theoretical frameworks, from feminist writers like Judith Butler and posthumanist feminists Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, and Karen Barad to Derridian deconstruction and the psychoanalysis of Laplanche and Winnicott, to support an exploration of parent-child relationships within posthumanist contexts. The introduction attempts to cover the basic tenets of these theories and how they work together in the analysis, while simultaneously exploring their application to the primary texts analyzed in the rest of the volume. With its focus not only on the posthuman and posthumanism, but also on psychoanalysis, deconstruction, feminism, and Levinasian ethics,

the theoretical framework informing the analysis of these texts can be difficult to follow—both in the chapters themselves and in the explanatory subsections of the introduction—and at times the argument about posthumanism becomes lost. Even more problematically, there is no clear articulation of the concept of the “wild child,” and the introduction would benefit from a clear discussion of how these multiple theoretical frameworks come together in this one concept. The result is instead a series of highly perceptive and intriguing textual analyses which lack a clear theoretical perspective to give them coherence and significance.

In chapter 1, Morgenstern analyzes Emma Donoghue’s *Room* and the position of women who choose or are forced to become mothers in twenty-first century Western society. The discussion centres around the idea of relational ethics, arguing that “the wild child—every child—must take a parent hostage in order for it to come into being” (40). This opening chapter provides a starting point for the discussion of ethics outside of existing humanist ideological frameworks and suggests that depictions of violent dependency such as that found in *Room* may signal a growing social concern with maternal roles and rights. This discussion seems particularly apt in light of current controversies surrounding women’s reproductive rights within the United States; while Morgenstern does not directly engage with these debates, her analyses suggests fruitful possibilities for future critical engagements with the impossibility of responsible parenting in a posthuman age. Nevertheless, the chapter leaves the reader wondering how posthumanist ethics in particular come to bear on this dilemma.

Chapter 2, which focuses on Cormac McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic novel *The Road*, continues the discussion of relational ethics, this time with reference to death and the demise of patriarchal authority. This chapter shifts the focus of discussion from the maternal to the paternal, reading the role of the father in *The Road* as symbolic of the role of patriarchal authority in a posthumanist society. With its focus on the extreme conditions of a post-apocalyptic world, this chapter is the one most explicitly focused on the posthuman as well as posthumanism. She argues, for example, that “the novel inscribes a distinctive ethics of abandonment and self-mourning linked via the child—the post-apocalyptic wild child—to the relinquishment of patriarchal grandiosity” (77). Her discussion addresses how the release of the child figure from patriarchal strictures as a result of the post-apocalyptic dissolution of

society in turn precipitates a re-evaluation of the patriarchal roles that posthuman scholars, such as Rosi Braidotti, have identified as central to humanist ideology.

Chapter 3 shifts the discussion to the maternal, engaging Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* and the thin line between maternal love and maternal violence that is particularly visible in the context of slavery. In analyzing *A Mercy*, Morgenstern tackles the difficult subject of wildness as it relates to the early American history of slavery, showing how the binary opposition between "wild" and "civilized" was historically codified both socially and legally as a means of justifying racial subjugation. In doing so, she suggests historical antecedents for current social and legal uncertainties: by demonstrating how this legalized "wilding" of racially Other children has robbed parents of non-violent options, Morgenstern suggests that racially motivated violence may be a generational inheritance. In this chapter, Morgenstern crystallizes the argument that has been building through the preceding chapters, that "ethics emerges . . . precisely when and where established legal and moral codes fail to comprehend and protect" (103), suggesting that posthumanist ethics emerge in the spaces where humanist moral and legal codes falter. In other words, humanist legal and moral codification of racial difference denies subjectivity and parental agency to racial Others, which in turn allows for the emergence of a "wild" or "posthuman" ethics of violence, where only violent parenting can provide the gift of subjectivity (104).

Chapter 4 extends the argument in chapter 3 even further, looking at the connections between responsibility and rights that emerge in the extreme conditions of parenting a child criminal. In this chapter, Morgenstern uses Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* to explore twenty-first century anxieties about the conflicting rights of parents and children that emerge from a growing culture of reproductive choice. The novel tells the story of a woman whose lifelong ambivalence about motherhood is eventually tested to the extreme by her teenaged son's decision to murder his classmates, teacher, father, and sister. Arguing that the novel explores ambivalence about the increasingly blurred line between the responsibilities of motherhood and the right to motherhood, Morgenstern identifies a central question to posthumanist parenting: "If I have a right *not* to be a parent, do I also have a right to be one?" (123). In other words, Morgenstern asks whether increased rights and access to

choice have a concrete impact on absolute parental responsibility. Once again, however, the thread of posthumanism becomes somewhat lost in this chapter as Morgenstern turns to psychoanalytical theory to support the argument.

Finally, chapter 5 rounds off the volume's thesis by examining questions of protection, rights, and consent as they relate to children, through a comparison of Denis Villeneuve's film *Prisoners* and Alice Monroe's short story "Miles City, Montana." This chapter returns once again to the idea of posthumanist ethics, by tracing the breakdown in "liberal humanist models of individual right and responsibility" (160). The chapter concludes the volume by reminding readers that the posthuman ethical dilemmas of the twenty-first century are uncanny echoes of those that have haunted previous generations: the questions of ethics, reproduction, and parenting are not new, and they are unlikely to go away anytime soon.

An afterword attempts to bring the disparate threads of these chapters together, reminding the reader of the connection between ideas of the wild (human/animal) child, and the murkiness of parental rights and responsibilities. Morgenstern writes that "the classically humanist (wild) child functions . . . as a way to cordon off the wild animal from the civilized, rational adult, who is also a subject of language" but "[t]he posthumanist wild child no longer functions to conceal or disavow the ethical and ontological uncertainty that haunts" the humanist subject (192). While this conceptualization of the wild child helps somewhat to bring into focus the many different perspectives on ethical parenting that the volume has covered over five chapters, the overall relationship between this idea of the posthuman wild child and the posthumanist, deconstructivist, Levinasian, and psychoanalytic framework remains murky. Overall, despite many interesting angles of exploration, the volume remains limited by the wide range of approaches it attempts to weave together.

Of the many different strands explored in this volume, one in particular is likely to be of the most interest to scholars of children's literature and culture: the exploration of changing social and political interpretations of parent-child relationships in an increasingly technological and global environment. Morgenstern's observation that the progressive blurring of the line between child and adult raises questions about parental rights, agency, and authority is in line with many different current discourses within children's literature and culture studies, from

arguments about digital media and culture for young people to considerations of embodiment and intersectionality. The volume raises a number of interesting questions for posthumanist studies as well, bringing theoretical considerations about the future of humanist politics and ideologies into the concrete realm of the family and parenting. Of particular value for readers who are interested in the application of posthumanist ideas is the discussion of the child as a symbol of the potential for uncivilized, animal, irrational wildness in every adult. These ideas appear in the work of Zoe Jaques, Victoria Flanagan, and others, and this volume offers a fresh perspective by turning attention toward perceptions of parenting as well as childhood.

In spite of its limitations, *Wild Child* remains a valuable and intriguing contribution to current discourses surrounding posthuman and posthumanist representations of childhood. This is the only volume currently available which addresses the representation not only of children but also of parents and parenting, thereby stepping away from traditional examinations of the child in isolation. In fact, the focus of this volume on texts specifically intended for adult readers offers fresh insights into the analysis of representations of childhood more generally. By reading these representations as symptomatic of shifting perceptions of the child-parent relationship in a global, digital, technological context, the volume extends these discourses in an interesting new direction and offers much food for thought.

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