Book Review

Christina Bieber Lake, *Prophets of the Posthuman: American Fiction, Biotechnology, and the Ethics of Personhood* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), xix + 263 pp. $38.00

Reviewed by Nils Borquist

Imagination Innovation or Violation?

With *Prophets of the Posthuman*, Christina Bieber Lake wishes readers to consider the possibility that people's intelligence should not be glorified as their saving grace but rather their capacity and willingness to love and be loved. Whereas the gifts treasured by society for the benefit of humanity often emerge from technological advancements, the elements that convened to cultivate civilization frequently get dismissed as relics of primitive man. Stories, myths, and religions, as the foundations of inspiration and interconnectivity, are judged as insignificant compared to possibilities of longer lives, pharmaceutical saviors, and joy delivered by social media stars. With such a contemporary wealth of digital life enhancers and vicarious living through the lens of another, who needs visionary literature, artistic invention, or God? Lake provides a blunt reply: To discover the good life, we all do.

The book avoids completely damning technology, instead pointing out the ill-advised worship of all things computerized. Through weaving a narrative wherein Lake braids the threads of fear of the inevitability of death, nefarious goals and outcomes of technological enhancement, ethical challenges, the potential of liberal arts, and the power of God, a clear picture materializes: Pixels forming a yellow thumb's up, and the checking of a "like" box replace man's true happiness and respect for his neighbor and himself. The ideas of being careful, thoughtful, and dedicated to the self, the other, and God burn on the altar of recklessness, selfishness, and the swiping from one face to the next to appease the spirits of social acceptance and conformity. Additionally, Lake chose several works of literature as the tools utilized to construct her messages, the primary focus being the power of story to incur a greater understanding of life's complexities, confusions, and ecstasies.

Lake immediately links the underlying premise of man's infatuation with death—especially his own—with technological pursuits. As "the inevitability of death has always shaped human psychology, philosophy, religion, and the arts," including technological advancements is no surprise (xii). However, the response, the legitimately believed notion that ultimately death can and will be conquered by

the ingenuity and hard work of humanity, shocks the practical portion of the mind. Within this idea lies the reality that the quest for greater longevity is merely a toll booth on the highway to the desire for infinite life. Scientists appear quite mad at times, and they can embody this wish to overtake death. Humanity often creates a version of itself in the form of a machine to defy nature and God. Lake cites Aylmer from Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birthmark" as a prime example of the genius capable of manipulating human biology while also failing to consider all potential outcomes; this is the person who "dedicates his science to overcoming" humankind's most significant problems, "human finitude and death," but also destroys beauty and life in the maniacal chase (49). As Aylmer discovers, two major consequences emerge from such ventures: death eventually becomes something that loses significance literally and symbolically for society, and humanity fails, usually dramatically and painfully.

Furthermore, a supplemental realization points to the decline of religion in society, especially Christianity. Perhaps the rejection of God derives from the introductory story involving people in the Bible, the birth and fall of Adam and Eve. This opening sequence highlights the fact that regardless of choices and decisions, each human being indulges in selfishness. Hence, death remains inevitable—God will simply not allow immortality for the creature intent on inflicting moral and physical damage to itself and others. Sinful humanity does not accept this recourse, so it returns to the drawing board, searching for another solution.

With humans persistently turning to technology to overcome perceived shortcomings, such as dying or cosmetic discomfort, Lake considers the numerous potential true overall goals of apparent advancement, some shocking, some scary, and all worrisome. Her first hypothesis, which essentially encapsulates all others, concerns the dream of absolute control over life in all facets. The end-all and be-all of proving human authority becomes verifiable through the recognizable fingerprint of humanity on all existence. If we can control and manipulate nature, what more can be done to prove to present and future humanity, nature itself, or even God that we are the pinnacle of both the physical and metaphysical realms?

Another possibility deals with creating a perfect society, the utopian dream. With so many progressive and productive inventions, and with the "fact" that "nearly all enhancement technologies...are viewed as quick and painless routes to healthy self-esteem" and tools for easing all difficulties for society, what should stop us from accepting widespread digitalization of all components of life? (69). Nothing, it would seem. However, a question does arise in this community—what is a perfect society without ideal humans to inhabit it? Therein lies the third aspect—engineering human perfection. "We have in contemporary America … a society of individuals who think that their bodies are essentially plastic, who think of their lives as a project, who look to technology to solve their problems," writes Lake (18). Weakness

abounds in every single human as well as every human group, or, to be thorough, in humanity in its totality. Once the technology exists that eliminates such weaknesses by inserting a microchip into a brain or via a simple procedure, the obvious course of action for people young and old alike (though advanced age will likely be one of the ultimate "weaknesses" to eradicate) is to accept the glorious changes with no questions asked.

Next, and perhaps most alarming, many inventive creators, those who believe humanity produced God rather than the other way around, wish to continue this process of pushing an explicit evolutionary agenda, fashioning the next step in intelligent development. The willingness to "play God" and disregard future implications seems quite acceptable to many today. Lake points out that the mindset of superiority residing in the minds of many has grown to be considered tolerable and absolutely reasonable. A side effect of this loss of faith emerges in the isolation of many people, especially the young. The comfort and connections from fellowship that once alleviated possible anxiety and loneliness have been replaced by millions of kids and adults sitting alone in the dark in front of one screen or another, playing games, indulging in base gratifications, or wasting precious moments.

The likeliest reason may be the most deplorable: Supreme financial gain. Money, of course, drives innovation, perhaps more than any other reason, save power, though the two are likely neck-and-neck down the home stretch. Of course, the effect of this race involves creators putting blinders on their faces and shutting out the negatives, such as diminishing the value of society. Citing theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, Lake writes that "if we view the world as being under the dominion of science, then science and technology 'will overpower and suffocate the forces of love within the world' because everything in the world will come to be viewed 'solely in terms of power or profit-margin'" and everything else will be categorized as "useless" and require "wiping out" (130). One could make a convincing argument, which Lake provides, that included in this "everything else" group will be civilizations around the planet, biological entities and natural formations alike.

Lastly, and most frighteningly, the attitude that overcoming humankind's fallibility and fragility will never occur and is, thus, a waste of effort to attempt to alter results in the genocidal notion that ridding the world of humans and replacing them with a robotic version capable of infinitude in life, software upgrades, and without emotions, sympathy, and weakness should be the ultimate goal. Unfortunately, a key factor is either forgotten or entirely missed for so many brilliant minds: Science without human imagination and criticism, without the infusion of personhood and morality, is doomed to dehumanize. As Lake contends, with such inevitable dehumanization, foundational ethics disintegrate as well, and with no ethics, society crumbles into a formless, structureless, and, ultimately, lifeless void.

Lake offers a clear explanation regarding the necessity of ethics as a connecting aspect of people within a community and even within the larger global community: "Ethics requires a definition of 'persons' that insists on persons as wholes that exist within, and depend on, society as a whole, not merely as materially independent 'individuals'" (4). While this determination may appear quite obvious, the fact that in today's vernacular, a phrase such as "individual truth" (or, more explicitly, people believing that they have legitimate personal truths that override societal ethics) may be heard multiple times per day with tones of seriousness. Such statements certainly display a lack of general understanding of responsibility to the other and the structures of rules, expectations, and pleasantries. What Lake discusses that should cause distress for thoughtful citizens concerns the reality that architects of developing technologies, as well as the technologies themselves, exclude ethical considerations or how the technologies may negatively affect human progress and interactions at the person-to-person level, especially concerning young people. Once marketers, investors, and corporations get involved, they tend to tell consumers about the greatness of products and that these products will be the most beneficial items ever purchased. Lake expresses surprise at the blind willingness to accept such propaganda from strangers whose interests clearly focus wholly upon financial gain.

Submission arises as a keyword for Lake midway through the text, which she masterfully employs explicitly and connotatively. Citizens who love neighbors, care for the community, and trust in God must submit themselves to an extent for the betterment of others and their own lives. Instead, consumers today are "rewarded" for submitting to the demands of commercialism and sacrificing scrutiny for the sake of lining up to buy the newest iPhone. The tension created by a lack of understanding of one's own emotional capacity causes confusion. The contentment that results from holding a door open for a fellow human or binge-watching an exciting series instead of facing the world feels eerily similar. How does one discern what is "right" from what is utterly meaningless? Lake states that a major problem in this struggle results from the desire "to embrace and promote quick fixes and easy enhancements," an issue that entices scientists "to think of individuals as patients who need their problems to be solved rather than as persons who need to be loved and cared for" (133). The message delivered and adopted by many disregards building long-term connections and even appropriate cultural habits wherein the promotion of species relies on kindness instead of convincing consumers that their wishes deserve to be fulfilled because their importance is so often under-appreciated or even neglected altogether. Therefore, the care that should be applied outward from the person ends up getting redirected inward. Unfortunately, acts performed for the other are replaced by "things," and the individual loses sight of his or her role in a functional community. Lake, citing the venerable C.S. Lewis, provides a lovely and haunting summation: "The goal of modern science applied through technique is to

'subdue reality to the wishes of men'" (153). In this light, reality becomes one of "my truth" being thrust to the fore of prominence. However, when millions of people place themselves first, what happens to ethics or care for the neighbor or, generally speaking, the good life? Quite simply, it suffers. Thankfully, Lake does not solely point out the downward trajectory of the human spirit and the human community, instead reiterating that the good life primarily comes as a result of sharing one's love with others. She also gives the solution for brightening societal gloom, pointing us to the wisdom contained in texts found in libraries and on the shelves in homes.

Countering the demands for self-sacrifice and conformity that constantly inundates citizens' senses is difficult, and understandably so. Heeding the words of those whom Lake deems prophets, artists, and theologians gives us direction and instructions for navigating life's difficulties, primarily through literary invention and a relationship with God. The prophets seek to guide rather than condemn, which means destroying technology is not the goal, but rather, "what unites them is their desire to oppose the dominant consciousness of an advanced technological society" (12). Having wheels on a car to travel across the country produces efficiency and safety, which is good; conversely, believing that because I own a car, I should never walk again or, when driving, my destination should be regarded by all other drivers as the most important, appears delusional. The superficiality of such notions tears us away from being a part of the greater society. Fortunately, art shows "the way to a richer reality," as does belief and trust in God (21). Revelation surfaces as a standard and imperative element found in art and faith. The power of revelatory experiences overwhelms and satisfies as secrets cease to be entirely hidden and complexities become understood. Ways to live harmoniously, both within the self and within community, are clarified via the ancient connecting tools that are stories encouraging "people to think about the purpose of human life" (111). The vehicle story utilizes for instruction remains, as through time, language. Words possess power and value, and meaningful interactions occur only via thoughtful language employment. Perhaps, as Lake stresses, the devaluation and bastardization of language today have damaged the arts and religious literature above all else, and leaders of technological advancement have been all too happy to join in the fray, pulling people away from deeper understandings to keep them on the level of superficiality. Art and faith fight through the attack by "integrating the problems of experience and the ordering of experience" (184). Essentially, we are helped to make sense of our existence through the word and the Word. What, then, is the predominant message regarding our lives on earth, considering literature, music, or the Logos? Live a life of grace.

Simply put, "the cost of the truly good life is sacrificial love" (179). Grace is the key. In the end, Lake delivers a beautiful and impactful message: "The way to return to being human is not to win the scientific debate…. It is instead to return...

to an ancient idea with the power to encourage humanity to be humane: that human existence...is personal. And where persons are concerned, love is always the highest and best choice" (187). While nice and useful in minimal quantities, technology gives us no true revelation. Art, community, and God—these show us how to live with grace, love, and togetherness. We connect via story, not through social media; we love through laughter and affection, not through heart emojis and likes; we find grace in the faces of our neighbors, not on the screens of our phones. Through the decades, prophets have shown the way—we need only look in the eyes of our fellow human beings, listen to their voices and their stories, learn to practice forgiveness and develop faith in God to reach true happiness and a life of fulfillment.

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