“Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you…”

“Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,” [Rabbit] asked, “or bit by bit?”

“It doesn't happen all at once,” said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby…”

The Rabbit sighed … He wished that he could become it without these uncomfortable things happening to him.

(Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit*)

The becoming of the velveteen rabbit is what the Skin Horse calls “nursery magic,” and it is a slow, awkward, errant, abrasive developmental process. To become animated in this way is to suffer wear and tear, entailing the loss of features as much as the acquisition of new ones. Becoming is a kind of susceptibility, interacting with others and forging strong attachments.

If the toy is an objective correlative of the boy, then the child’s ontogeny will be a similarly risky, hesitant, heteronomous realization of a form of life. That sort of nursery magic exemplifies what I tried to describe in *Becoming Human: The Matter of the Medieval Child* which takes up the kinked, crossed lines of early development from within a dense matrix, a large topic that exercised medieval writers and practitioners even when they may otherwise have held fast to anthropocentric and teleological notions of humanness. For medieval writers preoccupied with the formation of the child (as with many other kinds of material
causation or assemblage), you have to reckon with a warped, volatile, precarious if also precious moment of creaturely life when things are *barely themselves* (unformed, anonymous, prostrate, speechless). Those matters posed urgent problems for parents, midwives, legal thinkers, and pastoral writers who were vexed by the vulnerability and incremental unfolding of early formation. Emerging from fluid beginnings, the child is that thing which is as yet to be evoked from within a messy materiality, embodying a proto-human condition that resists philosophical bootstrapping. Fetal and infantile modes have long troubled the human concept even as they propagate humans, my argument ran, occasionally precipitating a category crisis then that can resonate even now.

Of course it depends where you look.

How did medieval medicine, for example, cope with the issue?

Embryology derived from ancient Greek authorities (i.e., Hippocrates and Aristotle), transmitted in Arab sciences and eventually translated into Latin and the European vernaculars, shows one way in theory. There was a recognition that so many external factors are determinative as to suggest becoming is a touch-and-go spatiotemporal process with many contingent outcomes.

And it is in some of that discourse – speaking, as Albertus Magnus put it rather pejoratively, “as the physicians” (*On the Animals*) – that a sophisticated vocabulary developed for dealing with un/becoming child. Gestation and growth proved deep reserves of thought about what we would call genetic and non-genetic heritability. The matter of the child produced some of the most curious notions of human exteriority and exposure and manifold deformation. Sources – learned and lewed – are eloquent about what it takes to sustain a life, dwelling on a creaturely incipience consisting of several phase transitions and multiscalar extrapolations.
Five topics are worth lingering over:

1. Delayed Animation In an age without ultrasonography the issue was especially acute: one could not be sure when life started. The moment at which the embryo becomes vivified was not settled. The Middle English *De Spermate* has a section on how seminal spirit imparts an animating principle, the “animacioun or soulying of the body,” but the text is at a loss to explain the mystery, and as ever, the timing is uncertain. Albertus Magnus, in his massive thirteenth-century work on animals, has a confused account of animation. Rather than pointing to a single efficient vehicle with a reliable driver on the road to completion (i.e., entelechy or seminal reasons), he insists on a concatenating series: a slow-moving, gradualist, accident-prone growth narrative.

2. Epigenesis, or Multidimensional Change One of the most lasting embryological concepts, epigenetic transmission, denotes everything else -- besides some genetic code -- required for an embryo to thrive in situated environments. Giles of Rome’s *De formatione corporis humani in utero* gives ten causes that include quality and quantity of sperm, the location of the fetus, the complexion of the menstruum, seasons and winds, and the influence of planets. Different lists of incorporealizing elements can be found elsewhere, and include...

3. Geohumoralism … other external events and elements, as epigenetic change suggests, which make a difference. Geohumoral theory was the notion that the constituent bodily elements -- viz., the four humours -- were disposed according to geographical region, climate, astral influence, diet and so forth.

4. Plural species In the widespread Aristotelian view of plurality, this describes the process of moving through multiple subspeciation. So “the embryo,” as we learn from a variety of texts, “lives the life of a plant, then the life of an animal,
and afterwards the life of a human being.” Fetal existence, traced in successive vegetal and animal forms, becomes a virtual zoo, and that leads to a fifth topic …

5. Virtuality … employed in specialized senses by medieval scholars and poets to describe scenes of springtime efflorescence, planetary influence, and animal generation. In embryology the “virtue informatif” is that which enables matter to attain passing states of becoming without being exactly this or that complete thing. A kind of propulsive force or phase rather than a single state, the virtual life of the embryo captures an acute sense of immanence and intensive change, and it has a wider resonance in the late medieval period, featuring in accounts of animal reproduction, alchemical processes, and natural philosophy.

What soon emerges from a range of evidence, I have tried to show in a less schematic way in the book, is a keen sense of the liabilities and possibilities of ontogeny, offering a longer historical view on the category of the human and themes of human separatism and exceptionalism that have preoccupied posthumansim and disability, transgender, and queer theory among others. And they are topics that get rearticulated elsewhere, in stories of volatile childish bodies – for example, in Gower’s Iphis and Ianthe, in the romance of Sir Gowther, in some Infancy of Christ narratives. Julia Couch, Angela Florschuetz, Jacqueline Tasioulas, Diane Watt, and Jeffrey Cohen offer expert treatments.

A couple things remain, for me, key methodological features of this inquiry:

Becoming Abstracted

At times it has felt very much like a project about the critical role of abstraction. The tricky part was to identify human matter without presupposing the category that my analysis was meant to trouble. How to speak the of “human” when the term is evidently so universalist and under-specified? But what if the “human” is a
provisional organizing principle unraveling to the extent that any concept does on close inspection? I think the human can be an indispensible heuristic – traversing rather than eclipsing differences. A strategic abstraction can be a useful fiction: like those we employ to designate periods, places, objects of study – they can animate problems and articulate a proposed set of connections. As Anna Tsing urges, “to use category names should be a commitment to tracing the assemblages in which these categories gain a momentary hold” (The Mushroom at the End of the World, p. 29)

On this reading, to abstract is not automatically to idealize. It brings something into the world much as does the virtual embodiment of the child. That way of putting things leads to the further thought that abstraction is not just conceptual, either. It’s corporeal. Following Brian Massumi for whom operations of abstraction produce relations, I see the proto-human embryo and infant as that which is becoming abstracted concretely within specific historical conditions.

**Becoming Historical**

Which leads to the issue I take to be hovering over this roundtable: why focus on these historical conditions? What if anything could medieval studies do that cannot be better handled by more recent developments in posthumanist though?

Well, for one, it seems we have inherited complex perceptions of embodiment and more-than-human epigenesis from a disavowed past where things were supposed to be cleaner and simpler. But they were messy. There is value in returning to medieval materialities insofar as, in the eloquent words of Patricia Ingham: “The signifiers shift . . . but the dilemma they circle repeats” (The Medieval New, p. 26).
More specifically, proto-human development reveals that we do not need to wait for modernity to check our anthropocentrism, or retrospectively liberate us from whatever is attributed to a benighted Middle Ages. The medieval child can be as queer, uncouth, or improper as anything found in Katherine Bond Stockton’s or Africa Taylor’s wonderful work on the strangeness of the modern child.

Finally, the non-modern matter of the child may exhibit a temporality that returns us to moments of radical untimeliness. A child is of course historically instantiated, produced from within a specific time and place, and yet also precedes and exceeds the limits of mere human reproductivity. This errant matter has us recall that history is made and remade at every turn, and that in the process of gestation, the medieval is not yet history. It had futures unknown in advance, engendering history out of a permutable materiality. Becoming takes us back behind or before whenever it is that “history” is determined as “past.”