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Comprehensive Exams, Topic II – Spring 2025

Beyond "Man": Remapping the (Western) Human/Animal

Introduction

Who gets to be "human," and under what circumstances? This essay traces an intellectual history of critical redress against (post-)Enlightenment claims to and theories of liberal humanism, wherein the human figures as a naturalized, universal (Eurocentric, white, rational, etc.) subject hierarchically distinct from other (in/subhuman, animal, plant, etc.) forms of being. In such contexts, the category of the human—essential to Western philosophical and scientific constructions of subject/objecthood—is made dialectically functional through the ontological exclusion and omission of *that which is not human*; in the long history of European imperialism and settler colonialism, these exclusions often materialize in violent processes of dehumanization (consummated through chattel slavery, colonial dispossession/resource extraction, genocide) carried out against marginalized communities. Liberal humanism and its epistemic vestiges thus reveal themselves to constitute modernity's hegemonic ethnoclass of the Western bourgeois subject: "Man," which, as Sylvia Wynter has written, "overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself" (2003). If this overrepresentation of Man has foreclosed humanism's emancipatory ideal—"a true humanism […] made to the measure of the world," writes Aimé Césaire ([1972] 2000, 73)—then the authors/works this essay attends to seek to provide ways of imagining and realizing the human anew, outside of and beyond Enlightenment formulations and modernity's current epistemological regime.

While the effects of Man's dominance continue to be felt on a global scale (albeit differently in different ecologies/geopolitical contexts), this essay offers one particular genealogy of thought anchored in the Black radical tradition, largely emergent from the (ever-present) aftershocks of Euro-American imperialism and the transatlantic slave trade. More specifically, I begin by locating the foundations of much contemporary retheorization of the (post/)human in strains of Black feminist theory and Caribbean anticolonial critique, represented by (among others) writers such as Sylvia Wynter, Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Aimé Césaire, Franz Fanon, and Édouard Glissant. This archive then provides the terrain for a discussion of recent interventions that take critiques of the human as a starting point for dislodging the (colonial) anthropocentrism(s) that weigh on (and often continue to dwell within) academic considerations of the *more-than-human*. Though the past few decades have witnessed a proliferation of discourses questioning the centrality of the human in Western academic scholarship (the "nonhuman"/"posthuman"/ "animal" turns, object-oriented ontologies, new materialisms, the environmental humanities, "The Anthropocene"), much of this critical theorizing has from its outset neglected to contend with the manner in which the exigencies of race and coloniality have anticipated and shaped discourses governing the nonhuman (Jackson 2013). This essay will provide an overview of work that has sought to address such oversights, giving attention to (1) decolonial/Black feminist critiques of posthumanist discourses and their intellectual/institutional demands to move *beyond* the human;

(2) theories of animality and (multi-)species studies that offer correctives to animal/multispecies studies' relative evacuation of race/coloniality in figuring "the animal" in contradistinction the "the human"; (3) efforts to rethink questions of biopolitics as they appear in Western critical/continental thought; and (4) interventions against implicit claims to a universal humanity (i.e. *Anthropos*) in accounts/conceptualizations of the Anthropocene, where reframings of the human to planetary or geological registers risk both ignoring how the causes/effects of climate change are unevenly distributed as well as masking a politics of "post-racial" becoming through Anthropocentric speciation (Yusoff and Thomas 2018).

Foundations: Black Feminist Theory and Caribbean Anticolonial Critique

While correctives to the coloniality of humanism since its installment in Eurocentric epistemologies of subjecthood have taken many forms and spring from a variety of critical traditions that crisscross hemispheric boundaries, among the most influential intellectual lineages that has found purchase in Western academic theorizations of the (post/)human subject emerges out of black studies, particularly as it has been imagined both in its institutional formalization in the American university ecosystem from the 1960s as well as in its more historical genealogies grounded in abolitionist movements of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries. Central to critiques of Enlightenment rhetorical claims to the universality of "freedom" under a rubric of generalized (white) "humanity" are moves that throw into relief how liberal humanism, far from its professed ideals, has been foundational to the production and preservation of hierarchical distinctions between humans (Weheliye 2014, 3) and "presumes particular forms of embodiment and excludes or marginalizes others" (Hartman 1997, 122). Theorizations of blackness and black-being-in-the-world have, in part, looked to chart alternative modes of existence both amidst and in resistance to/in excess of (post-)Enlightenment humanisms, from W.E.B. DuBois' conceptualizations of double-consciousness (1903) and Franz Fanon's epidermal schemata ([1952] 1967) to renderings of blackness that take it to index radical, nonnormative subjectivities (Hartman 2019; Henry 2020; Moten 2003, 2016) or as participating in counterhegemonic forms of "communistic materialism" (Césaire [1972] 2000, 55).

Black feminist thought has been particularly attuned to questions surrounding the construction of modern humanity, as many of its practitioners look to suture earlier (often masculinist) traditions of black radicalism and anticolonial critique to modes of inquiry and aesthetic practice that remain sensitive to the ways in which "black women's bodies are already colonized" (Hammonds 1997, 171) under patriarchal taboos that efface "not only a gender but a sexual discourse, unmediated [but not external to] the question of racism" (Giddings 1992, 442). Thus, black feminist theorizations of the gendered and racial processes that undergird the commodification or "fungibility" of black life (Hartman 1997) and the inhuman "categorical mistakes" of enslavement in its severing of "body" from "flesh" (Spillers 2003, 20) materialize what Édouard Glissant has referred to an "aesthetics of rupture and connection" (1997, 151) in their refusals to acquiesce to what Sylvia Wynter, Walter Mignolo, Aníbal Quijano, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, and others have called the coloniality of being and its attendant (onto-epistemic) demands. In this way, as Alexander Weheliye suggests, black feminist thought and black studies writ large "illuminates the essential role that racializing assemblages play in the

construction of modern selfhood," and as a result "advocates the radical reconstruction and decolonization of what it means to be human" (Weheliye 2014, 4). Perhaps unsurprisingly given this essay's title, Wynter's work in particular has been key to such reconstructions, and has proved indispensable for a vast array of thinkers endeavoring to dislodge the hegemony of the human—as both a physiologically (bios) and narratively (logos) constituted being (Wynter 1995, 35)—and its overrepresentation to Man as a biocentric genre of the human that reifies Western bourgeois tenets in its dominant epistemologies (Wynter and McKittrick 2015, 10). In dialogue with thinkers like DuBois, Fanon, Césaire, Glissant, Mignolo, Quijano, C.L.R. James, and Elsa Goveia (to name just a few), and across a capaciously synthetic body of theoretical work, Wynter imagines, through a "gaze from below" (Wynter 1984), a project of *counterhumanism*—one that Katherine McKittrick (invoking Césaire) contends is "now ecumenically 'made to the measure of the world'" (Wynter and McKittrick 2015, 11; Césaire [1972] 2000, 73).

Past(?) the Post(?)human

If projects like counterhumanism seek to push back against (and thus expose) the epistemological structures naturalized within Eurocentric notions of the human, they have also been deployed in the service of tracing how these naturalizations have inflected academic-theoretical imperatives to move *past* (and thus discard, or somehow transcend) the human as an operative category of analysis. As Weheliye notes, for example, "much post-1960s critical theorizing either assumes that black subjects have been fully assimilated into the human qua Man or continues to relegate the thought of nonwhite subjects to the ground of ethnographic specificity," thus clouding the ways in which mobilizations of the "posthuman" and its analogues remain tethered to (and as a result, hampered by) the unmarked whiteness/coloniality that resides within appeals to a generalizable humanity (Weheliye 2014, 11). As a result, the implicit assumption made by many post- and anti-humanist discourses that all people inhabit and experience the (contentious and highly exclusionary) category of the human similarly or equally render such discourses unable to conceptualize, for example, how "the transubstantiation of the captive into the volitional subject, chattel into proprietor, and the circumscribed body of blackness into the disembodied and abstract universal seems improbable, if not impossible" (Hartman, 1997, 123, cited in Weheliye 2014, 11). Paradoxically then, the urgency to upend the human in favor of less anthropocentric modes of analysis that animated many of the foundational premises of early posthumanism, affect theory, animal studies, and similar nonhuman "turns" in Western academic critical theory functioned instead to reify the human in its (presumed) absence, thus preserving a conceptualization of the human (here, again, overrepresented as something like Man) that could be feasibly exhausted as an ontological category. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson has noted that the posthumanist impulse to move "beyond" the human is often "issued in a manner that suggests that this call is without location, and therefore with the appearance of incognizance regarding its situated claims and internal limits, returns us to a Eurocentric transcendentalism long challenged" (Jackson 2015, 215). It is often on such grounds that many have critiqued, for example, the seeming political inertness of certain strains of new materialist or object-oriented philosophy (Thorne 2012; Wolfendale 2014).

In the context of Western academic spaces (like the graduate seminar, for example), Tiffany Lethabo King has written that Black and Native scholars often are expected to perform a mastery of posthumanist/nonrepresentational theory in the face of critiques that their work relies on formations of human identity or subjecthood, and, as a result, fail to move beyond "the human" in their analyses (King 2017). Revealing the "hostilities, assumptions, and misrecognitions" that lurk beneath such demands, King, in conversation with what she terms the "postures of refusal" assumed by many Native/Indigenous scholars, illuminates how Black and Native people are often "rendered structuralist (or modernist or dead) as white self-actualizing subjects disguise themselves as rhizomatic movements that transcend representation and the human" (King 2017, 177). Ultimately, King asserts that, rather than wading through ill-conceived claims to identitarian (and thus "humanist") theory, "practices of Native refusal and decolonization and Black 'skepticism/pessimism' and abolition argue that the U.S. police state can no longer determine the conditions of possibility for being considered human" (King 2017, 180).

Jodi Byrd, similarly, mounts a critique of poststructuralist theory's reliance on configurations of the "rhizome" in her book *Transit of Empire*, where she reads the presence of a "colonial nostalgia" in Deleuze and Guattari's treatment of the "vanishing Indian" in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Byrd 2011). This attention to the "politics and conditions of emergence" (Rowley 2013) of Deleuzoguattarian-inflected posthumanist/poststructuralist theory is similarly taken up by Linda Tuhiwai Smith in her account of the colonial spatial imaginings present in the "line of flight" concept, where she suggests that "there is a very specific spatial vocabulary of colonialism which can be assembled around three concepts: (1) the line, (2) the center, and (3) the outside"—a spatiality similarly reflected in discussions of "territorialization" (Smith 1999, 52-53). Amber Jamilla Musser, responding to queer (affect) theory's habitual tendencies toward negative futurity (Edelman 2004) and masochism (Bersani 1986), has also looked to "reinvigorate […] other ways of reading masochism, particularly because reading it as exceptional reifies norms of whiteness and masculinity and suppresses other modes of reading power, agency, and experience" (Musser 2014, 14; see also Smith 2010). Others in Black and Native studies have also found it suspicious that many (de-/post-)ontological "interventions" made by various theoretical posthumanisms seem to find their conceptual antecedents in earlier decolonial philosophies and Indigenous cosmologies, usually without attribution of any kind. Jackson, for example, remarks that "perhaps this foresight on the part of decolonial theory is rather unsurprising considering that exigencies of race have crucially anticipated and shaped discourses governing the non-human (animal, technology, object, and plant)" (Jackson, 2013, 681). Indigenous (Red River Métis, Otipemisiwak) feminist scholar Zoe Todd, recounting a lecture given by Bruno Latour she attended, laments Latour's neglect of the robustly theorized Inuit concept of *Sila*—as "the breath that circulates into and out of every living thing," both referring to climate and a life force (Qitsualik 1998)—in his account of Gaia and climate politics (Todd 2016). Echoing a long tradition of calls to decolonize academic knowledge production and its conditions of possibility—what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro has referred to as the "permanent decolonization of thought" ([2009] 2014)—Todd's broader concerns over the refusal of Western theory/philosophy/academia to credit Indigenous philosophies and forms of knowledge in their musings on ontology and the "more-than-human" (see also Todd 2015a, 2015b; Deloria 2001; Alfred and Corntassel 2005; Simpson 2007; Tuck 2010; Sundberg 2013; Watts 2013; Tuck and Yang 2014; Hunt 2014) caution against easy retreats to "canonical"

theory, and highlight the urgency of resisting (and redressing) the occlusion of "the human" in the theoretical pursuit of the "posthuman."

Animality and Species Discourse

In tandem with critiques like those described above, many theorists in recent years have sought to scrutinize constructions of "animality" or "the animal" as a category of being necessarily held in opposition to something like "the human." Following claims (such as Wynter's) that the human (as Man) has been mobilized in a way that overdetermines (and thus forecloses) the plurality of genres contained under its purview—for example, in relying on the biocentric scientism(s) often indexed in grand appeals to "species"—a sizeable body of work has emerged over the past two decades that has set its sights on dismantling the colonially inherited onto-epistemic divide between human and (nonhuman) animal. However, while early work in animal studies and would recognize the inextricability of dominant notions of animality from various formations of human difference (Adams 1991; Chaudhuri 2003; Haraway 2003; Derrida 2008; Wolfe 2010; etc.), many accounts would often play out via under-theorized analyses of power or ill-formed, generalized comparisons of Man's domination of other animals to specific historical examples of human genocide or enslavement (Spiegel 1988; Wright 2011; Pergadia 2018, 289-90; Weheliye 2014, 10). Mainstream animal liberation movements, for example, central to work in critical animal studies, tend to unwittingly reproduce the fallacies of liberal humanism through recourse to the language of "rights," thus reifying constrictive definitions of political subjecthood (Almiron, Cole, and Freeman 2016; Nocella II and George 2022; Sorenson 2014; Taylor and Twine 2014; cf. Regan 1986, Singer [1975] 2002).

Against simple understandings of anthropocentrism that position the human-animal distinction as prior (yet somehow external) to questions of race and coloniality, scholars like Jackson (2013, 2020), Joshua Bennett (2020), Lindgren Johnson (2018), Clare Jean Kim (2015), Mel Y. Chen (2012), Megan Glick (2018), Neel Ahuja (2009, 2016, 2021), Kadji Amin (2020), Samantha Pergadia (2018, 2020), Aph Ko (2019), Evan Mwangi (2019), Kalpana Rahita Seshadri (2012), Colleen Boggs (2013), and others have looked to account for the various entanglements between the construction of "the human" and "the animal" as respectively racialized categories. Jackson and Bennett, for example—reading the literary work of Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Jesmyn Ward, Haydn White, Nalo Hopkinson, Audre Lorde, and Octavia Butler, the art of Wangechi Mutu and Ezrom Legae, and the oratory of Frederick Douglass—have cautioned against uncritical celebrations of ontological slippage between human and animal, identifying in the Western human-animal distinction a plasticizing tendency (often reproduced in multispecies and posthumanist scholarship) to posit "the animal" as "one but not the only form that blackness is thought to encompass" (Jackson 2020, 3; Bennett 2020). Plasticity then, for Jackson, represents a "mode of transmorgrification whereby the fleshy being of blackness is experimented with as if it were infinitely malleable lexical and biological matter, such that blackness is produced as sub/super/human at once, a form where form shall not hold" (Jackson 2020, 3). Amin has remarked on the functions of plasticity in a slightly different register, arguing from the vantages of trans* studies that that the history of gland xenotransplantation "generated rather than troubled the ontobiological concepts of sexual, racial, and species difference," and thus

informed "biopolitical struggles over the resources of life, revitalization, and living tissue, as well as over which (racialized) living organisms count as "human" lives to be enhanced and which do not (Amin 2020, 49). Glick and Ahuja have also similarly called attention to "the conflation of race and species" in animal studies, asserting that such conflations "effectively work to devalue minoritized positions" (Ahuja 2009; Glick 2018). Collectively, such work argues that a central task for animal studies, then, is to "imagine a humanity built upon a ground that does expunge 'the animal'" (Pergadia 2020, 420).

Rethinking the Biopolitical

Nearly all of the work discussed here is deeply invested in questions of biopolitics, of course, but it is worth briefly mentioning a few key figures that have explicitly taken up the reformulation of biopolitical discourse and its theoretical genealogies in Western thought, especially as it has been thought through the work of Michel Foucault. Among the most widely influential reworkings of Foucauldian biopolitics has been Achille Mbembe's "necropolitics," which extends Foucault's biopolitics (as the "calculated management of life" by the state that wields the "power to expose a whole population to death")—alongside the *thanatopolitics* of Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito—into a decolonial register (à la Fanon) in order to account for the ways that the contemporary "death-worlds" inaugurated and maintained by the neoliberal imperialist state blur the line "between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom" (Mbembe 2003, 40). Jasbir Puar has suggested that necropolitics thus "makes its presence known at the limits and through the excess of [biopolitics], while [biopolitics] masks the multiplicity of its relationships to death and killing in order to enable the proliferation of [necropolitics]" (Puar 2007, 35). Thus, necropolitics, as a way of accounting for "contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death," gestures towards the ways in which bodies are often forced to remain in a state between life and death, where managed precarity by the state orders their conditions of existence (Mbembe 2019). Mbembe's work has since been picked up by a vast array of political theorists who grapple with questions of the state's role in death-making (e.g. Weizman 2011). Especially germane to the intellectual terrains this essay has been concerned with is Alexander Weheliye (2014), who—in dialogue with Mbembe necropolitics, Orlando Patterson's social death (1982), and biopolitical conceptions of "bare life" (Foucault, Agamben)—thinks through the place of racializing assemblages within the domain of modern politics from the perspective of Black feminist theorizations of "flesh" (Spillers) and the category of the human (Wynter). Complicating easy distinctions between life and death, such work also resonates with critiques in Indigenous studies that take to task Western metaphysics' biases, often echoed in multi-/interspecies studies, against that which is not taken to be "living" (Deloria 2001; TallBear 2017).

Conclusion: Geologies and Geo-logics (or, *Whose* Anthropocene?)

> So we are here in the weather, here in the singularity.
>
> ——Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake*

I build my language with rocks.

——Édouard Glissant, *Poetic Intention*

Just as the human (as-Man, as-biocentric-subject) masquerades as the dominant mode of subjectivity in our neo/liberal times (Povinelli 2016), the totalizing force of "The Anthropocene" as it presides over our contemporary ecological moment in discourses of environment and species life risks eliding all humans into an unmarked *Anthropos*, where humanity writ large is called upon to accept culpability for the ongoing catastrophes of climate and species extinction. Subsequent revisions to Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer's (2000) original diagnosis of a new geologic period marked by Man's entry into the mineral-fossil record have attempted to contend with this elision, and have generated a proliferation of theoretical neologisms that attempt to do justice to its root causes: capitalism, imperialism, colonialism, industrialization (Moore 2016). The *Agnotocene*, for example, foregrounds the willful "production of zones of ignorance" involved in our crisis' manufacture (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016); the *Anglocene* gestures towards the powers of empire that have been responsible for the majority of the world's carbon emissions (Ibid.); the *Chthulucene* asks for alliance-building and attunement to relationality among the "diverse earthwide tentacular powers and forces" (Haraway 2016, 101); and the *Plantationocene* recalibrates the *Capitalocene's* metaphor of the factory-as-ordering-relation to the horrifying death-work of the slave plantation (Tsing 2016, 4), in addition to reminding us that oil, quite literally, was initially conceived as a replacement for slave labor (LeMenager 2014, 5). Despite the necessity of conceptual reframing in grappling with the sheer scale of climate hyperobjects (Morton 2013) and the slow violences of pollution and environmental racism (Berlant 2007; Nixon 2013) however, it is not clear if the linguistic-theoretical playgrounds of naming and renaming have done anything at all to alleviate the uneven distribution of existential atmospheric pressures. If, as Kathryn Yusoff suggests, the Anthropocene (as both a human-existential and geological epoch) "proclaims a sudden concern with the exposures of environmental harm to white liberal communities," it does so precisely "in the wake of histories in which these harms have been knowingly exported to black and brown communities under the rubric of civilization, progress, modernization, and capitalism" (Yusoff 2018, xiii). And indeed, as Sarah Jane Cervanak notes, "scholars in Black studies and Native studies, along with twentieth- and twenty-first-century Black women writers and poets, have long engaged the intersection of anti-Black and anti-earth violence toward 'new models for social and ecological relation.'" (Cervanak 2021, 13, citing Posmentier 2017, 4). Thus, following Yusoff, if the Anthropocene and "new" forms of more-than-human thought carry with them the ghosts of humanism and its strategic/universalizing exclusions, then "any critical theory that does not work with and alongside black and indigenous studies (rather than in an extractive or supplementary mode) will fail to deliver any epochal shift at all."

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