# BECOMING HUMAN

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# On Becoming Human

## *An Introduction*

*Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* argues that key texts of twentieth-century African diasporic literature and visual culture generate unruly conceptions of being and materiality that creatively disrupt the human–animal distinction and its persistent raciality. There has historically been a persistent question regarding the quality of black(ened) people's humanity. African diasporic literature and cultural production have often been interpreted as a reaction to this racialization—a plea for human recognition. *Becoming Human* takes a different approach, investigating key African American, African, and Caribbean literary and visual texts that critique and depose prevailing conceptions of "the human" found in Western science and philosophy. These texts move beyond a critique of bestialization to generate new possibilities for rethinking ontology: our being, fleshy materiality, and the nature of what exists and what we can claim to know about existence. The literary and visual culture studied in *Becoming Human* neither rely on animal abjection to define being (human) nor reestablish "human recognition" within liberal humanism as an antidote to racialization. Consequently, they displace the very terms of black(ened) animality as abjection.

*Becoming Human* argues that African diasporic cultural production does not coalesce into a unified tradition that merely seeks inclusion into liberal humanist conceptions of "the human" but, rather, frequently alters the meaning and significance of being (human) and engages in imaginative practices of worlding from the perspective of a history of blackness's bestialization and thingification: the process of imagining black people as an empty vessel, a nonbeing, a nothing, an ontological zero, coupled with the violent imposition of colonial myths and racial hierarchy.[1] Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*, Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals*, Wangechi Mutu's *Histology of*

*the Different Classes of Uterine Tumors*, Octavia Butler's "Bloodchild," Ezrom Legae's *Chicken Series*, and key speeches of Frederick Douglass both critique and displace the racializing assumptive logic that has grounded Western science's and philosophy's debates on how to distinguish human identity from that of the animal, the object, and the nonhuman more generally. In complementary but highly distinct ways, these literary and visual texts articulate being (human) in a manner that neither relies on animal abjection nor reestablishes liberal humanism as the authority on being (human). Instead, they creatively respond to the animalization of black(ened) being by generating a critical praxis of being, paradigms of relationality, and epistemologies that alternately expose, alter, or reject not only the racialization of the human–animal distinction found in Western science and philosophy but also challenge the epistemic and material terms under which the specter of animal life acquires its authority. What emerges from this questioning is an unruly sense of being/knowing/feeling existence, one that necessarily disrupts the foundations of the current hegemonic mode of "the human."

While we often isolate African diasporic literary studies from the fields of science and philosophy, I contend that African diasporic literature and visual culture introduce dissidence into philosophical and scientific frameworks that dominate definitions of the human: evolution, rights, property, and legal personhood. By reading Western philosophy and science through the lens of African diasporic literature and visual culture, we can situate and often problematize authoritative (even if troubling) conceptualizations of being and material existence, demonstrating that literary and visual cultural studies have an important role to play in the histories of science and philosophy. Using literature and visual art, my study identifies conceptions of being that do not rely on the animal's negation, as repudiation of "the animal" has historically been essential to producing classes of abject humans. *Becoming Human* reveals that science and philosophy share many characteristics with literature and visual art despite the espoused objectivity and procedural integrity of scientific and philosophical discourses. In debates concerning the specificity of human identity with respect to "the animal," science and philosophy both possess foundational and recursive investments in figurative, and arguably literary, narratives that conceptualize blackness as trope, metaphor, symbol, and a kind of fiction. Instead of thinking

of philosophy and science as separate and unrelated sites of knowledge production, my study reveals their historical entanglement and shared assumptive logic with regard to blackness. As conceived by evolutionary theory and Western Enlightenment philosophy, extending into legalistic conceptions of personhood, property, and rights, antiblackness has sought to justify its defacing logics and arithmetic by suggesting that black people are most representative of the abject animalistic dimensions of humanity, or the beast.

While many scholars have critiqued the conflation of black humans with animals found in Enlightenment discourses, I argue that prior scholarship has fundamentally misrecognized the logic behind the confluence of animality and racialization. I reinterpret Enlightenment thought not as black "exclusion" or "denied humanity" but rather as the violent imposition and appropriation—inclusion and recognition—of black(ened) humanity in the interest of plasticizing that very humanity, whereby "the animal" is one but not the only form blackness is thought to encompass. Plasticity is a mode of transmogrification 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: potentially "everything and nothing" at the register of ontology.[2] It is perhaps prior scholarship's interpretation of this tradition as "denied humanity" that has facilitated a call for greater inclusion, as a corrective to what it deems is a historical exclusion of blackness. One consequence of this orientation is that many scholars have essentially ignored alternative conceptions of being and the nonhuman that have been produced by blackened people.

This project examines how African diasporic literary and visual texts generate conceptions of being that defy the disparagement of the nonhuman and "the animal." The terms of African diasporic art and literature's canonization have suggested that African diasporic cultural production does little more than refute racism and petition for assimilation into the very definition of humanity that produces racial hierarchy or, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. would put it in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*: "[T]he texts of the slave could only be read as testimony of defilement: the slave's representation and reversal of the master's attempt to transform a human being into a commodity, and the slave's simultaneous verbal witness

of the possession of a humanity shared in common with Europeans" (Gates 140).[3] Rather than seek an assimilationist transubstantiation via the "Talking Book," the texts in my study are better understood as providing unruly yet generative conceptions of being—generative because they are unruly. Yet, they are not always framed as an explicit critique of the dominant—thereby refusing the terms of liberal multicultural recognition, which require either the evocation of animalized depictions of blackness in order to point out the suffering these images cause or the reversal of stereotype in a bid for "inclusion." Instead, they often just get on with upending and inventing at the edge of legibility. The chapters in this book explore the critique and innovative thought that emerge from within the contradictions of competing conceptions of modernity's crucible—the human. I argue that the cultural production examined in the following pages reveals a contrapuntal potential in black thought and expressive cultures with regard to the human–animal distinction.

In order to facilitate a fuller appreciation of the conceptions of ontology identified in *Becoming Human*, I pose three arguments that fundamentally reframe the animalization of blackness. First, I argue that philosophers' and historians' emphasis on antiblack formulations of African reason and history have overlooked the centrality of gender, sexuality, and maternity in the animalization of blackness.[4] Namely, I argue that black female flesh persistently functions as the limit case of "the human" and is its matrix-figure. This is largely explained by the fact that, historically, the delineation between species has fundamentally hinged on the question of reproduction; in other words, the limit of the human has been determined by how the means and scene of birth are interpreted. Second, I demonstrate that Eurocentric humanism needs blackness as a prop in order to erect whiteness: to define its own limits and to designate humanity as an achievement as well as to give form to the category of "the animal." Third, I look beyond recognition as human as the solution to the bestialization of blackness, by drawing out the dissident ontological and materialist thinking in black expressive culture, lingering on modes of being/knowing/feeling that gesture toward the overturning of Man.

In debates concerning the specificity of human identity with respect to "the animal," science and philosophy foundationally and recursively construct black femaleness, maternity, and sexuality as an essential index of abject human animality. Furthermore, gender, maternity, and

sexuality are central to the autopoesis of racialized animalization that philosophers, theoreticians, and historians of race hope to displace. While black feminist and queer theories of race have underlined the intersectional nature of gender, race, and sexuality, few studies have ventured to identify the autopoetic operations of these very intersections (Maturana and Varela 78). Therefore, any study that attempts to provide an account of how racialization operates must offer an explanation of the intransigent, recursive, self-referential, and (re)animating power of abject constructs of black gender and sexuality. Contributing to studies of the *longue durée* of antiblackness and "afterlife of slavery," I offer a materialist theory of both blackness's ontologized plasticization and the temporality of antiblackness whereby I extend and revise Sylvia Wynter's theories of sociogeny and the autopoesis of racialization, in other words, antiblackness's auto-institution and stable replication as a system and its consequences for our being both bios and mythos.[5]

Much has been written about the roles of Reason and History in the production of "dehumanization." This discourse is most commonly represented by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's claim that "the African," never attaining immanent differentiation or the clarity of self-knowledge, is imprisoned by immediacy and is, in other words, ahistorical. However, in the chapters that follow, I am most interested in the roles of gender and sexuality in the production of blackness as "animal man." Negating discourses on African "history" and "reason" are not the only—and perhaps not even the most frequently deployed—concepts through which "the African" is posited as *animal*. Gender and sexuality feature prominently in animalizing discourse, as a measure of both the quality of the mind and an index of spirit.

Gendered and sexual discourses on "the African" are inextricable from those pertaining to reason, historicity, and civilization, as purported observations of gender and sexuality were frequently used to provide "evidence" of the inherent abject quality of black people's human animality from the earliest days of the invention of "the human." Christian Europe had already privileged gender and sexuality as indicators of "civilization," and visual observation, namely culturally situated perspective, had not emerged as an epistemological problem for thought (Haraway, "Situated Knowledges"). During the so-called "Age of Discovery," observation and the visual, imagined as transparent and in opposition to the opaque,

could overcome the practical problem of differences in worldings. Thus, observation of gender and sex was deployed in the interest of producing race as a visualizable fact. The body was believed to provide presence—a supplement to the immateriality of reason and historicity.

The black body's fleshiness was aligned with that of animals and set in opposition to European spirit and mind. As Winthrop Jordan documents in *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812*, Africans and apes were linked through physiognomic comparison and sexuality. Englishmen had only encountered nonhuman primates vicariously through travel writing and gossip. They were unfamiliar with anthropoid primates, such as gorillas, chimpanzees, and orangutans. Encounters with sub-Saharan Africans occurred adjacent to these encounters, leading to unbridled speculations linking primates and Africans (Jordan 29, 229). These speculations were an outgrowth of an epistemological foundation that had already been circulating tales of mythical human-animal hybrids and humanoid animals based on ancient reports and medieval morality (Jordan 29). Africa was seen as a land of new monsters. Though Africans were rarely perceived as a kind of ape, it was more commonly suggested that Africans and apes shared libidinous sexual characteristics or were sexually linked (Jordan 32, 227, 230–32, 237). For the English, sex was barbaric, as the body was host to sin; and when they did not perceive Africans as observing the same Christian worldview, they evaluated them negatively. According to Jordan, Africans were linked with sins of the body, and their blackness was believed to testify to their unlawful and ungodly nature (Jordan 17–20, 36, 41). The purported carnality of the African female was thought to be exemplary of African sexuality more generally, as the female sex was the measure of a race's civility (Jordan 35).

While the discussion here notes Jordan's comments on the role of sexuality in the antiblack production of the discourse of African animality, one could reasonably suggest that at times this now-classic text naturalizes racial difference as a visualizable fact of the body with immediate, unitary aesthetic effects for Europeans. In Kathleen Brown's reinterpretation of Jordan's early modern sources, she notes that divisions of household labor between the sexes, manners and customs, and mores were as, if not more, central to West Africans' function as foils to the emergent concept of Europeanness as skin color and hair texture (Brown, "Native Americans" 82). Despite what one might expect from

reading Jordan's conclusions, skin color was not the essence of racial difference in the pre-1650 sources: writers of the period devoted considerable space to descriptions of indigenous peoples' adornments of their bodies, "the consequences of which were no less startling to English observers than differences which allegedly originated in nature" (K. Brown 90). The common criteria for bestial otherness were measures of degrees of civility in Iberian and English sources rather than complexion. One of the most common refrains in early European accounts of people living near the so-called torrid zones was "the people goeth all naked" (K. Brown 88). The appearance of allegedly naked bodies had contradictory evocations: on the one hand, nakedness conjured images of the garden of Eden and a prelapsarian state of mind, arrested development, and innocence; on the other hand, "Nudity also communicated sexual promiscuity and the absence of civility to Europeans, which they sometimes described as 'beastly' living" (K. Brown 88). Rather than simply, or decisively, a matter of color, projected sexual mores and virility were crucial determinants for measuring the being of Africans.

As Jennifer Morgan has shown, the imagined proof of the enslaved's incivility and degraded humanity was frequently located in African females' purported childbearing and child-rearing practices, whereby the breast of the enslaved took on mythic proportions. In this context, the breast took on an emblematic status: "European writers turned to black women as evidence of a cultural inferiority that ultimately became encoded as racial difference. Monstrous bodies became enmeshed with savage behavior as the icon of women's breasts became evidence of tangible barbarism" (191). African female breasts were depicted as exaggeratedly long, even as bestial additional limbs. As Morgan asserts, what this history demonstrates is not that "gender operated as a more profound category of difference than race," but rather that "racialist discourse was deeply imbued with ideas about gender and sexual difference that, indeed, became manifest only in contact with each other" (169). What observers and commentators did not question was their own universality, their grid of intelligibility, and how it conditioned not just what they saw, or even how they observed, but how they *knew* what they saw. This is an issue of perception that exceeds the question of what was *actually* observed and what was "made up" or "imagined"; instead of debating the facticity of a story, it is imperative to interrogate how we would

go about evaluating any empirical truth claim. This calls into question how we "know what we know," not only about a world "out there" but also how we "know ourselves." Epistemology is a problem not of the past but one that is constituent with our being.

By the nineteenth century, the Chain of Being's physical anthropology, using human and animal physical measurements, sealed the connection between Africans and apes as scientific fact. One must only recall the manner in which Sara Baartman, the so-called Hottentot Venus, was displayed for the British and French public as both pornographic spectacle and scientific specimen (Gilman 88). Her physiognomic characteristics—posterior and genitals—were presumed to signal a difference in sexuality that was pronounced enough to further divide the categories of "female" and "woman": an idealized white femininity became paradigmatic of "woman" through the abjection of the perceived African "female" (Gilman 83–85). Female, rather than woman, African femaleness is paradoxically placed under the sign of absence, lack, and pathology in order to present an idealized western European bourgeois femininity as the normative embodiment of womanhood (Gilman 85–108).

In this context, the potential recognition of womanhood in blackness, and especially black femininity, is placed in tension with the discourses on black female sexuality. Hortense Spillers put it this way: "In the universe of unreality and exaggeration, the black female is, if anything, a creature of sex, but sexuality touches her nowhere . . . the female has so much sexual potential that she has none at all that anybody is ready to recognize at the *level of culture*" (*Black, White, and in Color* 155, emphasis in original). The perpetual specter of black female lack in the realm of culturally and historically produced femininity, at the register of both performativity and morphology, produces "the African female" as paradigmatically indeterminate in terms of gender and paradigmatically the human's limit case.

The spectacularization of the posterior has perhaps blinded our critical attention to the manner with which ontologizing racial characterization not only divides and stratifies gender but also calls into question the very meaning of sexual difference. Shifting critical attention from the posterior to the breast, I demonstrate that racism not only posits cleavages in womanhood such that black womanhood is imagined to be a gender apart (an "other" gender) but also an "other" sex. Additionally, antiblackness itself

is sexuating, whereby so-called biological sex is modulated by "culture." In other words, at the registers of both sign and matter, antiblackness produces differential biocultural effects of both gender and sex. Such a frame raises the stakes of recent feminist materialism's inquiry into both the inter(intra)actional relations of discursivity and materiality as well as the gendered politics of hylomorphism, or the form–matter distinction. Thus, antiblack formulations of gender and sexuality are actually essential rather than subsidiary to the metaphysical figuration of matter, objects, and animals that recent critical theory hopes to dislodge. I argue the plasticization of black(ened) people at the register of sign and materiality is central to the prevailing logics and praxis of the human and sex/gender.

Recent scholarship in black queer theory suggests we can no longer presume that gender is a metonym for "woman" and sexuality a metonym for "queer." The wanton manipulation of gendered and sexual codes is essential to the production of antiblackness generally, irrespective of self-identification.[6] Queer theory scholars have argued that the masculine–feminine dynamic is on the register of the symbolic, rather than the biological, even though it masquerades as if the borders dividing masculine from feminine map neatly onto the "natural" polarity of sex.[7] What feminism has not sufficiently interrogated is the manner in which the masculine–feminine dichotomy is racialized. We have neither adequately identified that racialization is intrinsic to the legibility of its codes and grammar, namely that antiblackness constitutes and disrupts sex/gender constructs, nor determined the consequence this has for the matter of the sexed body.

Such a predicament creates conditions of gendered and sexual anxiety and instability. As Spillers states, "[I]n the historic outline of dominance, the respective subject-positions of 'female' and 'male' adhere to no symbolic integrity," as their meaning can be stripped or appropriated arbitrarily by power, as black females' claim to "womanhood and femininity still tends to rest too solidly on the subtle and shifting calibrations of a liberal ideology" ("Mama's" 204, 223). Thus, while codes of gender are cultural rather than prediscursive, one must also attend to the matter of the body, as the body's materiality is thought to provide the observable "fact" of animality.

The African's "failure" to achieve humanity has historically been thought to be rooted in "the body," in an insatiable appetite that made it impossible for the African to rise above "the body," "the organ," in order

to come back to itself in self-reflection, never achieving the distance required in order to contemplate the self (Mbembe 190). Gender, and especially sexuality, was leveraged against counterclaims acknowledging black reason and civility. For thinkers such as Thomas Jefferson, black gender and black kinship stood as an impediment to black progress. So, while it seems that the human must be reconsidered, a critical engagement with the discourses of gender and sexuality must be coincident to our interrogation of both dominant and emergent *praxes* of being.

At this time, most feminist scholars can agree that an "intersectional" approach to the question of subjectivity is required, but scholars have not clarified how the different elements of subjectivity braid together historically and culturally. In the chapters that follow, I hope to provide more precise thinking in this area. Our task would be to take seriously the particularization of gender and sexuality in black(ened) people in the context of a humanism that in its desire to universalize, ritualistically posits black(female)ness as opacity, inversion, and limit. In such a context, the black body is characterized by a plasticity, whereby raciality arbitrarily remaps black(ened) gender and sexuality, nonteleologically and nonbinaristically, with fleeting adherence to normativized heteropatriarchal codes. In such a context of paradoxical (un)gendering, and by gendering I mean humanization, power only takes direction from its own shifting exigencies—a predicament that might be described as chaos. This chaos by design is used to marginalize black(ened) genders and sexualities as the border of the sociological: a condition I refer to as ontologized plasticity.

Plasticity in *Becoming Human* describes what Stephanie Smallwood, in her study of the Middle Passage and slavery, identifies as "an enduring project of the modern Western world": the use of black(ened) flesh for "probing the limits up to which it is possible to discipline the body without extinguishing the life within" (36). "Plasticity" has been, as concept and thematic, taken up by a range of thinkers including Hegel, Lévi-Strauss, Darwin, and most notably Catherine Malabou. I distinguish my concept from these alternatives in chapter 1. Here I would like to distinguish my usage from Kyla Schuller's more recent use of a similar term: impressibility. Recently Schuller, in *The Biopolitics of Feeling*, (re) interprets nineteenth-century US biopolitics, arguing that in Lamarckian sentimental discourse and its theories of evolutionary optimization, the conception of life's plasticity was grounded in the notion of mutable

inheritance rather than determinism, and that somatic potential was qualified by purported degrees of binary sex differentiation, cast as the crowning achievement of the "civilized." By comparison, black(ened) people appeared to be inert and undifferentiated—in other words, excessive to the domain of sexual difference.[8]

In contrast, the concept of plasticity in *Becoming Human* indexes a mode of domination that conditions the discourse and practices of optimization at the center of nineteenth-century sentimentality and accompanying theories of evolution, by suggesting that racial slavery fleshed out its imagination and provided the experimental means for exploring the possibilities and boundaries of the kind of optimization Schuller elucidates.[9] Plasticity's telos, I argue, is not the optimization of life per se but the fluidification of "life" and fleshly existence. Plasticity is certainly an antiblack mode of the human concerned with apportioning vitality and pathologization, but it is more than that. Plasticity is a praxis that seeks to define the essence of a black(ened) thing as infinitely mutable, in antiblack, often paradoxical, sexuating terms as a means of hierarchically delineating sex/gender, reproduction, and states of being more generally.

My suggestion is that slavery, as an experimental mode, sought to define and explore the possibilities and limits of sex, gender, and reproduction on the plantation and beyond in a manner distinct from but relational to the assumed proper subject of "civilization," and, in fact, enabled hegemonic notions of sex/gender and reproduction such as "woman," "mother," and "female body."[10] I demonstrate that racial slavery as well as early modern proto-racializing conceptions of "monstrous" races and births are integral to ideas of sex/gender, reproduction, and indeed what it means to possess a body such that receding and emergent idea(l)s of mutability and optimization provide cover for historical and ongoing discursive-material modes of domination that precede and surround its idealized and retroactively constructed white(ened) subject and from which historical and current biomedical and philosophical discourses of plasticity seek to distance and obscure. Because antiblack modes of sex/gender and reproduction are generated by means and in terms different from the dominant, it is commonly assumed that such "excess" lay beyond the boundaries of the productions of sex/gender; *Becoming Human* suggests, instead, that the long arc of

modern raciality reveals that the production of the "civilized" subject of sex/gender and reproduction is a retroactive construction and dependent on modes of generating sex/gender and reproduction imagined as excessive to its proper domain or otherwise invisibilized.

Liberal humanism's basic unit of analysis, "Man," produces an untenable dichotomy—"the human" versus "the animal," whereby the black(ened) female is posited as the abyss dividing organic life into "human" or "animal" based on wholly unsound metaphysical premises. Thus, as a result of being abjectly animalized, those marginalized have had to bear the burden of a failed metaphysics. *Becoming Human* furthers black studies' interrogation of humanism by identifying our shared being with the nonhuman without suggesting that some members of humanity bear the burden of "the animal."

My second intervention is to demonstrate that exigencies of racialization, have, commonly, prefigured discourses on animals and the nonhuman, more generally and that the categories of "race" and "species" have coevolved and are actually *mutually reinforcing* terms. Current scholarship in posthumanism, animal studies, new materialism, and theories of biopolitics has begun a broad inquiry into the repercussions of defining "the human" in opposition to "the animal." Much of the recent scholarship suggests that race is a by-product of prior negation of nonhuman animals. These fields, particularly animal studies, are slowly advancing the thesis that human–animal binarism is the original and foundational paradigm upon which discourses of human difference, including, or even especially, racialization was erected. The chapters that follow will take an alternative approach.

Far from being an inevitable feature of our thought, this dualism has been traced to none other than René Descartes. In "The Eight Animals in Shakespeare; or, Before the Human," Laurie Shannon argues that historical attention to lexicons reveals that the "human–animal divide" descends from "Enlightenment modes of science and philosophy that have been largely qualified in contexts like subjectivity, rationality, and liberalism . . . To put it in the broadest terms: before the cogito, there was no such thing as 'the animal'" (474). To illustrate the recentness of "the animal" as an impounding preoccupation, Shannon makes a striking observation: "While references to the creatures now gathered as animals defy inventory, the collective English word *animal* appears a mere eight times across

the entire verbal expanse of Shakespeare's work. His practice on this point of nomenclature tilts overwhelmingly against the word" (Shannon 474). Two of the eight uses of the word, Shannon notes, "involve persons failing a (gender-vexed and class-inflected) human standard": "lack of self-government," "unchastity," quoting *Much Ado* "savage sensuality," and in *Love's Labor's Lost* animality is evoked as intellectual inferiority.

Philosophers of race and Caribbeanist literary scholars have also detected the incipience of modern racialization in the work of Shakespeare.[11] This scholarship notes that in *The Tempest*, Caliban, too, is placed under the sign of "the animal," namely irrational and sexual intemperance. My argument is not simply that Caliban is animalized but rather that figures like Caliban are constitutive to "the animal" as a general term. Arguably more a personified idea than a traditional character, Caliban emerged in the context of publicity surrounding European voyages to the coast of Africa and the Caribbean.[12] The black body, held captive as a "resource for metaphor," has been discussed in the work of Frantz Fanon, in which he contends that black men's bodies, like Caliban, are projection screens for white anxiety about sexuality (Spillers, "Mama's" 205). But, instead of recognizing their projections as just that, projection, white anxiety imposes an image of black(ened) men as a bestial sexual threat: a powerful sexual menace, initiator of sexual activity unrestricted by morality or prohibition, or one who monopolizes gendered sexual pleasure. The result is envy, punishment, or masochistic pleasure; for the black is not *the symbol* of sexual threat but *is* sexual threat—the penis becomes the synecdoche of black manhood (Fanon 170, 177). My suggestion is that these subjects—"animal" as a generic term and the racialized masculine figure of Caliban—are intertwined and that their interrelation is ordered in relation to the absent presence of the material metaphor of the black female as matrix-figure.[13] By uncovering the centrality of racialized gender and sexuality in the very human–animal binarism that scholars are looking to problematize or displace, I demonstrate the necessity of the abjection and bestialization of black gender and sexuality for both the normative construction of "the human" as rational, self-directed, and autonomous and as the reproduction of the scientific matrix of classification.

In addition to providing a crucial reexamination of African diasporic literature and visual culture's philosophical defiance of Western scientific

and philosophic definitions of "the human," *Becoming Human* clarifies the terms of the relationship between what Cary Wolfe calls the "discourse of species" and racial discourse by demonstrating that racialized gender and sexuality serve as an essential horizon of possibility for the production of "the animal" as a preoccupation of Modern discourse (*Animal Rites* 2). Reading the existential predicament of modern racial blackness through and against the human–animal distinction in Western philosophy and science not only reveals the mutual imbrication of "race" and "species" in Western thought but also invites a reconsideration of the extent to which exigencies of racialization have preconditioned and prefigured modern discourses governing the nonhuman. As I demonstrate, at times antiblackness prefigures and colors nonhuman animal abjection. I argue that anxieties about conquest, slavery, and colonial expansionism provided the historical context for both the emergence of a developmental model of "universal humanity" and a newly consolidated generic "animal" that would be defined in nonhuman *and* human terms. In this context, discourses on "the animal" and "the black" were conjoined and are now mutually reinforcing narratives in the traveling racializations of the globalizing West. I demonstrate that both science's and philosophy's foundational authority articulate black female abjection as a prerequisite of "the human," and this abjection helps give credence to the linear taxonomical (ontological) thinking present scholarship is trying to displace. Thus, racialized formations of gender and sexuality are actually central rather than subsidiary to the very human–animal binarism recent scholarship hopes to dislodge.

*Becoming Human* emphasizes cultural production that philosophically challenges the abjection of animality and highlights alternative modes of being. The cultural production examined here does not figure the challenge of transforming ways of relating to animality as separate from the urgent need to reimagine (human)being because the semiomaterial burden of living as black virtually forecloses the "on behalf of" structure that characterizes so much of animal studies and, especially, its antecedents—animal ethics and animal rights philosophy. As I have established thus far, Western humanism has not produced African diasporic subjectivity in a manner that would permit black people to decisively remove themselves from being subjected to violence against "the animal." For the Enlightenment humanists mentioned above, *"the African" does not symbolize "the animal"; "the African" is "the animal."* The

black philosophical dissidence highlighted in this book speaks to the biopolitical entanglement of discourses on animals, environment, and African diasporic peoples. Thus, critical black studies must challenge animalization on at least two fronts: animalizing discourse that is directed primarily at people of African descent, and animalizing discourse that reproduces the abject abstraction of "the animal" more generally because such an abstraction is not an empirical reality but a metaphysical technology of bio/necropolitics applied to life arbitrarily.

Additionally, this project is not limited to a critique of anthropocentricism. As I have suggested here and will elaborate in the pages that follow, antiblackness's arbitrary uses of power do not comply with the hierarchies presumed by critics of anthropocentricism. Furthermore, viruses, bacteria, parasites, and insects all commonly exercise dominance over human populations. Thus, critics such as Jacques Derrida and Cary Wolfe have foregrounded a need for a critical and accountable humanism rather than seeking ever-vigilant forms of anti-anthropocentricisms.[14] However, it is crucial to critically engage with what it means to *be* in a biopolitical context that is characterized by entanglements of humans both historically recent and distant, nonhumans both big and small, and environments both near and far. *This criticality would interrogate the epistemology of "the human," as an idea, and that would guide its ethico-political practices rather than reify the presumptuous conceit of a received notion of the humane.*

A critique of anthropocentricism is not necessarily a critique of liberal humanism. Critics have advocated "on behalf of" animals without questioning the epistemic and material project of liberal humanism. Many critics of anthropocentricism have mistakenly perceived that the problem of our time is anthropocentricism rather than a failed praxis of being. Such critics of anthropocentricism often proceed by humanizing animals in the form of rights, welfare, and protections without questioning how advocates are constructing themselves in the process. In other words, they do not subject the very humanity they want to decenter and/or expand to sufficient interrogation.[15] As a result, they authorize the violence of the state, one that protects, criminalizes, enforces, and prosecutes differentially based on race, class, gender, sexuality, national origin, religion, ability, and immigration status. For example, advocacy projects that seek greater legal protection for the Great Apes and more strenuous criminal prosecution for those who transgress protective laws find themselves at

odds with impoverished people in African nations that have been burdened by IMF and World Bank policies. Such nations may not be able to provide even limited protections for their human citizens and even fewer economic opportunities for the people who would be prosecuted under international animal protection legislation. An impoverished person may participate in capturing animals for pay, given that the illegal wildlife trade is the world's second largest transnational trading industry, estimated to be worth $20 billion annually, second only to drugs. Yet, impoverished people do not gain the majority of the monetary value derived from the trade; the captured animals and the wealth generated from their labor spiral upward to the West—*but not the criminal prosecution*.[16] In this context, it is not difficult to glean how such international (read: universalist) legislation drafted by exponents from more powerful and stable nations (because they continue to be imperialist) places strain on already fragile postcolonial state resources (because they continue to be colonized). One really does have to wonder what we mean by justice and rights when states and their citizens are put in such untenable positions.

At present, animal studies scholarship tends to presume a humanity that is secure within the logic of liberal humanism rather than engage with a humanity that is often cast as debatable or contingent.[17] To render one's humanity provisional, where the specter of nullification looms large, is precisely the work that racism does. Yet when the authors of this field speak of a human, they most commonly speak of one whose ontological integrity is assumed and idealized rather than plasticized, even when the goal of posthumanism and animal studies is ultimately to interrogate or undermine that certainty. For these fields to do accurate, fully theorized, and principled work, they must show how the question of the animal bears on the question of hierarchies of humanity. In the pages that follow, I investigate blackness's relation to animality rather than presuppose black(ened) people's relative power and privilege *as human*, vis-à-vis nonhuman animals. Thus, my work focuses on humans whose humanity is a subject of controversy, debate, and dissension in order to reveal the broader political stakes of "the animal" as a problem for contemplation.

In what follows, I hope to demonstrate that the African diaspora does indeed have a stake in overturning the production of "the animal." However, the economies of value presumed in posthumanism and animal

studies need to be historicized and transformed, namely, the presumption that all humans are privileged over all animals by virtue of being *included* in humanity, or that racism is a matter of suggesting that black people are like animals based on a prior and therefore precedential form of violence rooted in speciesism. The chapters that follow are an attempt to clarify, historicize, and more precisely situate black(ened) humanity vis-à-vis animality. I engage contemporary critical theory in the fields of biopolitics, posthumanism, new materialism, and animal studies. However, my intent is to critically build on these fields' insights, *not* to replicate them.

What you will find in the subsequent chapters is less a systematic critical engagement with preexisting arguments in posthumanism, the new materialisms, and animal studies and more an establishment of a different conversation on ontology with different entry points because *Becoming Human* is more interested in redefining terms than entering into preestablished ones. *Becoming Human* contends that the aforementioned fields, in the main, position blackness in the space of the unthought, and therefore are not *sufficient* grounds for theorizing blackness. This is not to suggest, however, that their insights hold no purchase for black studies. Departing from such a reactionary position, *Becoming Human* is instead learned and deliberative—borrowing freely from and extending these fields' insights when and where it is useful to do so. To the extent to which *Becoming Human* does engage the fundaments of these fields, its primary aim is to clarify how blackness conditions a given discourse. *Becoming Human* observes some crucial distinctions: there is a difference between identifying how (anti)blackness is a condition of possibility for hegemonic thought and assuming the hegemonic terms of a given discourse. Moreover, not all engagements with a given discourse are a ceding of ground but might very well be the generative unsettling of it. By placing scholarly and creative work on blackness in dialogue with posthumanism and related fields, I am able to more fully theorize the binaristic and hierarchical logics that structure relations among humans and between animals and humans. I not only show that antiblackness is actually central to the very construction of "the animal" that recent scholarship wants to interrogate and move beyond but also that (anti)blackness upends these fields' frameworks of analysis and evaluative judgments.

*Becoming Human*'s third argument is a decisive break with a commonly held position in the study of race. I do not propose the extension

of human recognition as a solution to the bestialization of blackness. Recognition of personhood and humanity does not annul the animalization of blackness. Rather, it reconfigures discourses that have historically bestialized blackness. In the chapters that follow, forms of human recognition—inclusion in biological conceptions of the human species and the transition from native to universal human subject in law and society—are not at odds with animalization. Thus, animalization is not incompatible with humanization: what is commonly deemed dehumanization is, in the main, more accurately interpreted as the violence of humanization or the burden of inclusion into a racially hierarchized universal humanity.

The inquiry into being and matter here does not justify itself by reproducing the specter of the flesh, of the bestial, of the passions, of nature in need of human domination. The black cultural producers in this study have chosen representational strategies that redirect modern technologies (the magazine, ink-and-paper drawing, photography, painting, the short story, and the novel) by disrupting the foundational racialized epistemological presuppositions and material histories embedded in the archive of these forms. These are technologies that have not only reflected abject animalized depictions of blackness but invented them as well. Rather than solely rehearse debates about the ideological potential or pitfalls of genres and technology, the cultural production in my study mobilizes these technologies differently, producing not only disruptive conceptions of blackness but also of ontology and epistemology more generally. African diasporic cultural production intervenes productively in reconsidering the role of "the animal" or the "animalistic" in the construction of "the human" by producing nonbinaristic models of human–animal relations, advancing theories of trans-species interdependency, observing trans-species precarity, and hypothesizing cross-species relationality in a manner that preserves alterity while undermining the nonhuman and animality's abjection, an abjection that constantly rebounds on marginalized humans. I suggest that only by questioning rather than presupposing the virtuousness of human recognition will we be able to develop a praxis of being that is not only an alternative to the necropolitical but opposes it (Derrida, *The Animal* xi).

Ultimately, I suggest that the normative subject of liberal humanism is predicated on the abjection of blackness, which is not based on figurations of blackness as "animal-like" but rather casts black people as ontologi-

cally plastic. Therefore, the task before us is realizing being in a manner that does not privilege the very normativity cohered by notions of abject animality and the discursive-material plasticity of black(ened) flesh. This requires that scholars of race extend the radical questioning of "the human" established by African diasporic critics of Western humanism in a direction potentially unanticipated by prior scholarship, by interrogating the very construction of the animal beyond a condemnation of its racialized application and scope. Both critics who seek more equitable inclusion in liberal humanism and those who pursue a radical transformation of the normative category of "the human" have commonly overlooked the centrality of the animal question for black existential matters. *Becoming Human* extends the insights of African diasporic critics of "the human" by demonstrating that key texts in black cultural production move beyond a demand for recognition and inclusion in the very normative humanity that theorists such as Frantz Fanon, Lewis Gordon, Saidiya Hartman, Hortense Spillers, Fred Moten, Aimé Césaire, Sylvia Wynter, Frank Wilderson III, Katherine McKittrick, Christina Sharpe, Denise Ferreira da Silva, Achille Mbembe, and Alex Weheliye have shown is fundamentally antiblack, while also calling into question the presumptive logic undergirding the specter of animalization.[18]

The cultural production examined here spans three continents and three centuries because antiblackness has been central to establishing national borders and readily crosses them. Antiblackness has also been diasporically challenged and refused, making it central to what comprises the very notion of the African diaspora and of blackness. It is precisely *through* rather than *against* historically demarcated regional, national, linguistic, and state preoccupations that this discourse cyclically reorganizes itself. Antiblackness's pliability is essential to the intransigent, complementary, and universalizing impetus of antiblack paradigms. Irrespective of the innumerable and ever-transient definitions of black identity across the diaspora, which by definition are ephemerally produced, all black(ened) people must contend with the burden of the antiblack animalization of the global paradigm of blackness, which will infringe on all articulations and political maneuverings that seek redress for present and historical violence.

Within the structure of much thought on race there is an implicit assumption that the recognition of one as a human being will protect one

from (or acts as an insurance policy against) ontologizing violence. Departing from a melancholic attachment to such an ideal, I argue that the violence and terror scholars describe is endemic to the recognition of humanity itself—when that humanity is cast as black. A recognition of black humanity, demonstrated across these pages, is not denied or excluded but weaponized by a conception of "the human" foundationally organized by the idea of a racial telos. For Wynter, the Negro is not so much excluded from the category Man and its overrepresentation of humanity but foundational to it as its antipodal figure, as the nadir of Man.[19] I argue that the recognition of humanity and its suspension act as alibis for each other's terror, such that the pursuit of human recognition or a compact with "the human" would only plunge one headlong into further terror and domination. Is the black a human being? The answer is hegemonically yes. However, this, in actuality, may be the wrong question as an affirmative offers no assurances. A better question may be: If being recognized as human offers no reprieve from ontologizing dominance and violence, then what might we gain from the rupture of "the human"?

Animalization is a privileged method of biopolitical expression of antiblackness; however, historians' and theoreticians' response to the centrality of animalization has been inadequate, as scholars have misrecognized the complexity of its operations. Binaristic frameworks such as "humanization versus dehumanization" and "human versus animal" are insufficient to understand a biopolitical regime that develops technologies of humanization in order to refigure blackness as abject human animality and extends human recognition in an effort to demean blackness as "the animal within the human" form. This is not to say that expressions and practices of antiblackness never radically exclude black people from the category of "the human"; rather, the point is that inclusion does not provide a reliable solution because, in the main, black people have been included in (one might even say dominated by) "universal humanity"—but as the incarnation of abject dimensions of humanity for which "the human" is foundationally and seemingly eternally at war. Thus, black people are without shelter, whether invited into or locked out of "the human."

I seek to investigate black revisionist and counter-discursive practices in the context of liberal humanism's *selective and circumscribed recognition* of humanity in black people. While black people cannot *simply* opt out of humanism, as liberal humanism is the primary mode of recognition in

the global historical present, nevertheless, I argue that the severe limitations of liberal humanism and notions of "the human," the conscripting humanity imputed to black people, has led to a radical questioning of "the human," and in particular the status assigned to animality, in key works of black cultural expression. This questioning is suggestive of a desire for, perhaps, a different "genre of the human" or may even signal, as I propose, an urgent demand for the dissolution of "human" but, in either case, is not simply a desire for fuller recognition within liberal humanism's terms (Wynter and Scott 196–197).[20]

## Making Humans: Animalization as Humanization

> Everything happens as if, in our culture, life were what cannot be defined, yet, precisely for this reason, must be ceaselessly articulated and divided.
> —Giorgio Agamben, *The Open*

> No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar.
> —Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

> The uncompromising nature of the Western self and its active negation of anything not itself had the counter-effect of reducing African discourse to a simple polemical reaffirmation of black humanity. However, both the asserted denial and the *reaffirmation* of that humanity now look like two sterile sides of the same coin.
> —Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (emphasis in original)

As Achille Mbembe in *On the Postcolony* observes, discourse on Africa "is almost always deployed in the framework (or on the fringes) of a meta-text about the animal—to be exact, about the beast: its experience, its world, and its spectacle" (2). During the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries Western philosophy's architects, figures such as Hume, Hegel, Jefferson, and Kant, constructed a theory of blackness's inherent animality based on either "the African's" purported physical or mental likeness to nonhuman animals, or as a result of the underdeveloped condition of African humanity. The former relied on the establishment of "laws of nature" whereby Africans and animals found on the African continent developed similar deficiencies based largely on geographical determinants. In such a model, privileging human–animal comparison, the environment itself is black(ened), and its inferiority in turn stymies African humanity. Thus, African peoples qualify as human but only tentatively so, given their purported physical or mental similarity to nonhuman animals and vice versa. In the latter case, a developmental model, humanity is marked as an achievement and teleology. Here "the African," while also human, is nevertheless defined by their animality. Rather than being animal-like, black people are animals occupying the human form. The two positions have different routes but the same destination: in short, black(ened) people are the living border dividing forms of life such that "the animal" is a category that may apply to animals and some humans. Thus, the category of "the animal" develops in a manner that crosses lines of species. Furthermore, in either case, in the process of animalizing "the African," *blackness would be defined as the emblematic state of animal man, as the nadir of the human*. By virtue of racialization, the category of "the animal" could even potentially racialize animals in addition to animalizing blackness. The debate over whether blackness is a subspecies of the human or another type of being altogether haunted scientific debates concerning "monogenesis versus polygenesis." However, the line between these two approaches is only partially maintained in the thinkers discussed across this book's pages. It is not always clear, not only on what side of the border "the African" is placed, but also the total number of borders posited at any given point in this debate. *What is certain, though, is that monogenesis or racially inclusive constructions of "the human" complemented rather than detracted from animalized depictions of blackness.* Such debates were instrumental in codifying and institutionalizing both popular and scientific perceptions of race. There are too many examples to enumerate them all—but in the following, I have chosen what I believe are the most cited cases.

Much of this history is known; it is commonly referred to in critiques of humanism that advance a conception of "dehumanization," in which dehumanization is treated as sufficient shorthand for humanist thought (especially Enlightenment thought) concerning blackness. Enlightenment is a multivocality with contradiction and moving parts, and thus not reducible to its more infamous ideas. However, this section reinterprets a powerful and ever-present strand of racist Enlightenment thought.[21] After careful investigation, I have come to some new conclusions that inform the chapters that follow: First, I replace the notion of "denied humanity" and "exclusion" with bestialized humanization, because *the African's humanity is not denied but appropriated, inverted, and ultimately plasticized in the methodology of abjecting animality*. Universal humanity, a specific "genre of the human," is produced by the constitutive abjection of black humanity; nevertheless, the very constitutive function of this inverted recognition reveals that this black abjection is transposing recognition, and an inclusion that masks itself as an exclusion. Second, blackness is not so much derived *from* a discourse on nonhuman animals—rather the discourse on "the animal" is formed through enslavement and the colonial encounter encompassing *both human and nonhuman* forms of life. Discourses on nonhuman animals and animalized humans are forged through each other; they reflect and refract each other for the purposes of producing an idealized and teleological conception of "the human." Furthermore, antiblack animalization is not merely a symptom of speciesism; it is a relatively distinctive modality of semio-material violence that can be leveraged against humans or animals (Singer 6, 18, 83). Similarly, speciesism can be mobilized to produce racial difference. Thus, the animalizations of humans and animals have contiguous and intersecting histories rather than encompassing a single narrative on "animality." This is a crucial point, as it allows us to appreciate the irreducibility of both antiblackness *and* species as well as investigate the respective semio-material trajectories of black(ened) bodies and nonhuman animal bodies take in their historical and cultural specificity.

Hume extrapolated from his understanding of the natural environment that "inferior" climates produce "inferior nations." He believed that if plants and "irrational" animals were influenced by degree of heat and cold, then the character of humans must also be influenced by air and climate. These environmental factors rendered minds "incapable of

all the higher attainments of the human mind," which prompted him to "suspect negroes and in general all other species of men to be naturally inferior to the whites . . . No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences" (Hume 125n). He went as far as to infamously declare, "In Jamaica, indeed, they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but it is likely he is admired for slender accomplishments, like a parrot who speaks a few words plainly" (Hume 213). Hume, like most Enlightenment thinkers mentioned here, accepted the Aristotelian conception of the human as an animal, but what marked human's uniqueness, according to Aristotle, was rationality.[22] The human was a "rational animal." Thus, humanity was not defined in strict opposition to "the animal," but one's humanity was determined by the nature of one's rationality. For Hume, in the case of African rationality, it was either deficient or negligible. Therefore, the humanity of the Negro "species of men" was acknowledged, but in a hierarchical and taxonomical frame.

Kant, like Hume, looked to "the animal kingdom" as an analogue for humanity, but what is astonishing is the manner in which his articulations of "species" and "race" are interdependent and concentric epistemological constructions. Whether in the work of Carl Von Linne, Georges-Louis LeClerc, Comte de Buffon,[23] or in the following statement by Kant, animal and human "race" are co-articulations:

> Among the deviations—i.e., the hereditary differences of animals belonging to a single stock—those which, when transplanted (displaced to other areas), maintain themselves over protracted generation, and which also generate hybrid young whenever they interbreed with other deviations of the same stock, are called races. . . . In this way Negroes and Whites are not different species of humans (for they belong presumably to one stock), but they are different *races*, for each perpetuates itself in every area, and they generate between them children that are necessarily hybrid, or blendlings (mulattoes). (17)

In such formulations, there is much anxiety about maternity and sexual difference. It is difficult to maintain that either the logic of raciality or the animalization of blackness is merely symptomatic of attempts to domesticate "nature" or "animals" under an ordering system. Rather, the

demand for taxonomical and hierarchical races is foundational to the project of assimilating newly "discovered" plants and nonhuman animals into a system, as the vastness of nature would overwhelm and exceed the limits of the time and location's reigning epistemological frame (but not its appetite for mastery).[24] Race can only be subsidiary to the desire to animalize nonhuman animals or make "nature" knowable if one abstracts this desire from its historical context: "The Age of Discovery," which is to say the age of slavery and conquest.[25]

If, as Foucault maintains in *The Order of Things*, our current hegemonic, "universalist" conception of "man" is a mutation of prior metaphysical conceptions of being, then I would qualify this insight by insisting that this mutation was and remains an effect of slavery, conquest, and colonialism. The metaphysical question of "the human," as one of *species* in particular, arose through the organizational logics of racialized sexuation and the secularizing imperatives (largely economic, but not exclusively so) of an imperial paradigm that sought dominion over life, writ large. At the meeting point of natural philosophy and the so-called Age of Discovery, natural science instituted its representational logics of somatic difference in ever-increasingly secularized ontological terms.

Hegel represents perhaps the most extreme articulation of "the African's" animality, one in which animality is thought not only to be a feature, but *the essence* of African life. At times, from reading Hegel's (and arguably Kant's) geographical theories, one could conclude that his theory of nature and animals is animated by a desire to fix race as teleological hierarchy: to make race knowable and predictable. For Hegel declares:

> Even the animals show the same inferiority as the human beings. The fauna of America includes lions, tigers, and crocodiles. But although they are otherwise similar to their equivalents in the Old World, they are in every respect smaller, weaker, and less powerful. (163)

In this case, it is not the native's likeness to animals that defines human animality; instead animals' likeness to American Indians defines animals in their animality. The quality of American Indian being becomes the term through which "nature" is defined. This is not to say that his

thoughts on nonhuman animals are merely a justification for his theories of race, but rather it does demonstrate that we cannot assume that racism does not animate conceptions of some of our most foundational theories of nature and nonhuman animality. Most of the humanist thought discussed here was developed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when the slave trade was increasingly under scrutiny by abolitionists. Contestation had risen to unprecedented levels, and as a result, slavery increasingly required justification (Jordan 27, 231–232). These justifications relied heavily on the African's purported animality. Even Georges Leopold Cuvier's classification of humanity into three distinct varieties—Caucasian, Mongolian, and Ethiopian—emphasized the superiority of the Caucasian and is elaborated in his book titled *Animal Kingdom* (Cuvier 50).

In *Notes on a State of Virginia,* Thomas Jefferson attempts to qualify the essence of black people's humanity. What is crucial is that Jefferson defines black people as "animal" not based on a direct correlation to nonhuman animals but on the specificity of black people's humanity, particularly with regard to black embodiment, sexuality, intelligence, and emotions: aesthetically displeasing form, bestial sexuality, and minor intelligence and feeling. Regarding the heart and mind, he states:

> They are more ardent after their female; but love seems with them to be more an eager desire, than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation. Their griefs are transient. Those numberless afflictions, which render it doubtful whether heaven has given life to us in mercy or in wrath are less felt, and sooner forgotten with them. (Jefferson 46)

Jefferson's arguments recognize black humanity, but the question is what kind of humanity is imputed to black(ened) people? As he states, "It is not against experience to suppose, that different species of the same genus, or varieties of the same species, may possess different qualifications" (Jefferson 151).

Following Aristotle, humanity and animality are not mutually exclusive terms in much Eurocentric humanistic thought—however, there is an important qualification: the logic of conquest, slavery, and colonialism produced a linear and relational conception of human animality. Whereas Europeans are moral/rational/political animals, the recogni-

tion of black people's humanity did not unambiguously and unidirectionally elevate black people's ontologized status vis-à-vis nonhuman animals. "Being human" instead provided a vehicle for reinforcing a striated conception of human species. Thus, the extension and recognition of shared humanity across racial lines is neither "denied" nor mutual, reciprocal human recognition; rather, it is more accurately deemed bestializing humanization and inverted recognition. Instead of denying humanity, black people are humanized, but this humanity is burdened with the specter of abject animality. In fact, all of the thinkers above identify black people as human (however attenuated and qualified); thus, assimilation into the category of "universal humanity" should not be equated with black freedom. Assimilation into "universal humanity" is precisely this tradition's modus operandi. But what are the methods? And what are the costs?

Too often, our conception of antiblackness is defined by the specter of "denied humanity" or "exclusion." Yet as Saidiya Hartman has identified in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, the process of making the slave relied on the abjection and criminalization of slave humanity, rather than the denial of it. Hartman asks:

> suppose that the recognition of humanity held out the promise not of liberating the flesh or redeeming one's suffering but rather of intensifying it? Or what if this acknowledgment was little more than a pretext for punishment, dissimulation of the violence of chattel slavery and the sanction given it by the law and the state, and an instantiation of racial hierarchy? What if the endowments of man—conscience, sentiment, and reason—rather than assuring liberty or negating slavery acted to yoke slavery and freedom? Or what if the heart, the soul, and the mind were simply the inroads of discipline rather than that which confirmed the crime of slavery. (5)

Hartman contends that the recognition of the enslaved's humanity did not redress slavery's abuses nor the arbitrariness of the master's power since in most instances the acknowledgment of the humanity of the enslaved was a "complement" to the arrangement of chattel property rather than its "remedy"(6). She demonstrates that recognition of the

enslaved's humanity served as a pretext for punishment, dissimulation of chattel slavery's violence, and the sanction given it by the law and the state (Hartman 5). What's more, rather than fostering "equality," this acknowledgment often served as an instantiation of racial hierarchy, as the slave is "recognized" but only as a lesser human in (pre)evolutionist discourse or criminalized by state discourses. In other words, objecthood and humanization were two sides of the same coin, as ties of affection could be manipulated and will was criminalized.

The enslaved bifurcated existence as both an object of property and legal person endowed with limited rights, protections, and criminal culpability produced a context where consent, reform, and protection extended the slave's animalized status rather than ameliorated objectification. From this perspective, emancipation is less of a decisive event than a reorganization of a structure of violence, an ambivalent legacy, with gains and losses, where inclusion could arguably function as an intensification of racial subjection. Echoing Hartman, I would argue for reframing black subjection not as a matter of imperfect policy nor as evidence for a spurious commitment to black rights (which is undeniably the case) but rather as necessitating a questioning of the universal liberal human project. "The human" and "the universal" subject of rights and entitlements assumed a highly particularized subject that is held as paradigmatic, subjugating all other conceptions of being and justice. Furthermore, if the following assertion by Achille Mbembe is correct, "the obsession with *hierarchy* . . . provides the constant impetus to count, judge, classify, and eliminate, both persons and things" in the name of "humanizing" the colonized, I ask, how can we confidently distinguish humanization from animalization (Mbembe 192)? What we have at hand is more complicated than a simple opposition such as "exclusion versus inclusion," "the human" versus "the animal," and "humanization versus dehumanization." Consequently, a new epistemology and transformative approach to *being* is needed rather than the extension of human recognition under the state's normative conception.

As long as "the animal" remains an intrinsic but abject feature of "the human," black freedom will remain elusive and black lives in peril, as "the animal" and "the black" are not only interdependent representations but also entangled concepts. While there are particular Euroanthropocentric discourses about specific animals, just as there are particular

forms of antiblack racialization based on ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and national origin, for instance, these particularizing discourses are in relation to the organizing abstraction of "the animal" as "the black." To disaggregate "humanity" from the production of "black humanity," the one imposed on black(ened) people, assumes one could neutralize blackness and maintain the human's coherence. But the neutralization of blackness requires the dissolution of discourses on "the animal" and vice versa, but that is, to say the least, unlikely because "the animal" is a mode of being for which Man is at war. What is more plausible is that attempts to neutralize blackness and "the animal" will continue to be in practice, if not word, a means of discipline and eradication.

When humanization is thought to be synonymous with black freedom, or even a means to freedom, one risks inadvertently minimizing or extending the violence of "universal humanity." The "universal" is a site of imperial imposition and constant contestation rather than simply an ideal. The ongoing process of universalization is purchased precisely through the abjection and ontologizing plasticization of "the African." As Hegel argued, Africans are barred from universal humanity or spirit because they are not aware of themselves as conscious historical beings, a consequence of two intrinsic qualities. First, Africans worship themselves or nature rather than God. Second, Africans kill their king, which is a failure to recognize the superiority of a higher authority than themselves, whether that of God or law.

The African character, according to Hegel, springs from a geographical climate hostile to the achievement of spirit. Hegel builds on earlier theories that suggest that climate is not simply fertile ground for the cultivation of nature but is also the root of a teleological human character. He believed the "torrid" and "frigid" zones, "where nature is too powerful," do not provide the sufficient conditions for the dialectic of becoming, or the attainment of "freedom by means of internal reflection," whereby humanity is achieved in opposition to nature (Hegel 154). One achieves spirit by rising above nature, distinguishing oneself from one's natural surroundings. Only by passing through this stage is one able to recognize the presence of God as separate from the self and above Nature. Thus, God "exists in and for itself as a completely objective and absolute being of higher power" determining the course of everything in nature and humanity (Hegel 178). Hegel declares, "The Negro is an example of animal

man in all his savagery and lawlessness" and the African's "primitive state of nature is in fact a state of animality" (177, 178).

The practice whereby Africans "worship the moon, the sun, and the rivers," animating these natural forms "in their imagination, at the same time treating them as completely independent agents," Hegel believes, ultimately makes the mistake of identifying nature's power without identifying that nature has an eternal law or providence behind it, providing universal and permanent natural order (Hegel 178). The African's "arbitrariness" triumphs over permanent natural order. Thus, the African is not capable of the rational universality embedded in the concepts of law, ethics, and morality. As free rational laws are, for Hegel, the bases of freedom, Hegel formulates most systematically a conception of "the African" that is both *of* humanity but not *in* humanity. Thus, humanity is not strictly a biological imperative but a cultural achievement in Hegelian thought.

Hegel pronounces "the African" an animal precisely through the rejection of African political and spiritual rationality, even while denying the existence of African rational capability all together. One must ask, how can one deny the presence of African rationality through a method that acknowledges its existence? And, to what extent is black humanity "excluded" when it is central to the construction of European humanity as an achievement? Infamous pronouncements aside, Hegel's conclusion is circular: his logic collapses against the weight of his precepts and method. This circuitous logic is one we inherit when a *difference* in Reason is interpreted as *absence or chaos*.[26]

As Mbembe notes in *On the Postcolony*, the problem of universal humanity shapes current conditions of ethics and justice:

> Each time it came to peoples different in race, language, and culture, the idea that we have, concretely and typically, the same flesh, or that in Husserl's word, "My flesh already has the meaning of being a flesh typical in general for us all," became problematic. The theoretical and practical recognition of the body of "the stranger" as flesh and body just like mine, the *idea of a common human nature, a humanity shared with others*, long posed, and still poses, a problem for Western consciousness. (2)

Hegel's theory of "universal humanity" has influenced the culture of rights and law, including human rights law, but at the cost of erasing

competing conceptions of being and justice that *are not* rooted in the opposition between Man and Nature.

A conception of humanity that Hegel dismissed as "nature-worship" animates the work of famed South African artist Ezrom Legae, in particular his *Chicken Series* (Hegel 133). Legae created artworks in ink and pencil as well as totemic bronze sculptures (Figure P.1). In 1977, Legae expressed his feelings about the gunned-down child protesters during the Soweto uprising and the murder of Bantu antiapartheid leader Steve Biko at the hands of the police through chiaroscuro, a set of pencil and ink drawings. In *Biko's Ghost*, Shannen Hill asserts that the *Chicken Series* remains among two of the best known of all works that explore Steve Biko's death (116). A medium that mobilizes the polarity of black:white, by mixing light and substance, according to Richard Dyer, chiaroscuro can become a key feature of the representation of white humanity as translucence: privileging the "radiant white face" and obscuring "the opaque black one," "which is at the very least consonant with the perceptual/moral/racial slippages of western dualism" (115–116). Channeling Anne Hollander, Dyer argues that chiaroscuro is a technique used to "discipline, organize and fix the image, suggesting the exercise of spirit over subject matter" (Dyer 115). If, as Dyer suggests, chiaroscuro "allows the spiritual to be manifest in the material" because it selectively lets light through, Legae's subversion, his chiaroscuro's representation of spirit, bends the semiotics of the Christian West and black South Africa in a direction that calls for the overthrow of (state) hierarchies of race and "the human" rooted in polarities of the enlightened and benighted.[27] In the drawings, there are fragile domestic fowls and human–bird hybrids: broken bones, battered, impaled, crucified, fragmented, and swollen. Tortured bodies are alongside eggs, figures of renewal. The drawings collectively speak to the torture, sacrifice, and regeneration of South Africa's Black Consciousness movement.

As John Peffer notes, in terms of its manifest content, the image is that of Christian martyrdom: a crucified chicken. However, the animal aspect is not simply a metaphor for the pained existence of human life under the rule of apartheid; it also illustrates the animal potential of the human. This felt conception of humanity's animal potential is rooted in a cosmological system, a philosophy where the potency of animals may be shared with humans. Humans, especially those who are spiritually

powerful, such as community leaders or healers, harness the spiritual and even physical characteristics of animals. For South Africans such as Legae, those depicted in his work are no longer simply human, as they are transformed by the taking on of the physical and psychical potential of animals. Thus, they are not merely metaphorically animals, but are altered in a physical and psychical sense. His work is a challenge to Manichean distinctions between the physical and the spiritual as well as "human versus the animal" (Peffer 58–59).

When the prevailing notion of (human) being becomes synonymous with "universal humanity" or "the human" in discourses of law and popular consciousness, this is an outcome of power, whereby one worldview is able to supplant another onto-epistemological system with a different set of ethical possibilities. The more "the human" declares itself "universal," the more it imposes itself and attempts to crowd out correspondence across the fabric of being and competing conceptions of being. The insistence on the universality of "the human" allows for the multiplication and proliferation of this abstraction's aggression. To overcome a competing model, Western humanism has historically harnessed the force of the state; not only does this take the form of direct state violence, but it is also accomplished by epistemic erasure. Attacks on indigenous forms of knowledge are essential to the process of normalizing a colonial episteme. In bids for recognition and legibility of suffering, within national and global judicial bodies, one's legal identity and injury must speak the language of a particular philosophy of the human. This is so despite the fact that universal humanity, as defined by Hegel and taken up in liberal humanist judicial bodies, is rooted in an anti-African epistemology.

However, under the circumstances, Legae's protest did benefit, *to an extent*, from its opacity and incommensurability with respect to the state's conception of the human, as its critique was obscured from the state. Its cosmological codes, its animating conception of humanity, were rendered illegible by the same force of law that sparked his outrage and grief. *However, what was opaque to the state was immediately identifiable to South Africans like himself.* The current conception of universal humanity does not move beyond a Western, secularized cultural mode and thus misrecognizes and occludes African subjectivity. Thus, we cannot take universal humanity at its word that it is indeed "universal." Hegel's

conception of universal humanity aggressively negates Legae's conception of being and world. Namely, Hegel's humanism disregards the rationality, reflexivity, and abstract reasoning and idiom of representation that constitute Legae's vitalizing mode of insubordination. According to Hegel, such a considered act could never spring from "nature-worship" cosmological worldviews (133).

Ironically, the manner in which "the human" announces its universality provides the occasion for Legae's protest to slip under the radar of the apartheid South African government and elude censorship. Evoking the latent animal potential of those brutalized by the state's violence, an alternative mode of being (human) and attendant to spirit, the *Chicken Series* bypasses the problem of the representationalism and its historical reification of the traumatized black body. Thus, Legae could provide powerful witness to events barred from public discourse by an apartheid government, challenging apartheid state terror overtly (opaque). His conception of being, or ontology, defends indigenous African life from the encroachment of a humanism that universalizes itself through torture and intimidation, yes, but also via imperial epistemology, ontology, and ethics.[28] Considering that much of the world does not adhere to a worldview guided by human–animal binarism nor is legible within these terms, I wonder what other modes of relating, epistemologies of being, and ethical possibilities exist beyond the horizon of "the human" and "the animal"?

Some believe, like Lewis Gordon, that black people must be humanists for the "obvious" reason, that the dominant group can "give up" humanism for the simple fact that their humanity is presumed, while other communities have struggled too long for the "humanistic prize" (Gordon 39–46). But what if the enslaved and colonized "no longer accept concepts as gift, nor merely purify and polish them, but first make and create them, present them and make them convincing?" (Nietzsche 409). The elusive "humanist prize"—the formal, symmetrical extension of European humanism—makes *achieving* its conception of "the human" a prerequisite of equitable recognition, yet its conception of humanity already includes the African, but as abject, as plastic. Thus, in order to *become* human without qualification, you must already *be* Man in its idealized form, yet Man, understood simultaneously as an achievement and bio-ontology, implies whiteness and specifically nonblackness.

We misdiagnose the problems of Western globalizing humanism when we take universalism at its word, seeing its failures as simply a problem of implementation or procedure. This results in a further misdiagnosis of the causes and outcomes of freedom and unfreedom. Freedom itself is an evolving practice rather than a normative ideal (D. Roberts, *Killing* 183). As an ideal, freedom is shielded from critique by alternative conceptions rooted in another order of being/knowing/feeling. That said, I also believe that we have misrecognized the refractory desires of black culture, which are commonly not to assimilate but to transform.

## After Man

In the Enlightenment thought mentioned above, "the African" is a discourse that develops out of the specific historical context of slavery and expansionism beyond the so-called temperate zones, an expansion into what came to be called Africa and the Caribbean. The discourses that developed to narrate Africa as a land of abject bestial humanity spiraled out and sought to take possession of all African diasporic peoples beyond the geo/ethno/linguistic specificities of "the African" and "the Hottentot." As Mbembe puts it, "What we have said about the slave also holds for the *native*. From the point of view of African history, the notion of the native belongs to the grammar of animality" (236). Thus, while the black thinkers in *Becoming Human* were born in different nations—South Africa, Cuba, Kenya, the United States, among others—all must define themselves in a globalizing antiblack order that raises "the animal question" as ultimately an existential one.

In this project, I am interested in how African diasporic writers and artists not only critique animalization but also exceed critique by overturning received ontology and epistemic regimes of species that seek to define blackness through the prism of abject animality. By doing so, they present possibilities that point our attention to the potential of modes of worlding that are more advantageous to life writ large. I home in on the epistemic locations of science and philosophy not only because these are the sites that have continued to be privileged in a contest over meaning and truth but also because the questions pursued in *Becoming Human* are biocultural, or more precisely sociogenic: they concern the ways that we are Homo Narrans, both bios and mythos.[29] Instead of aiming for a com-

prehensive approach to African diasporic perspectives on the so-called animal question, this study does not claim to be all-inclusive, but it does claim that the strategies examined here offer a set of cases that enlarge the field of being's possibility beyond antiblack ontological plasticity. They initiate what appears impossible and create that which is to come.

In *Habeas Viscus*, Alexander Weheliye maintains, "The greatest contribution to critical thinking of black studies—and critical ethnic studies more generally—is the transformation of the human into a heuristic model and not an ontological fait accompli" (8). *Becoming Human*'s contribution to this effort is its concept of plasticity, which maintains that black(ened) people are not so much as dehumanized as nonhumans or cast as liminal humans nor are black(ened) people framed as animal-like or machine-like but are cast as sub, supra, and human *simultaneously* and in a manner that puts being in peril because the operations of simultaneously being everything and nothing for an order—human, animal, machine, for instance—constructs black(ened) humanity as the privation and exorbitance of form. Thus the demand placed on black(ened) being is not that of serialized states nor that of the in-between nor partial states but a statelessness that collapses a distinction between the virtual and the actual, abstract potential and situated possibility, whereby the abstraction of blackness is enfleshed via an ongoing process of wresting form from matter such that raciality's materialization is that of a dematerializing virtuality.

What sets *Becoming Human* apart is the manner in which it takes seriously that black literary and visual culture theorizes and philosophizes. While certainly highlighting historical and contemporary individual black philosophical thinkers, this project is equally interested in the philosophical thought that occurs in/as expressive culture. Given that, historically, black people have, in the main, been excluded from the more recognized domains of politics, religion, and philosophy, I maintain that black arts and letters has often been a key site for philosophy, theology, and political theory. *Becoming Human* acknowledges the historical and ongoing exclusions of black people from the domain of the "properly" theoretical and philosophical, but in what follows, you will not find an effort justifying or trying to convince anyone that black thought has something to say about European Continental thought and it is valuable to do so; it just gets on with the work of reading black arts

and letters philosophically. Such a reading is not content with reading a novel or poem or work of visual art as mere example of the ideas of an individual "great" thinker; rather, in reading literature and visual art for theory, the approach is that of placing the theories of/as literary and visual art in conversation with more recognizable means and forms of philosophy. It is not an attempt to be exhaustive or comprehensive rather it takes aim at assumptive logics by disrupting and reconstellating the frame through which we have come to question blackness's relation to Man, particularly as it pertains to "the animal" and "species." Thus, the aim is to establish new entry points into the conversation about the nature of the problem and point to other horizons rather than purport to exhaust the monumental question of race and "the human." Subscribing to the view all is present, when it comes to modern blackness, *Becoming Human*—while historically situating and contextualizing "theory"—has the principal intention of depth in its critical aims rather than producing the effects of the historian.

The modes of being examined in *Becoming Human* do not advocate a politics based on rights and entitlements under the law, precisely because their forms are undergirded by demands that are either criminalized, pathologized, or simply rendered illegible by law and the normative mode of "the human"; these demands emerge from a different way of being/knowing/feeling existence than the ones legible and codified in law and the dialectics of Man. Their contestation invests in speculation and expressive culture as a site of critique and creativity. They put forth transient and fleeting expressions of potentiality in the context of the incongruity between substantial freedom and legal emancipation as well as that of colonialism and decolonization. These gestures of potentiality are often incomplete but point to a desire and world-upending claim that is not currently recognized in the social orders that gave rise to them. Each chapter of *Becoming Human* engages a different aspect of what it is to problematize the category of Man from that space that has been foreclosed in order for the category to exist.[30]

The arc of *Becoming Human* starts with the grounding reference of slavery. It puts forward the theory of ontologized plasticity based on reading across Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* and 1873 speech on "Kindness to Animals" and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* for their respective elaboration and philosophical interventions into the idea of the Chain

of Being and its racialization of the human–animal distinction. Next, it examines the concept of "the world," by reading Nalo Hopkinson's genre-defying and literary philosophical *Brown Girl in the Ring* for its upending of Heideggerian metaphysics, in particular Heidegger's highly influential tripartite system of human, animal, and stone, through the text's allegorical examination of the matter of black women's being in the world. *Becoming Human* then turns to a reading of Octavia Butler's "Bloodchild," a text that deconstructs the racialized gendered and sexual imaginary of body and self, accompanying scientific debates about the origin of life itself and symbiosis, a theory of cross-species evolutionary association. Finally, *Becoming Human* concludes with Wangechi Mutu's *Histology of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumors* and Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals*; Mutu's visual art and Lorde's journals bring to the forefront the problem of antiblackness, in the mode of a discourse of species, and its role in reproductive health disparity. *Becoming Human* closes with a coda that initiates a black feminist theory of the necropolitical. The last two chapters and coda concern the pertinence of the biopolitics of antiblackness to historically recent and contemporary theories of biological discourse and species. However, all of the texts in my study underscore the recursive trajectory of discourses on black animality.

Chapter 1, "Losing Manhood: Plasticity, Animality, and Opacity in the (Neo)Slave Narrative," is introduced by Frederick Douglass's provocation from his 1845 *Narrative*, "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man" (389). Slavery, in particular the slave narrative, established the terms through which we commonly understand the bestialization of blackness. Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* has been central to interpretations that read African American literature through the framework of a petition for human recognition. Douglass, himself, arguably the nineteenth century's most iconic slave, grounds his critique of slavery in natural law. However, Douglass's later speeches problematize his commitment to the natural rights tradition found in his 1845 *Narrative*, by disrupting its racially hierarchical conception of being and challenging the animal abjection that is foundational to its ontology.

*Beloved* recalls rhetorical strategies, such as appeals to sentimentality and the sovereign "I" employed by Frederick Douglass, that diagnose

racialization and animalization as mutually constitutive modalities of domination under slavery. Chapter 1 examines how we might read Morrison as productively problematizing sentimentality as well as gendered appeals to discourses of the Self rooted in religio-scientific hierarchy, specifically the *scala naturae* or Chain of Being, as both discourses have historically recognized black humanity and included black people in their conceptualization of "the human," but in the dissimulating terms of an imperial racial hierarchy. *Beloved* extends Douglass's intervention by subjecting animality's abjection to further interrogation by foregrounding nonhuman animal perspective, destabilizing the epistemological authority of enslaving modernity, including its gendered and sexual logics. By doing so, *Beloved* destabilizes the very binaristic and teleological epistemic presumptions that authorize the black body as border concept. Re-constellating the slave narrative genre, Morrison opens up a new way to interpret the genre, not as one that exposes slavery's dehumanization but rather as one that meditates on the violence of liberal humanism's attempts at humanization. Unsettling calcified interpretations of history and literary slave narratives, *Beloved* identifies the violation of slavery not in an unnatural ordering of man and beast but in its transmogrification of human form and personality as an experiment in plasticity and its limits therein, while also exploring what potential opacity holds for a generative disordering of being.

Chapter 2, "Sense of Things: Empiricism and World in Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*," is a reading of Nalo Hopkinson's 1999 Locus Award–winning near-future novel *Brown Girl in the Ring*. *Becoming Human* avers that gendered antiblack metaphysics continues to subtend scales of world among humans, animals, and objects in Heidegger's still highly influential thought despite being imagined as a corrective to previous scales, such as the *scala naturae* or the Chain of Being examined in chapter 1. It explores what other sense of world becomes available in spaces of abjection and the unthought. Martin Heidegger once wrote regarding the relation between thought and being: "[1.] the stone (material object) is *worldless* [weltlos]; [2.] the animal is *poor in world* [weltarm]; [3.] man is *world-forming* [weltbildend]" (*Fundamental* 177). Chapter 2 argues that the absent presence of the black female figure functions as an interposition that subtends and therefore paradoxically holds the potential to topple the logic of this schema and investigates how, as a con-

sequence of this system's imperialist worldmaking and monopolization of sense, the matter of the black female body is vertiginously affected. An inquiry into onto-epistemology, this chapter explores the reciprocal production of aesthesis and empiricism, both the seemingly scientific and the perceptual knowledge that signify otherwise under conditions of imperial Western humanism.

I argue that as an enabling condition of an imperial Western humanist conception of *the* world *as such*, the black *mater*(nal) marks the discursive-material trace effects and foreclosures of the dialectics of hegemonic common sense and that the anxieties stimulated by related signifiers, such as the black(ened) maternal image, voice, and lifeworld, allude to the latent symbolic-material capacities of black *mater*, as mater, as matter, to destabilize or even rupture the reigning order of representation that grounds the thought–world relation. In other words, the specter of black mater—that is, nonrepresentability—haunts the terms and operations tasked with adjudicating the thought–world correlate or the proper perception of *the* world *as such*, including hierarchical distinctions between reality and illusion, Reason and its absence, subject and object, science and fiction, speculation and realism, which turn on attendant aporias pertaining to immanence and transcendence. Exploring the mind-body-social nexus in Hopkinson's fiction, I contend that in *Brown Girl in the Ring,* vertigo is evoked as both a symptom and a metaphor of inhabiting a reality discredited (a blackened reality) that is at once the experience of the carceral and the apprehension of a radically redistributed sensorium. I argue that black mater holds the potential to transform the terms of reality and feeling, therefore rewriting the conditions of possibility of the empirical.

While remaining attentive to the role of the scientific in the philosophical and the philosophical in scientific throughout, the second half of *Becoming Human* turns, more centrally, to the question of "species" in scientific discourse. Having established the plastic function of blackness in the still active metaphysics of The Great Chain and the conditioning absent presence of black mater for Heideggerian scales of being, *Becoming Human* moves from an investigation of the philosophical production of "the animal" to the scientific production of "species." I demonstrate that in scientific discourse, antiblackness functions there, too, as an essential means of arranging human–animal and human–nonhuman

distinctions. Chapter 3, the penultimate chapter, "'Not Our Own': Sex, Genre, and the Insect Poetics of Octavia Butler's 'Bloodchild,'" begins an inquiry into the constitutive role of antiblackness for the logics of scientific taxonomical species hierarchies. The chapter identifies the agentic capaciousness of embodied somatic processes and investigates how matter's efficacies register social inscription. Chapter 3 provides a reading of risk, sex, and embodiment in Butler's "Bloodchild," a text that affirms the continued importance of risk for establishing new modes of life and worlding, despite historical violence and embodied vulnerability. "Bloodchild" is instructive for situating the racial, gendered-sexual politics of the idea of evolutionary association, or symbiogenesis, in the historical discourses of evolutionary and cell biology, as well as deposing a cross-racially hegemonic conception of the autonomous, bounded body that underwrites phantasies of possessive individualism, self-ownership, and self-determination. Perhaps surprisingly, one organism in particular—lichen—has played no minor role in the idea of evolutionary association. As a material actor, lichen has been a source of imagination for troubling the idea of the human individual.

In 1868, when Swiss botanist Simon Schwendener put forth his theory that lichen were actually an association of a fungus or algae—modified fungi, rather than one or the other—he employed vexed social imagery (Schwendener). He argued that lichens represented a master–slave relation: the master was a fungus of the order Ascomycetes, "a parasite which is accustomed to live upon the work of others; its slaves are green algals, which it has sought out or indeed caught hold of, and forced into its service" (Schwendener 4). As Jan Sapp describes, his theory was met with "bitter opposition," considered a threat to taxonomical classification and disciplinary boundaries (4). One commentator described the theory as "the unnatural union between a captive Algal damsel and tyrant Fungal master" (4). This theory would eventually be known as symbiosis. Similarly, the term "colonialism," Eric C. Brown explains in *Insect Poetics*, "replays one of the most visible ways in which humans and insects have been compared: insect colonies take their name from the Latin verb *colere*, meaning 'to cultivate,' especially agriculturally" (xiv). This poetic Latinization of the zoological world extends the bygone Roman Empire into the realms of contemporary biological science and political theory.

If, as Donna Haraway states in *How Like a Leaf*, "science fiction is political theory," the penultimate chapter demonstrates that in Butler's narratives, interspecies relations between humans and insects, parasites, viruses, protoctists, fungi, and bacteria open up the question of what it means to be (human) rather than neatly map onto intrahuman relations and histories (120). This chapter aims to critically examine the stakes, possibilities, and problems of trans-species metaphors at the interface of Butler's fiction and its criticism by examining how racial slavery and colonial ideas about gender, sexuality, and "nature," more generally, have informed *evolutionary discourses on the origin of life itself* and our ideas of cellular biology by looking at the racialized history of the theory of symbiosis in relation to "Bloodchild," Butler's 1984 Hugo and Nebula Award–winning short story that creatively and philosophically reimagines symbiosis as well as what it means to be (human) and to have a body. Departing from the substitutional logic Sapp and Brown identify, chapter 3 explores how Butler's fiction overturns commonly held conceptions of "the human's" relation to the nonhuman not by analogy but by dislodging established presumptions regarding the fundaments of human subjectivity and the materiality of the body. With "Bloodchild," Butler offers a reorientation to the subject and its related associated notions of subjectivity and subjectivation. Butler challenges conventions of literary genre and those genres of the human predicated on racial slavery and colonial narratives of possessive individualism, sovereignty, and self-determination through a literary meditation on sexuality beyond heteronormativity, sexuation beyond dimorphism, and reproduction beyond the man–woman dyad.

The fourth and final chapter, in an alternate reading of Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals* and Wangechi Mutu's cyborg figures in *Histology of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumors*, identifies the manner in which the nullification of black mater as *mater*, as matter, continues to underwrite contemporary species hierarchies, including that of race, as race is a "discourse of species." This chapter, "Organs of War: Measurement and Ecologies of De*mater*ialization in the Works of Wangechi Mutu and Audre Lorde," identifies the contemporary reorganization of racially sexuating bio-economies by examining biotechnology, tissue economies, and epigenetic discourse as well as furthers an investigation into the stakes of the manner in which the agencies of the organismic body

shape and are shaped by an antiblack world. "Racism," Sylvia Wynter argues, "is an *effect* of the biocentric conception of the human" ("Biocentric" 364, emphasis added). Biocentrism, as defined by Wynter, is a peculiar yet hegemonic logic of species; it espouses the belief that we are "biological beings who then create culture" (361). In other words, according to a biocentric logic, human cultural practices are linearly determined by groups' respective bio-ontological composition, which are vertically arranged by nature itself. Wynter contrasts this belief system's reductive investment in DNA as substratum and mechanistic causation with an alternative she terms *sociogeny*: "My proposal is that we are bio-evolutionarily prepared by means of language to inscript and autoinstitute ourselves in this or that modality of the human, always in adaptive response to the ecological as well as to the geopolitical circumstances in which we find ourselves" ("Biocentric" 361). With sociogeny, Wynter joins other critics of nature–culture binarism, perhaps most notably Haraway's natureculture, which has been recently extended by ecofeminist and feminist materialist conceptions such as Samantha Frost's "bioculture," Staci Alaimo's "trans-corporeality," and Karen Barad's "entanglement" and "intra-action."[31] But Wynter raises the stakes of these critiques by arguing that affect and desire are determinant of both nature and culture as their coproduction (matter and meaning) is given dynamic expression by biocentrism's raciality, which is to say our studied critiques of nature–culture oppositions and the phenomenon itself are inside of the economies of affect and desire generated by raciality.

Departing from an *exclusive* focus on structure, whether it be that of the double-helix or scaled up to the symbolic order, I argue that black female sex(uality) and reproduction are better understood via a framework of emergence and within the context of iterative, intra-active multiscalar systems—biological, psychological, environmental, and cultural. Mutu's *Histology of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumors* crucially reveals the stakes of this intra-activity as it pertains to the semio-material history of "the black female body," reproductive function, and sex(uality) as linchpin and opposable limit of "the human" in scientific taxonomies and medical science, particularly that of Linnaeus's *Systema Naturae* and Ernst Haeckel's highly aesthetic approach to evolutionary theory.[32] Mutu's art is notable for its constructive reorientation of the theorization of race via a reflexive methodological practice of collage, one that reframes

the spectatorial encounter from that of a determinate Kantian linear teleological drama of subjects and objects to that of intra-active processes and indeterminate feedback loops. Thus, this is not a study of a reified object but of an intra-actional field that includes material objects but is not limited to them.

While chapter 4 is principally concerned with the work of Mutu, I maintain that Lorde offers insights that are generative for a fuller appreciation of Mutu's critical artistic engagement with the racialization of biological reproductive systems and its somatic effects. Lorde's *The Cancer Journals* was one of the first critical analyses of female reproductive cancers to put forth an understanding of the body as an emergent and co-productive intra-actional system and to emphasize that semio-affective-psychic relations are crucial determinants of physiological processes. Lorde contends in *The Cancer Journals* that carcinogenesis is a feedback loop encompassing biological, psychological, environmental, and cultural agencies and, therefore, neither a matter of individualized disease nor inferior biology but rather a somaticization of politics, and, by politics, I mean war.

The coda closes *Becoming Human* with a consideration of recent developments in the biological sciences and biotechnology that have turned their attention to narrating the problem of "racial health disparity" in reproductive health. I suggest that work on the epigenome, mostly housed in the regulatory sciences—epidemiology and public health—possesses contradictory potential and thus uncertain possibilities with respect to (dis)articulating the antiblack logics that have conditioned the symbiosis of teleological determinism and evolutionary thought (whereby a developmental conception of "the human" is only one of its most obvious instantiations). Bringing the epigenome in conversation with my theory of ontologized plasticity, I argue that Mutu's aesthetic strategies, along with those of Legae, Douglass, Morrison, Hopkinson, and Lorde, featured in *Becoming Human* reveal a potential (with neither guarantee nor a manifest horizon of possibility—but a potential, nonetheless) for mutation beyond a mode of thought and representation that continually adheres to predefined rules and narratives that legitimate antiblack ordering and premature death.

I do not suggest consensus across the texts in this study, rather I am highlighting evidence of a disturbance within "the human's" epistemolo-

gies and horizon of meaning. This disturbance is suggestive of how we might theorize anew the paradoxes of regimes of knowledge and being that gave rise to the ongoing exigencies of enslavement and colonial modernity. Furthermore, they are highly innovative, creatively offering contrary and often counterintuitive approaches for how we might see humans and animals differently. I am less interested in finding a universal posture toward humanism in the form of a prescription on how we should be (human) or treat animals. That would run the risk of simply inverting the paradigmatic universal subject, obscuring the particular situatedness of my subject(s) by reproducing the normative logic of imperial humanism, one that equates an idealized Western subjectivity with universal law and universal law with justice. And, as we have seen, law may obscure ethics and justice because laws always point to a specific lived, historical, and embodied subjectivity—one that is not universally shared. I approach what follows without investing in any foundational authority, whether in philosophy, law, or science, because I do not believe it is necessary for ethical action; instead, this study takes as its central task the unsettling of foundational authority. It is precisely the condition of the absence of foundational authority that has commonly grounded black ethics.

Historically, foundational authority has either been hostile to or denied the possibility of black intellectualism and disqualified black people from ethical consideration. The seeds planted in the pages that follow spring from the embattled epistemology of peoples living at the vanishing point between direct domination and hegemony but who nevertheless generate a centrifugal and dissident way of being, feeling, and knowing existence.

1

# Losing Manhood

## *Plasticity, Animality, and Opacity in the (Neo)Slave Narrative*

The very essence of the male animal, from the bantam rooster to the four-star general, is to strut.
—Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action*

You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man.
—Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

Slavery and colonialism not only catalyzed the conscription of black people into hegemonically imperialist and racialized conceptions of "modernity" and "universal humanity" but also inaugurated Western modernity's condition of possibility, initiating a chain of events that have given rise to a transnational, capitalist order.[1] In light of this history, it stands to reason that we should critically remember New World slavery as epochal rupture.[2] Slavery's archival footprint is a ledger system that placed black humans, horses, cattle, and household items all on the same bill of purchase. This ledger's biopolitical arithmetic—its calculation of humanity—dislocated, depersonalized, and collapsed difference, except in the area of market value. In "Mathematics Black Life," Katherine McKittrick states that "this is where historic blackness comes from: the list, the breathless numbers, the absolutely economic, the mathematics of the unliving" (17). The ledger's life promised the social death of those enslaved.[3]

"Slave humanity" is an aporia with which we have yet to reckon. It may well mark the limit of the reckonable. Rather than view the paradoxical predicament of enslaved humanity through the lens of dehu-

manization, I contend that the concept of humanity itself is fractured and relational. In place of assuming the virtuousness of human recognition or humanization, I interrogate the methods upon which an imperialist and racialized conception of "universal humanity" attempted to "humanize" blackness. In the case of slavery, humanization and captivity go hand in hand. Too often, our conception of antiblackness is defined by the specter of "denied humanity," "dehumanization," or "exclusion," yet, as Saidiya Hartman has identified in her path-breaking study *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, the process of making the slave relied on the abjection and criminalization of the enslaved's humanity rather than merely on the denial of it.[4] Thus, humanization is not an antidote to slavery's violence; rather, slavery is a technology for producing a *kind* of human.

Following Hartman, my interest is in drawing attention not only to the manner in which black people have been excluded from the "life and liberty" of universal rights and entitlements but also to the conditions under which black people have been *selectively incorporated* into the liberal humanist project. Blackness has been central to, rather than excluded from, liberal humanism: the black body is an essential index for the calculation of degree of humanity and the measure of human progress. From the aporetic space of this inclusion that nevertheless masks itself as exclusion, I query how Toni Morrison's *Beloved* might disarticulate Eurocentric humanism while negotiating blackness's status as interposition in the ever-shifting biopolitical terms and stakes of "the human versus the animal." *Beloved*'s questioning of liberal humanism's selective recognition of black humanity is suggestive of a desire for a different mode of being/knowing/feeling and not simply a desire for fuller recognition within liberal humanism's terms.[5]

Toni Morrison's 1988 Pulitzer Prize–winning novel, *Beloved* (1987), is a neo-slave narrative that departs from and transforms the slave narrative convention of juxtaposing the degradation of slaves with that of animals in order to draw our attention not to the violence of dehumanization but rather to the violence of humanization.[6] More specifically, *Beloved* suggests that animalization and humanization of the slave's personhood are not mutually exclusive but mutually constitutive. In other words, the slave's humanity (the heart, the mind, the soul, and the body) is not denied or excluded but manipulated and prefigured as animal

whereby black(ened) humanity is understood, paradigmatically, as a state of abject *human* animality.

Morrison's text recalls rhetorical strategies employed by Frederick Douglass that diagnose racialization and animalization as mutually constitutive modalities of domination under slavery. Douglass has become an icon of nineteenth-century slavery, perhaps due to his dexterous navigation of competing liberal humanist rhetorical modes and affective registers, in particular sentimentality and religio-scientific hierarchy. Douglass calls into question the biopolitical logics and practices of slavery with respect to both humans and animals. However, he does so in a manner that reveals the seemingly near-inescapable paradoxes of liberal humanist recognition to the extent that one is conscripted by its terms—appeals to discourses of sentiment and Self.

Both sentiment and the sovereign "I" return us to racialized, gendered master narratives of identity and feeling, which the rooster's gaze in *Beloved* productively destabilizes.[7] Mister's gaze, or the exchange of glances between Mister and Paul D, offers a much-needed critical alternative to sentimental ethics—sympathy, compassion, protection, stewardship, care, and the humane—which has historically been conceived within the terms of a racialized, heteropatriarchal economy of sensibility. In what follows, I examine how we might read Morrison as productively problematizing sentimentality as well as gendered appeals to discourses of the Self rooted in religio-scientific hierarchy considering both discourses have historically recognized black humanity and included black people in their conceptualization of "the human" but in the dissimulating terms of an imperial racial hierarchy.

Re-constellating the slave narrative genre, Morrison opens up a new way to interpret the genre, not as one that exposes slavery's dehumanization but rather as one that meditates on the terror of liberal humanism's attempts at humanization. Unsettling calcified interpretations of history and literary slave narratives, *Beloved* identifies the violation of slavery not in an unnatural ordering of man and beast but in its transmogrification of human form and personality, as an experiment in plasticity and its limits therein. To put it differently, New World slavery established a field of demand that tyrannically presumed, as if by will alone, that the enslaved, in their humanity, could function as infinitely malleable lexical and biological matter, at once sub/super/human. What appear as alter-

nating, or serialized, discrete modes of (mis)recognition—sub/super/humanization, animalization/humanization, privation/superfluity—are in fact varying dimensions of a racializing demand that the slave be all dimensions at once, a simultaneous actualization of the discontinuous and incompatible: everything and nothing at the register of ontology such that form shall not hold. Blackness, in this case, functions not simply as negative relation but as a plastic fleshly being that stabilizes and gives form to human and animal as categories.

## "How a Slave Was Made a Man": Racialized Animality and the Paradoxes of Recognition

Canonized among literary studies of blackness, Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* has served as many critics and readers' introduction to the routine bestialization experienced by those enslaved in the southern United States. The text relies heavily on bestializing images and juxtapositions of slave and animal degradation, a strategy that sought to provoke moral persuasion and/or Christian outrage over a system of "unnatural" ordering that was discordant with God's law. For instance, Douglass describes how, upon the death of a master, the enslaved were divided and appraised:

> We were all ranked together at the valuation. Men and women, old and young, married and single, were ranked with horses, sheep, and swine. There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being. . . . After the valuation, then came the division. . . . We had no more voice in that decision than the brutes among whom we were ranked. (*Narrative* 271, 282)

As Jennifer Mason has observed, the "scale of being" to which Douglass refers is the *scala naturae*, or the Chain of Being, predicated on the commonplace view that all living beings could be placed on the rungs of a linear, hierarchical, and continuous ladder that extended from Earth to Heaven. Each step of the ladder corresponded to a different measure of perfection: God was at the top, humans were suspended between angels and animals, and inanimate things occupied the lowest rung (Mason 124).[8]

Douglass published the 1845 *Narrative* while acting as an orator for William Lloyd Garrison's Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. As Dou-

glass knew well, the philosophy of natural rights and its hierarchies of being—human superiority and uniqueness—were cornerstones of the rhetorical arsenal for abolitionists like Garrison. Yet, the adoption of the Chain of Being framework neither provides the slave standing nor authorizes the slave's testimony.

While the Chain of Being may have suggested that placing humans and animals on the same rank was discordant with God's law, it did not provide a stable place for black people to argue for symmetrical, liberal humanist recognition, much less redress, since the enslaved were merely a rung away from animals or possibly even conjoined with their animal neighbors as "animal humans" on what was a *continuous* scale. Once (human) being became coincident with animality, recognition of one's humanity as such would not guarantee a respite from violence based on race because humans were measured by their purported capacity to be more or less "animal."[9] As Winthrop Jordan has noted, the strategic use of the Great Chain was exceedingly tricky for abolitionists because

> [o]n the one hand the existence of the Chain of Being was difficult to deny categorically without implying that Nature was not so highly ordered as it might be. Contrarily, to admit the possibility that Nature was hierarchically ordered was to open the door to inherent inferiority, no matter how strenuously the unity of the human species was objected. (496)[10]

As in this case, if black people were human but represented the lowest human rung of the ladder and, thus, embodied the specter of "the animal" within the human, then the extension of human recognition dissimulated rather than simply abated race's animalizing discourse.

As exemplified by the Chain of Being, modern racialized animalization stratified humanity, preemptively barring or excluding black participation in the symbolic order while also establishing or including black humanity as an object in the discursive-material institution of proto-scientific Western humanism. Here, human recognition is extended, but only to serve further objectification. The recognition of the slave's humanity was cast in the terms of a globally expansive debate over what *kind* of human black(ened) people represented. To put it plainly, the discourse of race is a discourse of speciation and thus indissociable from the historical development of what Cary Wolfe has called the "discourse

of species" and "the animal" as a fundamental site of onto-epistemo-ethical reflection.[11]

The Chain of Being and related frameworks provided a sense of order and stability at the dawn of an expanding imperial order, which was newly conceived in global terms. As noted by Jordan, the Great Chain and related systems developed in a manner that was responsive to global political and epistemological shifts that emerged in the wake of slavery including the French Revolution and the ascendancy of comparative anatomy in natural philosophy (485). The slave's disputed humanity would ground claims about what was proper to man by functioning as its plastic limit case. Therefore, I suggest that slave labor be principally understood not as forced, unwaged labor exploitation in the master's enclave but as an essential enabling condition of the modern grammar of the Subject, a peculiar grammar of kind or logic of species, one that approaches and articulates the planetary scale.[12] Yet as Jordan reminds us, while blackness might have functioned as a stabilizer, the logic of the Great Chain was always inherently tautological; the Great Chain lapsed into incoherence once specific cases came into view:

> To obtain criteria for ranking all creatures on a single scale was virtually impossible. . . . When natural philosophers tried to decide whether the ape, the parrot, or the elephant was next below man, for instance, the grand Chain began to look like an unprepossessing pile of ill-assorted links. . . . Any sharp increase in detailed knowledge of the multitude of species was bound to make hierarchical construction impossible even for the most masterful craftsman. How was one going to rank thousands of species of plants in exact order? (222)

It was for these precise reasons, I would argue, that the compulsive repositioning of blackness as limit case, in its abstraction, as type was not only necessary but also an essential stabilizer.

The Chain of Being framework was a compromise between the increasing authority of science and the powerful sway of Christianity. Christian abolitionists deployed the Chain of Being as a rhetorical strategy in the hope of rousing a largely white, northern, Christian readership to ethical action. Most white Christian denominations at the time

sanctioned slavery based on a reactionary interpretation of scripture. Abolitionists countered by producing interpretations that repurposed biblical authority. But both pro- and antislavery factions, by appropriating an established discourse, necessarily obscured the singular nature of New World slavery's cataclysmic violence.[13] Rather than registering the seismic stakes of the enslaved's claim to being or attending to the contradiction inherent in *racializing* humanity, the twin strategies of moral suasion and Christian outrage joined the fray of contemporaneous debates concerning the potential consequences of slavery for the fate of the white soul and/or the future of the republic.[14]

Many scholars have underscored the exceptional originality of Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*. Deborah McDowell has even suggested that it might be best understood as "sui generis."[15] However, it is worth asking: how might the *Narrative*'s subversion of genre or innovation of both slave and abolitionist literature as noted by scholars *necessarily* exist alongside and even be enabled by the fraught rhetorical inheritance that occasioned Douglass's textual performance? In particular, I want to consider the ways in which abolitionist discourse and its conventions are constitutive of Douglass's textual performance of the "truth" of slavery and the veracity of experience. Those formerly enslaved, like Douglass, were pressured from within white-led abolitionist circles to trope one's personally nuanced experience of slavery to produce recognizable characters, plot devices, and rhetorical strategies because the slave narrative had become a genre, and like all genres, it had narrative strictures.

In a study that investigates "the discursive terrain" awaiting slave testimony, Dwight McBride observes the following:

> If the situation of the discursive terrain is that there is a language about slavery that preexists the slave's telling of his or her own experience of slavery, or an entire dialogue or series of debates that preexist the telling of the slave narrator's particular experience, how does one negotiate the terms of slavery in order to be able to tell one's own story? The importance of this idea is that the discursive terrain does not simply function to create a kind of overdetermined way of telling an experience; it creates the very codes through which those who would be readers of the slave narrative understand the experience of slavery.

> . . . Even more radically, the discourse of slavery is what allowed the slave to speak in the first place. But to speak what? It allowed for speech on one's very experience as a slave. That is, it produced the occasion for bearing witness, but to an experience that had already been theorized and prophesied. . . . Before the slave ever speaks, we know the slave; we know what his or her experience is, and we know how to read that experience. Although we do not ourselves have that experience, we nevertheless know it and recognize it by its language.[16]

"To be heard at all," McBride argues, the witness writes to, if not for, an imagined reader, who is, in turn, discursively constructed out of a cacophonous debate concerning the controversy surrounding the being of the witness (2). This scenario arguably positions the witness as an object of discourse and/or noise—an actant rather than an interlocutor.[17] It is likely that the slave's actual perspective (rather than unmediated experience, which is ineligible for strict narration by the very nature of representation) was often only obliquely present in the text's inconsistencies, ellipses, and constrained speech. The writing of subsequent versions of Douglass's narrative reveals *the text's and the self's* opacity and instability as "origin."

Following McDowell, I want to inquire into rhetorical inheritance: In what ways does Douglass's corpus exist inside and outside of slavery's and abolitionism's textuality? Or more precisely, how does this polarity undermine our ability to identify and assess the enabling conditions of textuality? Moreover, as a number of scholars have observed, reading slave narratives as unmediated truth would not only reinforce the problematic conflation between black authors and their texts but also potentially undermine our ability to critically examine both their content and the historical context of their production, considering that they arose within a literary cultural industry and often under the duress of fugitivity's criminalization.[18]

The point here is not to criticize Douglass's strategic use of the Chain of Being framework or his adroit facility with sentimentality but to take stock of its constraints. Those untimely voices negated by the prevailing episteme of their age may never find the words to satisfactorily describe their experience, or their speech may be rendered illegible or inaudible by power. This is so even when their voices are, like Douglass's, bold

and eloquent. That said, the insistence that slavery's violation be articulated as a mistake of categorization (rendering humans as beasts) or application undercuts our ability to subject racialization's justifications to fuller critique. This approach undermines our capacity for a more thorough assessment of the life-and-death stakes of slavery's equation of black humanity with a state of animality. A fuller critique would risk calling into question not only its application but also its epistemic foundations. Antiracism has too often limited our critique of "animalization" to a critique of the term's scope instead of disrupting its authority in the management of life. Power has legitimated itself by taking refuge in the presumed necessity of managing, disciplining, criminalizing, and extinguishing "the animal." The debate or controversy over black humanity is itself a form of necropolitics. I am interested in how we can undermine the assumptive logic of the debate rather than reinforce its starting places. What I am suggesting is that "freedom" is a practice of onto-epistemology as well as of affect or feeling. "The animal" as symbol, as trope, as locus of possibility, must be *rethought and transformed*; otherwise, it will continue to animate antiblack discourse and institute itself biopolitically.

Here I want to suggest that although it is often taken to be the case, Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* may not in fact be representative of how the enslaved saw their place in relation to animals. Liberal humanist frameworks of "inclusion" and "recognition" have obscured and/or insufficiently examined other possible modes, some authored by Douglass himself, of relating to animals—forms of relating that problematize biopolitical arrangements engendered by slavery. While ultimately I will argue that Douglass problematizes rather than resolves the biopolitical arrangements he scrutinizes, shifts in his rhetorical strategy confound his earlier position in the 1845 *Narrative*—revealing that testimony, social structural position, and political diagnosis must be understood as an improvised rather than reified interrelation in the corpus of Douglass's thought.

In the years immediately following the formal end of slavery, Douglass produced speeches that have a noticeably more vexed and irresolute relation to the 1845 *Narrative*'s philosophies of natural rights and the Chain of Being, philosophies that are premised on concepts of human superiority and uniqueness. For instance, on Friday, September 19, 1873, the *Tennessean* published a speech that Douglass had delivered the day

before at Nashville's "Colored Fair Grounds." When discussing the topic of "Kindness to Animals," Douglass states the following:

> There is no denying that slavery had a direct and positive tendency to produce coarseness and brutality in the treatment and management of domestic animals, especially those most useful to the agricultural industry. Not only the slave, but the horse, the ox, and the mule shared the general feeling of indifference to the right naturally engendered by a state of slavery. . . . It should be the study of every farmer to make his horse his companion and friend, and to do this, there is but one rule, and that is, uniform sympathy and kindness. . . . All loud and boisterous commands, a brutal flogging should be banished from the field, and only words of cheer and encouragement should be tolerated. A horse is in many respects like a man. He has the five senses, and has memory, affection, and reason *to a limited degree*.[19]

Here, Douglass suggests that *slavery introduces brutality* into the lives of humans and animals such that brutality is understood as synonymous with the institution, and he advocates for human–animal cooperation in farming in place of rivalry or brutalization. More than that, while stopping short of foreclosing difference, his understanding of (human) being, presumably including his being, does not arise in binaristic opposition to, or in negation of, "the animal" as a "horse is in many respects like a man."[20] More importantly, for this discussion, Douglass's "many respects like" and the use to which these words are put confound the terms of his earlier testimony.

Nevertheless, what if the rhetoric of sentimentality and empathetic identification itself reintroduces hierarchies of feeling and capacity engendered by slavery rather than remedies them as his "to a limited degree" might suggest? The *Tennessean* reports that Douglass ends the section of his speech devoted to "Kindness to Animals" with the following:

> When young, untrained and untamed, he (a horse) has unbounded faith in his strength and fleetness. He runs, jumps, and plays in the pride of his perfections. But convince him that he is a creature of law as well as of freedom, by a judicious and kindly application of your superior power,

> and he will conform his conduct to that law, far better than your most law-abiding citizen. (4)

While a horse is "perfect" rather than in a state of privation as the Chain of Being might suggest, according to Douglass the horse, like a citizen, must still defer to the "kindly application" of "superior power" and "law." Rather than read Douglass's sentimental animal ethics and deference to state power as either an unqualified reversal of the 1845 *Narrative* or prescriptively, I read both statements as critically wrestling with (but still very much conscripted by) slavery's hierarchies of being and feeling—even extending the institution's palliative logic of "humane" reform.[21]

The "humane" is an ideal that suggests humanity is gained by performing acts of kindness and attuning oneself to the suffering of those of inferior status and lesser capacity; as such, it does not posit humanity as simply an inherent or a priori aspect of being (human). As in John Locke's highly influential *Thoughts on Education* (1693), rather than forestall domination, "humane" discourse, in effect, made human identity contingent on hierarchical relationality—encounters between those with refined sensibilities and those presumably without, in particular children, animals, and slaves—as "humane" education in the United States concerned itself with the proper cultivation of sympathy and behavior conducive to the successful *reproduction of the established order*.[22] Saidiya Hartman has argued that "the humane in slave law was totally consonant with the domination of the enslaved" and, more specifically, that sentiment routinely regulated and preserved the institution rather than effected a reversal of its relations (*Scenes of Subjection* 93):

> On one hand, there was an increased liability for white violence committed against slaves; and on the other, the law continued to decriminalize the violence thought necessary to the preservation of the institution and the submission and obedience of the slave. If anything, the dual invocation of law [property and person] generated the prohibitions and interdictions designed to regulate the violent excesses of slavery and at the same time extended this violence in the garb of sentiment. . . . To be subject in this manner was no less brutalizing than being an object of property.

> In the arena of affect, the body was no less vulnerable to the demands and the excesses of power. The bestowal that granted the slave a circumscribed and fragmented identity as a person in turn shrouded the violence of such a beneficent and humane gesture. (94)

While scholars of the US nineteenth century have put forth varying accounts of how racial slavery shaped white racial anxiety and the increasing prominence of sentimentality as a mode of civic engagement and pedagogy, a shared scholarly conviction that extends far beyond Hartman holds that sentimentality, perhaps the century's most privileged rhetorical mode, acted to safeguard existing power relations, even in its abolitionist deployment, by masking the reorganization of domination and violence in the emerging secularizing terms of empathetic identification on the one hand and hierarchical bonds of kindness, domesticity, and laws of nature on the other.[23] Regarding Douglass, Robert Fanuzzi notes, "Above all, Douglass knew what it meant to produce the position of the outsider as a kind of performance, through a political rhetoric that was also an art. His infamous mimicry of venerable orators, his reiteration of civic pedagogy, and his inversion of political symbolism all betrayed a formal mastery" of genres of masculine, republican elocution (206).

But what if this lesson in civic pedagogy addressed to the "colored citizens" of Tennessee in 1873—exemplary pedagogy of civic manhood—actually reinscribes (even as it appears to renounce) the terms of their continued subjugation, even in slavery's putative absence? I invoke Douglass's equivocations here to suggest we read the inchoate and incomplete nature of his intervention, its fugitivity, as a provocation and an effort to refuse modes of relating that were established under slavery. However, Douglass's hierarchized conception of feeling and capacity, even in its deployment as empathetic identification with animals, actually rehearses the assumptive logics of racial subjection. After all, the racialization of capacity and feeling preconditions and prefigures the occasion of Douglass's speech on at least two counts: the city's spatiotemporal arrangement—the "Colored Fair Grounds"—and the honorifics bestowed on Douglass—"the most distinguished of their race," "The Colored American's Chosen Moses," "distinguished gentleman, statesman, and lover of his race."[24] In addition to hypostatizing racial

difference, the regularity of such plaudits throughout Douglass's career implies that while Douglass represents black people, he is not representative of blackness but exceptional not simply as an orator but as a black person. In fact, in Douglass's case, assessments of his skill as an orator is inseparable from his racialization: it is precisely his reported exceptional capacity as an orator that simultaneously marks his racial difference and purportedly sets him apart from other black people.

Douglass's acclaim as an orator began with his career as a lecturer in Garrison's Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society and grew precipitously with the publication of his 1845 *Narrative*. At the time, some skeptics questioned whether a slave, a black, could have produced such an eloquent and moving piece of literature. The credibility of black authorship—in other words, the facticity of black capacity for reason and feeling—was so routinely questioned that slave narratives were commonly underwritten by white abolitionists. For instance, the 1845 *Narrative* was published under Garrison's imprimatur presumably because he was axiomatically credible by virtue of his whiteness.

However, Jacques Derrida has productively called into question how securely "the human," understood in its white Western imperial form, possesses the characteristics it claims for itself and denies to others (*The Animal* 135). *In The Animal That Therefore I Am*, the late French philosopher Jacques Derrida contends "the question" of "the animal" in philosophy refers "not to the animal but to the naive assurance of man." In critically approaching the "bestiary at the origin of philosophy," Derrida clarifies that it is less a matter of asking "whether one has the right to refuse the animal such and such a power . . . [than of] asking whether what calls itself human has the right rigorously to attribute to man, which means therefore to attribute to himself, what he refuses the animal, and whether he can ever possess the pure, rigorous, indivisible concept, as such, of that attribution" (*The Animal* 135). Moreover, what of the capacities that exceed human identification? What of those things and creatures with which it is not (yet) possible to confer identification or with which identification is denied? Sentimental ethics is an arbitrary order of perception and sense making that disqualifies from ethical consideration all those incalculable opacities and yet-to-be-recuperated differences with which it does not and, by design, cannot identify. Moreover, sentimentality is a relation, not a sensibility; conceived as a sen-

sibility, sentimental feeling has historically functioned as a pretext for racial hierarchy in the forms of a pedagogy in white ideality and the pathologization and criminalization of blackness.[25] If, as I suggest, sentimental ethics typically proceeds without sufficiently interrogating the vexed terms of identification or even pausing to consider whether or not identification should organize ethics, is such an order of consideration ethical? And if so, by what measure?

These vexed terms of identification are precisely what are under investigation in *Beloved*, and in the process of investigation, a hasty, prescriptive, sentimental ethics is exchanged for an exploration of affectivity and its relational effects.[26] Eschewing both sentimentalism and naturalized hierarchy with *Beloved*, Morrison pulls apart and reconstellates the slave narrative form. In doing so, Morrison invites the reader to relinquish a reified understanding of "the truth of slavery" so that we might investigate New World slavery as an ever-present mode of violent ontologizing that includes but exceeds the animalization of the slave, as blackness was always subject to something more.

## Ontological Plasticity in *Beloved*

I have always been struck by the speed with which "handsome young Negro" turns into "young colt" or "stallion."
—Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

At the close of Derrida's highly influential essay, a number of interrelated questions at the center of what he calls the "philosophical bestiary" nevertheless remain. In particular, if sexual difference and its attendant Oedipal anxieties and oppositions structure the foundational violence of the Western philosophical tradition, a violence that is constitutive with and recalled by human–animal oppositions, how might a consideration of the mode by which the symbolic logics of both dualisms are cut and qualitatively intensified by antiblack racialization clarify the terms and stakes of his inquiry? I suggest that *Beloved* (1987) sheds light on a constitutive lacuna in Derrida's thought by thinking a being for whom normative symbolics of gender and personhood do not take hold due to a concerted attempt to apportion and delimit characteristics presumed to be proper to Man in a manner that accords

with the paradoxical dictates of a racializing Law. Morrison's *Beloved* is suggestive for identifying how blackness constitutes and disrupts the historical and philosophical terms and assumptive logic of Derrida's meditation. However, the primary investment here is not a systematic critique of Derrida's essay but drawing out Morrison's philosophical meditation on antiblack slavery as a mode of ontologizing and identifying its implications for resetting our thinking on ontology. Namely, I argue that blackness is the missing term in Derrida's analysis of the antinomy of man and animal and that it is blackness in the mode of ontological plasticity that stabilizes and gives form to "human" and "animal" as terms.

The bestialization of blackness has been central, even essential, to reanimations of antiblack discourse from the early days of the American republic until today. Often when this occurs, the evocation of black animality is either unquestioningly reified or criticized for reinforcing antiblack racism and quickly dismissed. Toni Morrison avoids both approaches; instead, she problematizes these strategies by critically engaging the assumptive logic of racialized animality and redirecting antiblack animal imagery such as the bestializing compositions found in Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*. Morrison critically observes the fundaments of animalized representation up close rather than negating them at a distance. Instead of performing a straightforward rejection of racially oppressive imagery, her text exposes the complexity and contradictions that produce blackness and animality as proxies, not through the refutation of bestial imagery but rather through its magnification and deconstruction. It is Morrison's deconstructive approach that reveals the convolutedness of racialized animalization as an essential feature of the historical institution of liberal humanism, including its lexical and ethical possibilities.[27]

*Beloved* does not resolve the ethical blindness of liberal humanism through empathy between the reader and the narrative's characters, or between human and animal as general categories, but instead reopens the field of ethics by reminding readers of alterity's intractable insistence.[28] Instead of offering a dialectical solution or providing an answer or prescription on ethical action, the text uncompromisingly insists on the problem of ethics that accompanies asymmetrical relations, in this case between Paul D, a slave, and Mister, a rooster.[29]

*Beloved* identifies the site of a potential breach in the epistemological project of humanistic perspective: What is behind Mister's gaze? More accurately, *Beloved* intensifies "animal perspective," a disruption that is already there—latent and repressed—in liberal humanism's textuality. As a result, the novel facilitates reconsideration of perspective's consequence for ethics, given liberal humanism's stubborn refusal to authorize (or even avow) the perspective of the animalized (human and nonhuman) while also failing to attend to its own pernicious limitations.

This refusal is the result of at least three contiguous presuppositions: first, "the animal" lacks perspective; second, "the African" is animal in the form of a human and, thus, is devoid of the achievement of Reason or the full realization of perspective; and third, because "the animal"—human and nonhuman—is lacking, animality disqualifies one from ethical consideration. Mister's gaze calls into question the ethical authority of this formulation by countering the epistemological certainty upon which principled judgment is made and questioning, rather than presuming, the ontological distinctions upon which ethical judgments rest. *Beloved* rearticulates, rather than resolves, the problem of ethics in light of differential embodiment by questioning and destabilizing slavery's economy of sense and perceptual logic, that is to say, its religio-scientific taxonomies and foreclosures that rely on a white patriarchal authority alternately supported by naturalistic, divine, or positivistic pretense. *Beloved* invites a critical reopening of the orders of ethical authority and ontological distinction, thus rendering them not as the context of investigation but rather as the object to be critically reexamined. As the foreclosing of animal perspective reinforces the logic of enslavement, the novel prompts us to reconsider how animal perspective potentially undermines one of race's most formative epistemic presumptions.

With *Beloved*, Morrison provides a rich exploration of the seemingly contradictory construction that is black(ened) humanity, namely the entanglement of racialized, gendered, and sexual discourses with those concerning animality. Largely focusing on the animalization of black male gender, sexuality, and subjectivity under conditions of enslavement, I investigate how the captive's gender and sexuality were constructed in relationship to humanity *and* animality in the text.

Critics of *Beloved* have largely ignored the presence of Mister the rooster despite the text's insistent return to Mister's gaze in scenes that

make and undo the significance of both humanity and manhood—where gendered, sexual, and ontological violence produce and mark the limits of manhood for Paul D. If one considers the rooster as both figurative actor *and material entity* in the novel rather than mere *projection of Paul D's trauma*, the gaze of Mister—the exchange of glances between Mister and Paul D—takes on the quality of a caesura, a disruption of the prevailing grammar of gender, knowledge, and being.

Taking up the narrative's insistence on Mister's gaze, in particular, I investigate the distinctive quality of Paul D and Mister's relationality and explore its implications for contemporary theorization of biopolitics and the onto-epistemo-ethical stakes of non/in/humanity designations. Problematizing literary conventions of form and interpretive method, *Beloved* performs narrative at the register of a structural analysis of the modern grammar of the Subject. Reaching to meet the fullness of Morrison's intervention into theory, mine is a literary criticism that explores how narrative texture performs and excites philosophical engagement. I will read Paul D's encounter with Mister the rooster as bringing into stark relief Paul D's gendered sexual alienation and existentially debilitating circumstances.

The practice of gender at Sweet Home, the fictional plantation that provides the setting for much of *Beloved*, would appear to depart from the generalized principles that characterized slavery as depicted in the text. At Sweet Home, male slaves are considered "men," breaking with the commonplace slaveholder logic, which typically withheld acknowledgment of manhood or even adulthood among those enslaved. It was believed that reciprocal recognition between white and black men would disrupt the natural order of plantation life. Normative modes of gender such as patriarchal authority and filial recognition are the entitlements of manhood in the Oedipal symbolic economies of the US South, but manhood and enslavement were commonly viewed as incommensurate by proponents of slavery. As one slaveholder put it, "Ain't no nigger men" (*Beloved* 13).[30] Yet, Mr. Garner would appear to break with this tradition by being "tough enough and smart enough to make and call his own niggers men" (*Beloved* 13). However, with Garner, Morrison explores dimensions of sovereign power that often go undetected and unremarked. Garner is emblematic not of sovereignty's power to expropriate and withhold recognition but of that as-

pect of sovereignty (self-)authorized to give and bestow, to create and legitimate.

So that he might "demonstrate . . . what a real Kentuckian was," Garner consolidated his manhood in the bestowal of abject manhood on the enslaved in the figure of the "Sweet Home man." The concept of "Sweet Home men" was initially introduced by Morrison's omniscient narrator in the following way: "There had been six of them who *belonged* to the farm" (*Beloved* 11, emphasis added). That they belonged to the farm, rather than the other way around, alerts readers to their nonnormative relation to property. Owning property is an emblem of white patriarchal masculinity; in contrast, Paul D belonged to property. The enslaved men's fungibility, or replaceability and interchangeability, was built into their names.[31] There are three Pauls at Sweet Home, with Garner's surname qualifying their proper name. His surname does not announce their entitlement to patrilineal wealth, as it would seem to suggest, but marks them, brands them, as belonging to the arrangements of the property relation. Another is named after a number, Sixo—the wild man. His name possibly references the "60 million or more" lost to the Middle Passage. And then there is Halle Suggs, Sethe's husband and the father of her children—only he disappears, going "wild eyed" after witnessing Sethe's mammary rape by Schoolteacher.

Paul D's encounter with Mister initiates wonder: When Garner refers to them as men, "was he naming what he saw or creating what he did not?" (*Beloved* 260). He is "allowed" or "encouraged" to correct Garner; defiance is even tolerated. He can invent ways of doing things and can "attack" problems without permission. He can buy a mother, choose a horse or a wife, handle guns, and "even learn reading" (*Beloved* 147). But even these forms of masculine prerogatives still leave him with the feeling that Sweet Home men are "trespassers among the human race" (*Beloved* 148). They are "watchdogs without teeth, steer bulls without horns; gelded workhorses whose neigh and whinny could not be translated into a language responsible humans spoke" (*Beloved* 148). "He did manly things," yet Paul D cannot come to a clear conclusion about whether that was Garner's gift, or his own will (*Beloved* 260). He wonders if his manhood rests entirely on the word of a white man, stirring within him

a nascent question: Is his sense of manhood the product of a "wonderful lie" (*Beloved* 260)?

After his encounter with Mister, Paul D continues to wrestle with creeping unease concerning his own manhood. What becomes increasingly apparent is that Garner recognized Paul D's mutual humanity but then proceeded to manipulate and exploit it. What was commonly believed to distinguish human from animal, for Garner, are merely opportunities for manipulation; human capability—sentiment, sexuality, rationality, intention, and intelligence—were instrumentalized in order to plasticize Paul D's humanity rather than guarantee a just intersubjectivity. Again, Garner recognized Paul D's humanity but inverted it, in the interest of property and ego, rather than affirmatively recognizing their shared humanity as the grounds of a principled intersubjectivity. Garner transgresses behavioral polarities that normatively characterized the master–slave relation, not as recognition of the injustice of denied intersubjectivity but as a performance of his dominance. In other words, he invited the disruption of hierarchical coded behavior without sacrificing his dominance over the enslaved, precisely because he solicited the transgression. Thus, by inviting the slave to transgress slavery's limitations, he displays the arbitrariness of his power, and Garner's "superior" manhood rests on the arbitrariness of his power.

Paul D had no substantive authority over himself or the definition of manhood at Sweet Home, in Alfred, Georgia; Ohio; or Delaware. He could respond to Garner's definition, but he had no power to generate a definition to his liking: at least, not in a "language responsible people spoke" (*Beloved* 148). That Garner's slaveholding estate is named "Sweet Home" points to the manner in which language is used ironically in the text. Language, the deadly play of signification over terms like "manhood," is exactly what the narrative alerts us to, as Paul D qualifies of Sweet Home: "It wasn't sweet, and it sure wasn't home" (*Beloved* 16). Garner, as patriarch, was so powerful that the enslaved could hardly believe he could die. He is elevated even beyond death. The extent to which his life defined theirs is revealed in his death—when Schoolteacher arrives.

It is Schoolteacher and his necropolitical pedagogy—but especially Mister's gaze—which destabilizes the illusion Garner had worked so

hard to create. Paul D desperately tries to cling to his genre of manhood by recalling his past demonstrations of corporeal masculinity:

> He, he. He who had eaten raw meat barely dead, who under plum trees bursting with blossoms had crushed through a dove's breast before its heart stopped beating. Because he was a man and a man could do what he would: be still for six hours in a dry well while night dropped; fight raccoon with his hands and win; watch another man, whom he loved better than his brothers, roast without a tear just so the roasters would know what a man was like. And it was he, *that* man, who had walked from Georgia to Delaware, who could not go or stay put where he wanted in 124—shame. (*Beloved* 148)

The stuttering "he" initiating the passage above testifies to both a stubborn pursuit and an uncertain arrival. Paul D wants to believe that he is a fully autonomous man, coherent, and whole. Ironically, the more Paul D clings to rugged expressions of masculinity—curtailed emotion, mastery over bodily sensation, and killing if need be—the more he is boxed into not simply animality but plasticity: he can be manipulated and poured into a mold designed by Garner, and later by Beloved—acting as an avatar for slavery. For Paul D, masculinity is a symbol of his *presence* as a human. However, his manhood is decidedly qualified at Sweet Home because he is not an architect of a language under the aegis of power, but rather, he is subjected to its mocking grammar.

The expressions of masculinity that he offers as evidence of his manhood are easily appropriated as evidence of his savagery and animality; yet these paradoxical symbols of manhood are the only aspects of masculinity available to him. Autonomy and a rugged code of masculinity have failed Paul D. Whereas they might provide white masculinity solace, for him, they only mock. Instead of a steadiness in the conviction of his manhood, he is flushed with shame and disquietude, the kind of shame that produces nausea and repulsion. Before his encounter with a rooster named Mister, Paul D affirmatively identified as a "Sweet Home man" as defined within the terms of Garner's racially qualified and hierarchical definition of manhood.

Yet, with the arrival of Schoolteacher and the subsequent encounter with Mister, Paul D begins to question the meaning of his manhood (*Beloved* 11). Schoolteacher "arrived to put things in order" (*Beloved* 11). A man who "always wore a collar, even in the fields," Schoolteacher was an emblem of both the epistemic powers and abuses of scientific and biblical authority under relations of domination (*Beloved* 44).[32] Through the use of free indirect discourse, Paul D's telegraphed subterranean thoughts oscillate between (self)assurance and worry: "He grew up thinking that, of all the Blacks in Kentucky, only the five of them were men. . . . Was that it? Is that where the manhood lay? In the naming done by a whiteman who was supposed to know?" (*Beloved* 147). He tries to reassure himself that, in fact, he has nothing to worry about, his identity secure, yet the stark and near total domination introduced under Schoolteacher's rule, culminating in his encounter with Mister, ushers in creeping doubt. He recounts:

> [Mister] sat right there . . . looking at me. I swear he smiled. My head was full of what I'd seen of Halle a while back. I wasn't even thinking about the bit. Just Halle and before him Sixo, but when I saw Mister I knew it was me too. Not just them, me too. One crazy, one sold, one missing, one burnt and me licking iron with my hands crossed behind me. The last of the Sweet Home men. (*Beloved* 85–86)

As I will demonstrate, in this scene, the recurring phrase "*the last* of the Sweet Home men" (emphasis added), and Paul D's self-identification with it, takes on an ironic quality. It suggests incipient possibilities and the unsettling of identity rather than mere reification. Paul D might in fact be able to experience something the other Pauls had not—a life beyond the farm—that introduces discontinuity into the fetters of ownership and gendered identification. In its way, his growing envy of Mister in this scene is an acknowledgment of doubt, but Paul D initially refuses that knowledge due to his attachment to heteropatriarchy and its sovereign "I."

It is not until Paul D has an encounter with a rooster that destabilizes his sense of his own manhood that he begins to recognize that tyrannical power not only denies but also permits. This is a realization that ultimately leads him to question Sweet Home's fetters of obligation.