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Antebellum Posthuman

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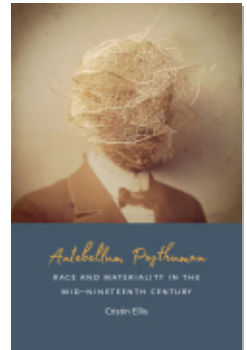
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Posthumanism and the Problem of Social Justice: Race and Materiality in the Twenty-First Century

In this chapter I would like to explore the present-day status and stakes of the epistemic overhaul that I have been tracing through the antislavery materialisms of Frederick Douglass, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman. The preceding chapters have suggested that these authors' embodied accounts of the human bear certain affinities with the materialist turn of contemporary posthumanist theory. There is, of course, a kind of knowledge and also a kind of pleasure to be had in recognizing the slant rhymes of historical recurrence. However, this chapter starts from the premise that antebellum antislavery materialism should be interesting to us now not simply because of its shadowy prescience of posthumanist theory, but also because its divergence from contemporary theory can help to light up absences and aporias in posthumanist discourse today.

The absence that antebellum antislavery materialism makes conspicuous is the missing term of race in contemporary posthumanist theory. As I have argued, the proto-posthumanism that Douglass, Thoreau, and Whitman developed in the 1850s was triggered by the rise of racial science and the consolidation of modern biological racism. Race is the founding proposition around which their antislavery materialisms gather, like

so many antibodies, to wrest human materiality away from its conscription by racist ideology. Against the backdrop of this history, the marginality of race in contemporary posthumanist discourse is puzzling. In this regard, examining the transhistorical echoes between antislavery and contemporary posthumanist materialism can help to bring the latter's undertheorized relationship to histories of racism and social justice into sharper focus. In doing so, I hope to amplify demands that posthumanism's current critics are already making for a fuller accounting of posthumanism's racial politics.

Indeed, a growing number of critics now suggest that the absence of race from posthumanist theorizing constitutes a considerable theoretical and ethical failure. This absence registers most notably in what Zakiyyah Jackson describes as posthumanism's "resounding silence" on the subject of racism, which remains one of the most powerful and resilient technologies for delimiting and policing the border between the "fully" human and the "nonhuman."¹ Race's absence furthermore registers in the posthumanist archive's general neglect of theorists of color whose analyses of "the tight bonds between humanity and racializing assemblages in the modern era" prefigure posthumanism's critique of Western humanism's abjection of the nonhuman. As Alexander Weheliye points out, black feminists like Sylvia Wynter and Hortense Spillers began calling for revisionary "genres" or conceptions of the human long before contemporary posthumanism picked up this refrain.²

To be fair, most critics working under posthumanism's large tent understand themselves to be advancing a critique of humanism's exclusions that is sympathetic to antiracism while seeking to go beyond the anthropocentric terms it offers. For these critics, posthumanism is a liberatory project that proposes to radically extend the democratizing efforts that antiracism and antisexism pioneered. Thus when Bruno Latour proposes that the exclusion of nonhuman being from moral and political consideration "will soon appear . . . as extravagant as when the Founding Fathers denied slaves and women the vote," he identifies posthumanism as the successor to antiracism: a related but ultimately distinct political struggle.³ Whereas antiracist and antisexist movements speak up for the equality of what they construe as dehumanized humans, posthumanism's "flat ontology" makes the case for the ethical and political standing of nonhuman being, human or otherwise.

At its broadest, this chapter proposes that this distinction between dehumanized and nonhuman beings—a distinction that insists that "human" is not just a biological but a natural moral identity—lies at the root of racism's

marginality in posthumanist discourse, as well as the marginality of speciesism in antiracist discourse. Although theorists from both of these schools insist that “the human” is an ideological construct—a moral category whose borders have been willfully drawn and redrawn throughout Western humanism’s history—both schools nevertheless regularly naturalize the human by conflating this moral category with the biological category *Homo sapiens*. Thus, for instance, when posthumanists denounce human exceptionalism and defend nonhuman rights, they generally understand themselves to be speaking up for non-*Homo sapiens*. But in conflating the human with *Homo sapiens*, their critics observe, posthumanists ignore the long and ongoing history of racism that has systematically demoted targeted populations of *Homo sapiens* to the status of “nonhuman.” Meanwhile, if posthumanism fails to acknowledge that “the nonhuman” may include some *Homo sapiens*, for their part antiracist theorists also tend to argue that this inclusion is a heinous category mistake. That is, when antiracist critics document the genocidal consequences suffered by those to whom Western humanism has denied human status, they tend to insist that this moral category *is* in truth natural: that all *Homo sapiens* are human and ought, therefore, to be accorded equal human rights. Between posthumanism’s biologization of the moral category, “human,” and antiracism’s moralization of the biological category, *Homo sapiens*, the artificiality of “the human”—something both discourses, in other moments, quite compellingly flag—recedes from view.

To argue that the human is not synonymous with *Homo sapiens* is to observe something so simple, so very basic to posthumanist and antiracist theorizing, that it sometimes strikes me that I might be embarrassing myself. Forging ahead nonetheless, this chapter aims to demonstrate that the slippage between the human and *Homo sapiens* (or, conversely, between the nonhuman and non-*Homo sapiens*) is persistent in posthumanist and social justice criticism and contributes to their mutual alienation. The first two sections below will therefore rehearse some of the most trenchant objections and correctives to posthumanist theory offered by recent antiracist and social justice criticism. Although this discussion is bound to offer a critique of posthumanist theory, it is not meant to condemn the posthumanist project tout court but, on the contrary, to strengthen it by suggesting how posthumanism might productively engage with antiracist and social justice theory going forward. As I shall suggest, a closer collaboration between posthumanist and social justice theories can help to clarify the broad common ground that they in fact share.

Toward this end, my third and final section will highlight posthumanism’s resonance with the work of the anticolonial and Black feminist theorist,

Sylvia Wynter. I focus on Wynter's work because, more than any other critic now writing on Blackness and justice, Wynter insists that overcoming racism is not simply a matter of redeeming liberal humanism but rather commits us to inventing new "genres of the human" that look beyond Western humanism's episteme of "Man." Wynter's work, then, frames social justice as an explicitly *posthumanist* project—a project of moving beyond Western humanism—and as such it offers the most fertile site for discerning crosscurrents between posthumanist and social justice projects. This third section therefore lays out my vision for the partial reconciliation and future collaboration between posthumanist materialisms and *posthumanist* social justice theories. One major advantage of this collaboration, I suggest, is that read through one another, these theories speak each other's lapses, illuminating blind spots the other cannot see. Thus I show how each attempts to preserve a central feature of the episteme they ostensibly oppose: posthumanism remains committed to liberalism's individualist politics while even Wynter's social justice theory remains invested in Western humanism's philosophy of human exceptionalism. Thus I propose that, taken together, these theories spur each other to live up to the transformative potential of their epistemic challenge to liberal humanism's construction of "Man."

At the same time, however, I shall argue that the clarified posthumanism this collaboration yields also makes the limitations of this project more visible—limitations that, I argue, antislavery materialism anticipates and therefore can help us to anatomize. Above I have suggested that the antebellum materialism I have been outlining lights up absences and aporias in its latter-day counterpart; if the absence is race, the aporia we arrive at here has to do with what I shall describe, in my Coda, as posthumanism's romanticism. This chapter's detour through twenty-first-century posthumanisms thus ultimately leads us back to the antebellum sources with which it starts. In the Coda I will return to Douglass, Thoreau, and Whitman in order to suggest how their antislavery materialism helps us to confront the vestiges of romantic naturalism within modern posthumanism and presses us to reimagine what a future posthumanist politics might look like.

Lastly, a note on methodology: these final chapters depart from the broadly historicist and textual approach of my foregoing chapters to engage in a more abstractly philosophical discussion of recent critical theory. They are nonetheless written with a number of different potential readers in mind: from scholars of the nineteenth century who have little or no familiarity with contemporary critical theory, to critical theorists with little or no interest in nineteenth-century literature. I have therefore

tried to describe the theories treated in these final chapters in terms that rely as little as possible upon the idioms or critical jargons characteristic of each. To some readers this decision may seem to express a degree of skepticism or estrangement from these critical schools, but my aim is clarity in the hopes that making these discourses accessible to new readers—and more mutually accessible to each other—will contribute to their further development.

Myopias of the Anthropocene: Human ≠ Homo sapiens

Posthumanist materialism confronts us with our inhumanity—our animality, materiality, and irreducible alterity to ourselves. It presents this dehumanizing portrait in a spirit of radical generosity: by acknowledging our constitution through, and dependence upon, nonhuman beings and systems, posthumanists suggest that we may finally renounce the speciological chauvinism (and perhaps even the suicidal tendencies) of our self-proclaimed autonomy from nature. Honoring that acknowledgment would necessarily entail a profound rearrangement of current modes of existence at all levels of its ordering. Daunting though this wholesale revolution may be, the hope is that we might yet restructure global biopolitics and neoliberal biocapitalism, reorganize our consumptive and ethical behaviors, and reinvent our cultural and autobiographical narratives to make them, as N. Katherine Hayles puts it, “conducive to the long-range survival of humans and of other life-forms, biological and artificial, with whom we share the planet and ourselves.”⁴ For posthumanists, the continued flourishing of the human species depends upon embracing its nonhumanity, including the sensitive mechanisms of its organism and the fragile ecosystems of human and nonhuman existence on which human life depends. We must learn to think in terms of collective, planetary survival; indeed, given the porously networked nature of the human organism, there is, posthumanists suggest, no other kind.

But if this effort to dehumanize the human is not intended to be degrading, it is nonetheless still necessary to theorize its relation to the dehumanizing assemblages of racism and sexism that precede it—a task that contemporary posthumanism has yet to rigorously take up. The urgency of specifying this relation is in part a matter of bridge building. Posthumanism’s emphasis upon human animality and objecthood understandably sets off alarm bells for those who are or who work on behalf of those struggling to be recognized as fully human and as rights-bearing persons before the law. Christopher Peterson observes that posthumanists therefore “cannot

expect racial minorities simply to forget the prolonged history of their dehumanization, as if to say, ‘We are all animals, so get over it!’”⁵ Insofar as posthumanist critics have begun to address this resistance, there is evidence that they may not yet fully understand its complaint. In the introduction to a recent collection on “the nonhuman turn,” for instance—a collection that proposes “to name, characterize, and therefore to consolidate” this emerging posthumanist bent—Richard Grusin suggests that skepticism toward this turn arises from a default suspicion of materiality that is the result of social constructivism’s predominance in the past fifty years of critical discourse.⁶ “Participants in liberatory scholarly projects,” Grusin offers, tend to presume “that any appeal to nature . . . could only operate in service of a defense of the status quo.”⁷ While Grusin’s diagnosis may well be true in many cases, it fails to account for the most compelling concerns raised by scholars of social justice, as I shall attempt to demonstrate below. It also discounts the move away from strict social constructivism that has unfolded across “liberatory” critical discourses, including work in feminist, queer, postcolonial, and critical race theory in recent years—some of which has been vital to posthumanism’s emergence.⁸ As we shall see in this chapter, then, the concerns that social justice theorists bring to posthumanism do not neatly boil down to an objection to posthumanism’s materialism per se but, rather, raise questions about its inattention to human inequality.

This inattention to racism and other forms of discrimination finds expression in posthumanism’s rhetorical tendency to invoke the human in the monolithic singular—as if, writes Alexander Weheliye, “we have now entered a stage in human development where all subjects have been granted equal access to western humanity.”⁹ But of course, as Aimé Césaire memorably observed, Western civilization has as yet never lived “a true humanism—a humanism made to the measure of the world”; instead, as I have discussed in Chapter 1, under biopolitics, Western liberal humanism has sorted biological humans along a racially and sexually coded spectrum from the “fully” human to the “nonhuman.”¹⁰ A concern for social justice therefore commits us to attend to the ways in which the human/nonhuman binary not only functions to privilege *Homo sapiens* above other animal species but is simultaneously deployed to differentiate *Homo sapiens* into different categories of legal and social protection. In light of the lethally uneven attribution of “humanity” across *Homo sapiens*, posthumanism’s invitation to divest from Western humanism’s privileging of humanness can appear to be inequitable itself insofar as it demands a disavowal that is potentially far more costly to those whose life chances are already lowered

by their marginalization from the human. Hence Jinthana Haritaworn urges us to ask, “for whom might identifying with the nonhuman be too risky a move?”¹¹

On the face of it, this question raises a concern that might easily be countered. After all, it assumes that dehumanized populations have more to lose by identifying with the nonhuman whereas, arguably, divesting from the human promises to be costlier to those populations whose lives have heretofore been systematically protected by this episteme than it is to those who are oppressed and exterminated by it.¹² At the very least, whether biopolitically condemned populations would be better off fighting for recognition under the auspices of Western humanism or, conversely, fighting to overthrow this episteme is a complicated question whose answer cannot be known in advance and whose risks may look very different in the short and the long term. Neither is it clear how the immediate individual perils of living without full liberal recognition can or should be measured against the collective planetary risks of persisting in this epistemic order. What good will a perfected humanism be to a human population facing mass extinction in a climate inimical to human life?

Nonetheless, by flagging the unequal distribution of humanness among *Homo sapiens*, Haritaworn’s question crucially interrupts a conflation of the human with *Homo sapiens* that pervades posthumanist critiques of anthropocentrism. The term “anthropocentrism” has been broadly used in both posthumanist and environmentalist circles to indict a myopic selfishness that is, in this critique’s strongest formulations, not just ideological but structurally inherent to human consciousness. In recent years, the strong version of this critique has become a central feature of “speculative realism,” a distinctive school of posthumanist theory that endeavors to think beyond human “finitude”—beyond, that is, the phenomenologically “centered points of view” endemic to the “organic perception” of all *Homo sapiens* as “sensing and world-oriented beings.”¹³ This speculative school—which encompasses projects like Claire Colebrook’s efforts to envision thought after human extinction, as well as projects that belong to the subfield of object-oriented ontology (OOO)—proposes to think beyond the structural limitations that are physiologically built into the perceptual and cognitive apparatus of *Homo sapiens*. Thus in contrast to the mainstream of posthumanism, which aims to think beyond a particular (Western liberal humanist) episteme of the human, this school of thought attempts to imagine (if that is still the right word) an inorganic perspective divorced from *Homo sapiens*’ embodied mind. It seeks to pioneer a perspective that “frees itself from folding the earth’s surface around human

survival” and from what Quentin Meillassoux terms “correlationism,” the philosophical notion that our perception of “reality” is inevitably a representation shaped by (correlated with) the faculties particular to our species.¹⁴ In short, this school of posthumanism explores ways to speculatively move beyond what it views as the “anthropocentric” bias that organically limits the human mind.

The political trouble with this project arises from the way its critique of “anthropocentrism” allows for slippage between a critique of cognitive finitude (an epistemological limitation biologically endemic to *Homo sapiens*) and a critique of environmentally exploitative practices (an ethical failing ideologically endemic to Western civilization).¹⁵ The political fallout of that slippage becomes visible in discussions of the Anthropocene period that blame humanity’s anthropocentrism for the environmental degradation of the planet. As Jason Moore points out, whatever its other liabilities, the term “Anthropocene” paradoxically locates the origins of the modern geohistorical shift it names in a distinctly ahistorical force: “Not class. Not capital. Not imperialism. Not even culture. But . . . the *Anthropos*: humanity as an undifferentiated whole.”¹⁶ Anthropocenic discourse thus acts as if all *anthros* were equally “anthropocentric”—as if it is *Homo sapiens*, and not a certain (Western) mode of being *Homo sapiens*, that is destroying the Holocene and has been since “we” discovered America, invented the steam engine, exported industrialism to “our” colonies, or exploded the atom bomb (wherever the “golden spike” of the Anthropocene is to be set). By this sleight of hand, Moore objects, the idea of the Anthropocene collectivizes responsibility for climate change without stopping to consider the “inequalities, alienation, and violence inscribed in modernity’s strategic relations of power and production” that have ushered in this new geological reality.¹⁷ In this way, critiques of the Anthropocene and of anthropocentrism threaten to naturalize those power relations by treating the extractive economy and social injustice licensed by the West’s reigning episteme as if this were the organic expression of *Homo sapiens*’ innately limited mind—the inevitable fallout of the ineluctable humanness of human perception. In both its speculative or object-oriented and its environmentalist forms, then, the critique of anthropocentrism frames the present ecological crisis as an outcome determined by a speciological rather than a cultural myopia: the product of epistemological limitations ontologically organic to *Homo sapiens* rather than the contingent results of the hierarchical and extractionist episteme of modern Western civilization.

As advocates for social justice point out, this faulty diagnosis not only ignores the history of human inequality but moreover may intensify that

inequality. By suggesting that all humanity (*Homo sapiens*) is accountable for “anthropogenic” climate change, the concept of the Anthropocene justifies charging minority and postcolonial peoples with responsibility for redressing an environmental crisis they have not only not engineered but whose costs they have disproportionately shouldered as the populations most heavily exploited by industrial capitalism and most acutely exposed to its environmental consequences (including poisoned water, landslides, flooding, and climate change–related disasters like Hurricane Katrina). Social justice–minded critics thus point out the inequity implicit in environmentalist policies that, premised on the notion that “we humans” are responsible for engendering a possible sixth mass extinction event, have, for instance, moved to criminalize indigenous hunting practices. Or even more commonly, where such traditional ways of life have been irrevocably interrupted by imperial and economic expansion, indigenous and postcolonial peoples have often come to rely on extractive industries that are now the target of environmental restrictions. As Elizabeth Povinelli observes, despite their devastating effects on the landscape, extractive industries are often among “the few alternatives for landholding groups to sustain their homelands, if in an often severely compromised fashion.”¹⁸ Therefore, while the effort to more tightly regulate extractive and polluting industries remains vitally important, advocates of social justice contend that environmentalists must also be attentive to the ways in which even well-intentioned environmental policy may perpetuate historical inequities by further burdening those who have benefitted the least from the ecological despoliations of Western economic “development.”

Expendable Populations: “Nonhuman” ≠ Non–Homo sapiens

Broadly viewed, then, current theoretical discourse has a tendency to cross its biological and ideological wires. In the instances I have just discussed, anthropocenic discourse confuses ideological and biological critique when it conflates the anthropocentric bias of the modern Western episteme with a critique of the perceptual limitations of *Homo sapiens* as such. If this conflation of “the human” with *Homo sapiens* is problematic, in this section I examine how the corollary conflation—a tendency to treat “the nonhuman” as a category synonymous with non–*Homo sapiens*—likewise makes posthumanism vulnerable to important critiques. Indeed, I submit that, above all, it is posthumanism’s tendency to conflate “nonhuman” with non–*Homo sapiens* that lies at the root of its failure to recognize its deep congruencies with the antiracist projects of social justice.

The commonness of this conflation of nonhuman with non-*Homo sapiens* is perplexing given that it is roundly condemned in one of posthumanism's founding texts—Jacques Derrida's collection of essays *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Here Derrida rebukes the “asinanity” [*bêtise*] of the practice of referring to “the animal” in the monolithic singular, arguing that the definite article elides “a heterogeneous multiplicity of the living, or more precisely . . . of organizations of relations between the living and dead.”¹⁹ Derrida thus underscores that, like “the human,” “the animal” is also sorted into different biopolitical and necropolitical molds—*e. coli*, cattle, wolves, and French bulldogs enjoy very different life chances and are subject to widely differing regimes of state scrutiny, ranging from legal protection to systematic extermination, exploitation, or lethal neglect. Derrida's point, then, is (as we might expect) antibinaristic: oppositions like human/nonhuman oversimplify our view of extant biological and biopolitical realities, mocking the speciological diversity of planetary life as well as the heterogeneity of ethical relations (all of them contingent, none of them ontologically given) that organize the planetary distribution of living and dying.

In highlighting the myriad relations of similarity and inequality that cut across species lines, Derrida's essay therefore reminds us that the human/nonhuman binary is not, in fact, a speciological distinction but rather an ideological one. Indeed, as Thoreau's transmutationalist critique of Agassiz insists (or as anyone even cursorily familiar with the “trees” of modern evolutionary science knows), species are not originally and immutably different but rather emerge and branch out from each other, fanning into shades of proximate relation organized by differences of degree rather than kind (and featuring, as Derrida insists, differential rather than categorically different capacities for things like language, culture, intelligence, feigning, etc.). The scales of differentiability that speciological evolution creates thus simply do not obey the categorical rules of binaristic logic. Which is to say that *Homo sapiens*, kin as it is to other species, is not the antithesis of the nonhuman; *only* the human is. “Human” and “nonhuman” are ideological designations by which forms of being that are deemed moral and thus worthy of protection are distinguished from forms of being (including object being or “nonlife”) that are deemed morally negligible and therefore expendable. As a designation of moral value, the human floats free of the speciological body, trailing a hierarchy of privilege that insinuates divisions *both* within and among species—dividing citizens from slaves and pets from pests, while conversely conflating human chattel with cattle, the poor with the feral, racial others with beasts. The human, in short, is an ideology masquerading as a species.

The force of this point is therefore to suggest that posthumanism is a form of antiracism that does not consistently recognize itself as such. Bracketing for now the speculative branch of posthumanism discussed above—that which understands itself to be attempting to move beyond *Homo sapiens*' perceptual limitations—the vast majority of posthumanists working in this loose-jointed field understand themselves to be engaged in an effort to deconstruct liberal humanism's arbitrary and anti-empirical distinction of human from nonhuman being. Broadly encompassing posthumanist critics working in and after poststructuralism (such as Derrida, Cary Wolfe, Neill Badmington), in science and technology studies (N. Katherine Hayles, Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour), in materialist feminism and new materialism (Jane Bennett, Rosi Braidotti, Elizabeth Grosz, Mel Chen, Stacey Alaimo), and others, this main branch of posthumanist theory seeks, in particular, to depose the drastically reductive materialist philosophy that subtends the transcendental liberal subject, and according to which liberal humanism equates human being with moral freedom and autonomy while condemning all other forms of being to a rigid biological determinism. Against this hierarchical account of the human, posthumanism's revisionary materialism instead highlights the inextricability of human being from the animality and embodied materiality that it derogates and disavows, tracing the imbrications of mind and matter, and natural and cultural agencies within the larger "vital, self-organizing, and yet non-naturalistic structure of living matter itself."²⁰

Posthumanism's effort to deconstruct liberal humanism's hierarchy of the human is therefore nothing less than an effort to dismantle the racializing regime that has functioned to differentiate valorized (human) from devalorized (nonhuman) *Homo sapiens* life. Indeed, as I shall elaborate below, Wynter's work makes this connection particularly explicit by maintaining that, since at least the Middle Ages, the erection of racializing hierarchies (Christian/pagan, and later human/Black) has been the primary function of the Western humanist episteme. As Wynter argues, the task of social justice must therefore be to move beyond the human of this humanist tradition. But although posthumanism's ambition to dismantle the human/nonhuman binary coincides with such antiracist endeavors to deconstruct this same epistemic formation, posthumanism has been slow to recognize the relevance of race to its theoretical undertaking. Indeed, Zakkiah Jackson observes, "given that appositional and homologous (even co-constitutive) challenges pertaining to animality, objecthood, and thingliness have long been established in thought examining the existential predicament of modern racial Blackness, the resounding silence in the

posthumanist . . . literatures with respect to race is remarkable.”²¹ Despite sharing a common enemy—Western humanism’s hierarchical conception of the human—as well as a common critique—of the false empiricism that condemns nonhuman being to embodied essentialism and biological determinism—posthumanism has generally understood itself to be an ontological rather than an antiracist discourse.

In one view, this failure of recognition stems from the problem of posthumanism’s theoretical canon. Despite its commitment to moving beyond the episteme of Western liberal humanism, posthumanists have largely gone searching for inspiration in the record of Western philosophy and theory—looking to Derrida and Niklas Luhman, Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, Baruch Spinoza and Gilles Deleuze, Lucretius and Niels Bohr, Charles Darwin and Silvan Tomkins. As Alexander Weheliye observes, posthumanism has thus “rarely considered cultural and political formations outside the world of [Western] Man that might offer alternative versions of humanity.” More pointedly, Weheliye notes that posthumanism’s neglect of postcolonial and minority criticism means that it has been all the less likely to come across works that could help it to theorize “the tight bonds between humanity and racializing assemblages in the modern era.”²² In this way, the Western bias of its canon may explain posthumanism’s tendency to disregard racism’s centrality to (perhaps even synonymity with) the epistemic formation that it critiques.

However, posthumanism’s failure to recognize antiracist and postcolonial criticism as its precedents may also derive from its persistent conflation of the nonhuman with non-*Homo sapiens* species. That is, despite the critical care they take to identify the object of their critique as a particular episteme of the human, posthumanists nonetheless overwhelmingly tend to treat the nonhuman as if this were a speciological category referring to animals, plants, and objects—to, that is, non-*Homo sapiens* entities—rather than an ideological category referring to forms of being that have been deemed morally negligible. This slippage from the moral category “non-human” to the biological category “non-*Homo sapiens*” leads posthumanists to focus on the way Western liberal humanism has systematically devalorized nonhuman species and objects—a form of discrimination they then *compare* to racism and sexism rather than identifying racism and sexism as other names for the structurally discriminatory logic they protest.²³ In other words, this slippage invites posthumanists to imagine that racism and sexism are not what they are talking about when they talk about emancipating the nonhuman.²⁴ In this way, posthumanism’s tendency to treat the nonhuman as a speciological category (designating non-*Homo sapiens*)

rather than a moral one (compassing dehumanized *Homo sapiens* as well as non-*Homo sapiens* beings) in turn works to obscure the relevance of anti-racist and social justice discourses to the epistemic critique posthumanism frames.²⁵

This critique of posthumanism's Western theoretical bias may register as an accusation, but it is even more pressingly an invitation to wider collaboration. By holding more tightly onto the distinction between human and *Homo sapiens*, and between nonhuman and non-*Homo sapiens*, posthumanism opens itself up to a whole new archive of antiracist and social justice thought, and a closer conversation between these theories going forward could produce a powerful new critical matrix. To begin this conversation, my next section turns to the work of Sylvia Wynter, whose sustained critique of Western liberal humanism's constitutive racism affords a particularly productive starting place for thinking conjunctively (although not, as we shall see, seamlessly) across posthumanist and social justice theories. As I shall argue, putting these two discourses in conversation can help each to refine its philosophical commitment—and perhaps, too, the limits of that commitment—to moving beyond the Western episteme of “the human.”

Mutual Encounters: Posthumanism as Social Justice

Sylvia Wynter's theory of social justice highlights the structural role that racism plays in the episteme of Western liberal humanism. Her major intervention into the fields of postcolonial, Black, and feminist studies has been to underscore the futility of seeking social justice within this Western episteme of “Man,” and to call, therefore, for a posthumanist model of social justice. For Wynter, the story of Western humanism's development cannot be separated from the history of New World colonialism and, in particular, Black slavery. Expanding and sharpening Foucault's genealogical account, Wynter tells the story of Western Man's epistemic development in three grand movements.²⁶ In the Middle Ages, Western Europe operated with a Christian hierarchy of the human, with the faithful occupying the status of fully moralized beings, and pagans constituting morally negligible beings. In the Renaissance, this Christian hierarchy was partially overwritten by the ostensibly more secular idea of liberal “Man,” who is defined not by his relation to God (Christian or pagan) but rather by his relation to the state (citizen or noncitizen, *bios* or *zoe*). In the third movement, which began in the late eighteenth century, the liberal definition of “Man” was further (if again only ostensibly) secularized by the rise

of biologism and Darwinian evolutionism. Since this “second variant of *Man*” was understood to originate “in Evolution rather than as before, in Divine Creation,” Wynter argues that this “biocentric” turn in Western liberal humanism consolidated racist hierarchy. For whereas in the Renaissance and Middle Ages the human had been understood to have been universally made in God’s image (and only subsequently parsed into Christians/pagans, or citizens/noncitizens), now the human was to be represented as an unevenly developed species “in the slow process of evolution from monkey into man.”²⁷ The biologization of Western Man thus introduced the idea of “the *genetic* nonhomogeneity of the human species,” distributing *Homo sapiens* along a racialized spectrum from apelike (“the Negroid”) to “man” (“the Caucasian”).²⁸

In Wynter’s hands, then, the history of Western liberal humanism is a history of factualizing—of making biologically “scientific”—a hierarchy of human being that has been inscribed in the Western episteme from its earliest days. Of course, this episteme is only one out of a potentially infinite number of stories one could spin about what it means to be human. And yet, as Wynter observes, by posing as an objectively empirical rather than a subjectively political, ethical, philosophical, or religious account of the human, this episteme made it “impossible for [Western thinkers] to conceive of an Other to what they called and continue to call *human*.”²⁹ In the West and its former colonies, the supposed naturalism of this “genre” of human being worked alongside the hegemony of Western power to conceal the contingency of this Western ideology and to occlude the existence of—as well as the possibility of inventing—alternative epistememes of the human.³⁰

Wynter’s larger aim here is therefore *posthumanist* in the sense that her antiracist theory calls upon us to dismantle liberal humanism’s hegemonic conception of Man. Indeed, a central premise of her project is that the task of redressing inequity and discrimination ultimately cannot be accomplished by simply redistricting the human within the terms this episteme provides. It is not enough, she suggests, to revalorize marginalized populations and thus, bit by bit, shuffle more beings into the lifeboat of moral privilege that liberal recognition affords. “Such a *moralistic* approach,” she writes, “is the logical result of taking our *isms* [racism, sexism] as isolated rather than systemic facts.”³¹ Instead, she insists, the project of social justice requires us to move beyond the present episteme of the human. For as her genealogy of Western humanism underscores, discrimination is structural to the Western humanistic tradition: this episteme has always operated by constituting “a negative ontological category” (pagan, foreign, Black) to

serve as the foil to its representation of the human. Accordingly, Wynter argues that the plight of humanism's dehumanized Others, "like that of the ongoing degradation of the planetary environment, is not even *posable*, not to say *resolvable*, within the conceptual framework of our present order of knowledge."³² Thus, instead of a more pluralistic liberal politics, Wynter calls for a radical break from the hierarchical and discriminatory episteme that funds liberal politics, pluralistic or otherwise. "In order to call in question this ontologically subordinated function, 'minority discourse' can *not* be merely another voice in the present ongoing conversation," she insists: the challenge is not to expand the conversation but to change it.³³ Linking the dehumanization of racialized, feminized, and impoverished populations to the exploitation of animals and the destruction of the nonhuman environment, Wynter envisions something like a unified minority (or nonhuman) movement that would seek to "bring closure to our present order of discourse" and inaugurate a new one no longer premised upon the derogation of others.³⁴

Wynter's conviction that ending racism entails moving beyond (i.e., post-) humanism marks an entry for thinking about the deep congruencies, and perhaps equally entrenched differences, between posthumanist materialism and *posthumanist* social justice theory. It is, at least, arguable that posthumanist materialist discourse is where the conceptual work Wynter calls for—this effort to conjure new "genres of the human"—is currently and most actively getting done. Like Wynter, posthumanism attacks the "biocentric" or deterministic logic that arose in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and that holds that human identity is essentially coded in the body, and that bodies can in turn be located along a spectrum of moral evolution "from monkey to man." Against this essentialist, deterministic, and teleological account of embodiment, posthumanism's revisionary materialism insists that acknowledging the imbrication of identity with embodiment does not condemn us to erecting racist, sexist, speciesist, or any other form of moral hierarchy.

Indeed, posthumanism's materialist ontology bears little resemblance to the watchmaker's world of bestial automata and chains of being that subtends the biocentric account of human identity that Wynter decries. Instead, its founding assumption is that acknowledging the force of material embodiment does not condemn us to biological determinism. In this way, posthumanist materialism hopes to displace racial science's taxonomic and hierarchical order of being with a monistic vision of ontological mutuality, or what José Muñoz terms "the potential and actual vastness of *being-with*."³⁵ As Karen Barad describes this ontology (drawing upon the theory

of quantum entanglement), embodied being primordially consists of ongoing “relations without preexisting relata.”³⁶ Before we are anything or anyone individually, and thus before any hierarchical system of ordering differentiated entities, we exist more primally as a collective: in other words, the mutuality of being is ontologically prior to any system of order that we might impose on being’s dynamically relational field.³⁷ Before individual subjects and objects, before causes and effects, being is imbricated and unfolding, a complexly conjoint becoming. Posthumanism thus conjures what Roberto Esposito describes as “the flesh”: a “vital reality that is extraneous to any kind of unitary organization.”³⁸ As a dynamic material heterogeneity that is as resistant to totalization as it is to individuation and hierarchical ordering, “the flesh” is at once “singular and communal, generic and specific, . . . undifferentiated and different.”³⁹

The deterministic essentialisms of biological racism, sexism, and speciesism can thus find no purchase in this ontology because the materiality of being-with defies attributions of identity. Indeed (much like we have just seen in Whitman), posthumanism’s ontology defies *individuality*. The primordial relationality of being means that any frame we put on being—any attempt to articulate a *particular* being out of being-with (to carve a particular “relatum” out of quantum entanglement or an individual body out of “the flesh”)—could only ever be provisional, perspectival, a revisable construction. On this view, far from being grounded *in* being, individual identity can only ever appear as a kind of denial or misrepresentation of being’s primordial relationality, a processualism that resists identity. Hence Jasbir Puar describes identity as an attempt “to still and quell the perpetual motion of assemblages, to capture and reduce them, to harness their threatening mobility.”⁴⁰ This is to say that whether or not we choose to see identitarian regimes as intentionally repressive, posthumanism insists that they are, at least, inherently reductive, premised on the disavowal “of a relation of otherness that is destined to force open the identity presupposed by the body proper.”⁴¹ In posthumanism’s ontology of “the flesh,” bodies, such as they are, are irreducibly open-ended, porous, compound, relational; identities unravel into ongoing processes that are riven with complexity and creative contingency; all nouns melt into verbs. Where racism and sexism imprison identity in the body, posthumanist materialism frees the body of identity, reimagining the “boundary” of the skin as a site of chiasmic continuity with an alien yet intimate world.⁴²

So the question I have been posing is this: Could posthumanism be describing something like the *posthumanist* “genre of the human” that Wynter envisions? To what extent might posthumanist materialism and

posthumanist social justice be thought together as two fronts in the same fight against liberal humanism's hegemonic hold on "the human"? The summary of these two theories that I have just offered attempts to highlight their common interests: posthumanist materialism explodes the discriminatory hierarchy of being that Wynter diagnoses as structural to the Western episteme she opposes. But to answer the question of their congruency properly, we would have to know whether posthumanist materialism and posthumanist social justice oppose the same thing when they set themselves in opposition to liberal humanism. And the answer to this question, which I shall elaborate in my discussions below, will be no, they don't. That is, when we put these theories in conversation it becomes clear that Wynter ultimately endorses humanism's faith that human life is uniquely endowed with freedom and moral import, whereas posthumanist materialism consistently challenges this premise. But if the preservation of human exceptionalism suggests that Wynter's theory does not wholly break with the Western liberal humanism it critiques, posthumanist theory likewise seeks to conserve key aspects of this episteme. As I shall elaborate, despite the anti-individualism of its relational ontology, posthumanism's politics remain deeply indebted to the individualistic institutions of modern liberal democracy. In outlining these two different conservative tendencies below I will be suggesting why it makes sense to view them as theoretical problems for the ostensibly posthumanist and posthumanist critical traditions in which they respectively arise. Ultimately, however, I will suggest in my Coda why falling short of a radical break from liberal humanism might set desirable or even necessary limits on our posthumanism.

Humanism's Holdovers in Posthumanism

For its part, posthumanism sets itself up in opposition to liberal humanism's transcendental subject; however, this opposition does not extend to a rejection of the liberal political institutions that were organized to honor and accommodate the liberal humanist subject. On the contrary, posthumanists regularly gloss the mutuality of being that their ontology discovers as an invitation to a pluralistic expansion of democratic politics. From Esposito's "affirmative" biopolitics to Latour's "parliament of things" to Levi Bryant's "democracy of objects," posthumanist ontologies routinely double as blueprints for a more pluralistic (a more-than-human) democratic politics whose constituency will finally encompass all beings without exclusion.

On this description, the material connectedness of human and nonhuman being in the primordially of being-with becomes an argument for extending ethical recognition to nonhuman being on the model of democratic liberalization. As Jane Bennett puts this thought, “If human culture is inextricably enmeshed with vibrant, nonhuman agencies, and if human intentionality can be agentic only if accompanied by a vast entourage of nonhumans, then it seems that the appropriate unit of analysis for democratic theory is neither the individual human nor the human collective but the (ontologically heterogeneous) ‘public.’ . . . Surely the scope of democratization can be broadened to acknowledge more nonhumans in more ways, in something like the ways in which we have come to hear the political voices of other humans formerly on the outs.”⁴³ The logic, then, of this vision of posthumanist politics imagines that the enmeshed and dependent nature of human being argues for extending respect and recognition to devalued forms of being through which, it turns out, human life and agency move. Between the ontology outlined in the first part of this quote and the pluralism endorsed after the ellipses, we move from a processual materialism that deconstructs individual identity to a politics that is premised upon individual recognition.

Such a comprehensively inclusive politics would seem to constitute a major ethical advancement—how could it not?—and yet it is not immediately clear how posthumanism’s ontology supports the pluralistic politics posthumanists invoke. Posthumanism, as we have seen, begins by pointing to the processual nature of being, recasting apparently solid objects as open-ended processes. But this processual ontology creates difficulties for any politics we would construct on its back. The fact of process—what Bennett calls the “public” but what we might more accurately, by Bennett’s lights, view as the “publicity” or collectively “enmeshed” nature of all being—is not, after all, a “unit of analysis” but, on the contrary, an account of the ideological contingency (the fictionality) of any unit whatsoever. Nouns like “public” and noun phrases like “a vast entourage of nonhumans” help Bennett manage the contradiction between her processualism and the democratic theory she turns to by precipitating the processual assemblage of being back into a countable array of discrete entities with self-possessed “voices” and political interests. Bennett’s vision for a broadened democracy that would “consult nonhumans more closely” and “listen and respond more carefully to their outbreaks, objections, testimonies, and propositions” thus seems like an ethically admirable program that nonetheless sacrifices the central insight of her posthumanist materialism. For her compelling account of agency as a force distributed across

human and nonhuman actants—an account that thereby deconstructs differences between human and nonhuman, self and other, vital subjectivity and “vibrant” materiality—suggests, to the contrary, that we exist in a world that is not divisible into speakers and listeners. Indeed, even in Barad’s quantum ontology—which does suggest that we might frame *local* “units of analysis” that temporarily resolve “intra-action” into “interaction”—it is not clear that any entity would have the longevity, let alone the personality, sufficient to support anything we could call an objection, testimony, or proposition.

Versions of this contradiction between posthumanism’s processual ontology and its liberal politics recur throughout posthumanist work. It shows up, for instance, in Barad’s injunction to “intra-act responsibly,” which seems to commit us to an impossibility by enjoining us to act ethically (make choices, take into account) toward a mode of relation (“intra-action”) which Barad defines as belonging to a state of entanglement that is ontologically prior to the differentiation between subjects and objects, or causes and effects. But, of course, in this state of entanglement ethical obligation has nothing or no one to which it might attach.⁴⁴ As Matt Taylor argues in his critique of Latour’s “parliament of things,” ontological theories like these fail to explain how we are meant to adjudicate “between a processual relationality that precedes entities, on the one hand, and a procedural politics or ethics between entities, on the other.”⁴⁵ There is, in other words, no way to navigate between the ontology of being-with and the unit-based calculus of liberal politics and ethics—at least, there is no way to effect this translation that does not simply betray the mutuality of being that posthumanism champions. Indeed, it seems particularly dubious that an ontology that is, as posthumanists regularly stress, distinctly inimical to the figure of the sovereign and autonomous liberal self could be translated without loss into an expanded liberal politics. Thus while posthumanist plans for incorporating non-*Homo sapiens* into liberal democratic politics seem laudible, they also seem curiously perverse, for invariably they shunt us back into liberal, ethical, and political grammars in which the radical imbrication of being is reduced to interactions between individual beings whose inherent sovereignty, freedom, and autonomy demand to be recognized. In this sense, posthumanism’s habit of positioning itself as an emancipatory discourse working in the pluralizing tradition of abolitionism and first-wave feminism arguably undersells the radicalism of its philosophy.

In fact, this is one important area in which a more sustained engagement with social justice theory could help posthumanism to refine its

understanding of its own project. Confirming Wynter's sense of the acute limitations of trying to seek social justice within the terms of the Western episteme, recent work in indigenous studies has highlighted the epistemic coerciveness of liberalism's regime of rights and recognition. These studies reveal the steep price of admission exacted from indigenous communities seeking political recognition.⁴⁶ As they demonstrate, the very process of establishing claims to rights and sovereignty often subjects indigenous groups to a kind of epistemic neocolonialism, forcing them to abandon or reframe their traditional cultural conceptions of subjectivity, kinship, and community with the nonhuman environment so as to bring them into alignment with liberal accounts of personhood, race, and territory. Indeed, Taiaiake Alfred observes, even multiculturally minded liberal policies tend to resolve any "disconnect between [their] rights-based liberal philosophical orientation and the fundamentals of Indigenous teachings and worldviews" at the latter's expense. In this way, the process of securing tribal rights can end up coercing indigenous peoples to relinquish "traditional notions of belonging . . . and [replace] them with race and gender-based notions of membership designed to reconstitute Indigenous people in ways acceptable to Euroamerican ideologies."⁴⁷ Over generations—and, more pointedly, as a result of political policies ostensibly designed to accommodate cultural difference—indigenous peoples can thus come to "hold ideas about identity and their nationhood which reflect colonial attitudes," losing touch with an indigenous "worldview that is illuminated by notions of fluidity [and] flux."⁴⁸

Kim TallBear echoes this critique in her recent study of the popularization of DNA testing in North America as a mechanism for establishing claims to tribal belonging. Although this practice offers seemingly straightforward and objective answers to questions about tribal belonging, TallBear shows how it does so by reducing tribal identity to a genetic fingerprint, drastically simplifying the intricate interplay of both genealogical and cultural inheritances (including what TallBear describes as the "sense of inexplicable inheritance") that has traditionally shaped the logic of tribal belonging. DNA testing therefore proposes to convert a complexly biocultural phenomenon into a set of "particular ideas and vocabularies of race, ethnicity, nation, family, and tribe" that have been codified by the Western liberal-raciological episteme over the past two hundred years. But "for and by whom are such categories defined?" TallBear inquires. "How have continental-level race categories come to matter? And why do they matter more than the 'peoples' that condition indigenous narratives, knowledges, and claims?"⁴⁹ Thus, like Alfred, TallBear calls attention to the ways in

which the tools for gaining political recognition often subject non-Western peoples and epistemes to a kind of neocolonial disciplining. By underscoring the epistemic price of liberal inclusion—what Elizabeth Povinelli dubs “the cunning of recognition”—indigenous social justice studies like these can serve to alert posthumanists to the ways in which its focus on extending liberal rights and recognition to nonhuman beings may be hostile to the more radical epistemic transformation—the emancipation of being-with—that they ultimately seek.⁵⁰

Indeed, studies of recognition’s “cunning” coercions suggest that posthumanism’s faith in liberal recognition might not simply sell short its processualist ontology but, rather, sell it out. By demonstrating how liberal recognition can act as a straightjacket as much as a means to liberation, Alfred, TallBear, and Povinelli help us to see how posthumanism’s advocacy for nonhuman recognition and inclusion may in fact be antithetical to the kind of change its ontology tasks us with when it suggests that inclusion is, for better or worse, inescapable—that we are always already ontologically conjoined whether or not we recognize each other as equals. This is to suggest, as Cary Wolfe also reminds us, that posthumanist materialism in fact has nothing to do with the question of which bodies “matter” (*Homo sapiens*? All primates? All animals? Black lives? All lives?).⁵¹ That is, its key proposition is not to champion the sovereignty (the entitlement to freedom, rights, and recognition) of nonhuman beings but rather to disclose the fictionality of sovereignty as such in a material world in which every being is relationally constituted in and through the being of others.

But if these social justice critiques of liberal politics help us to discern the conservatism of posthumanism’s faith in liberal recognition, posthumanism’s critique of human exceptionalism can, conversely, help us to discern the humanism that still haunts even Wynter’s ostensibly posthumanist theory of social justice. Although Wynter calls out the discriminatory hierarchy that lies at the heart of the Western liberal humanist tradition, the alternative “genre of the human” that she outlines ultimately looks a lot like the liberal humanist subject she proposes to displace. Wynter’s genealogy of Western Man pivots on the notion that “the human” is a representation—an enunciation that passes itself off as a natural fact. Seizing on this demonstration of humanity’s capacity for self-narration (which she terms, borrowing from Frantz Fanon, “sociogeny”), Wynter argues that this capacity marks out human being as exceptional to nature. As she explains, sociogeny is an endowment unique to *Homo sapiens*, which affords this species an additional “nonphysical principle of causality”—the power to self-generate cultural codes that prescribe our beliefs and behaviors for

us over and above the promptings of our inherited genetic code.⁵² Sociogeny thus liberates human action from material causation: in contrast to the “purely biological” being of other species (whose identities, she argues, “are genetically *preprescribed* for them”), we humans “are *simultaneously* storytelling *and* biological beings.”⁵³ For Wynter, this unique speciological capacity not only affords *Homo sapiens* an intrinsic moral freedom lacking in all other forms of being, but it simultaneously guarantees the moral equality of all *Homo sapiens* to each other, for if *Homo sapiens* are sociogenic (self-creating) by definition, this speciological trait means that no member of the species could be genetically “preprescribed” by race or sex. For Wynters, then, sociogeny not only makes alternative genres of the human possible (by exposing Western humanism’s genre of the human to be a sociogenic rather than an organic fact), but it also (and somewhat paradoxically) provides an ostensibly biological justification for upholding the exceptional autonomy of all *Homo sapiens* (as the only species endowed with this special power).

The irony here is thus that Wynter’s account of sociogeny reproduces a version of the same moral hierarchy and “biocentric” reasoning that she denounces in the Western episteme of Man. Indeed, it’s not hard to hear the echo of racism’s biological determinism in her celebration of human exceptionalism. Scientific racists like Josiah Nott also maintain that human beings are uniquely free of the biological determinism that rules lesser forms of being. And although clearly Nott differs from Wynter insofar as he maintains that this capacity is endemic to only certain races of *Homo sapiens* and not the whole species, the underlying logic of biological exceptionalism—the proposition that select organisms are auto-instituting while all others are physiologically determined—remains the same in both Nott’s and Wynter’s accounts of the human. That Nott’s racism and Wynter’s antiracism are both able to adopt the same criterion to such differing ends underscores the contingency of the standards by which racial or speciological “autonomy” is defined. That is, whatever we might choose to count as evidence of a capacity for sociogenic self-making must always itself be an artifact of culture rather than a strictly biological fact. Thus the definition of what qualifies as “articulate” speech as opposed to animalistic noise, “rational” thought as opposed to brutish self-interest, or “cultured” behavior as opposed to instinctive action may be—and historically has been—stipulated and gerrymandered as power sees fit.

Indeed, that sociogeny yields its own version of the “cunning of recognition” is a lesson brought home to us by Frederick Douglass, who recognizes in its discrimination of speech from noise a key to the “blood-stained

gate of slavery.” At the start of the *Narrative*, Douglass harrowingly recalls witnessing his aunt Hester’s torture at the hands of Captain Anthony, during which “no words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose.” As numerous critics have pointed out, Douglass’s masterful performance of literacy in the prose of this scene, and throughout the *Narrative*, functions as a powerful testament to his humanity, demonstrating his rational intelligence. And yet this primal scene simultaneously labors to expose the brutal capriciousness of language as a test of humanity in the first place. Douglass’s depiction of Anthony’s indifference to Hester’s “words,” “prayers,” and “heart-rending shrieks” lays bare the ease with which Anthony dismisses her utterances as merely instinctive, animalistic noises (morally indistinguishable from the bellows of the cow whose slaughter would have furnished the “blood-clotted cowskin” at this scene’s center).⁵⁴

Douglass’s ambivalence in this scene—his implicit appeal to language as expressive of moral being and simultaneous critique of the ease with which language may be dismissed as mere sound—confronts us with what posthumanists describe as the necessarily ideological, rather than empirical, nature of any distinction between human (autonomous, sociogenic) and nonhuman (embodied, “purely biological”) life. Thus Derrida argues that correcting the injustice this arbitrary distinction inscribes into being is “not just a matter of giving back to the animal whatever it has been refused” (by, for instance, demonstrating various animals’ capacities for “speech, reason, experience of death, mourning, culture” and so forth); instead the challenge is “a matter of questioning oneself concerning the axiom that permits one to accord purely and simply to the human or rational animal that which one holds the just plain animal to be deprived of.”⁵⁵ It is not enough, in other words, to discover that hitherto excluded beings are capable of “testimony” (to return to Bennett’s word). To do this is simply to keep moving the chains down the field of humanism when the task, instead, is to escape the rules of its game. Thus Derrida demands that instead of trying to perfect the axiom by which we distinguish which utterances count as “speech,” which events count as “actions,” or which beings count as “free,” we ought to be asking ourselves whose interests that axiom serves.

But if posthumanism’s critique of human exceptionalism thus calls into question Wynter’s faith in, and commitment to, *Homo sapiens*’ sociogenic autonomy, its skepticism also arguably forwards Wynter’s larger project. Weheliye suggests that Wynter’s effort to think “freedom beyond the world of Man” commits us to listening for “language that does not rely on

linguistic structures, at least not primarily, to convey meaning . . . transparent to the world of Man.”⁵⁶ Taking up this invitation (and perhaps taking it farther than Weheliye means it to go), we might conclude that Wynter’s desire for a posthumanist genre of the human not only commits us to listening for language among those not already counted as human but also urges us to listen for the nonhumanity of human language. Put differently, instead of imagining that sociogeny (language, culture) is the antithesis of genetic determinism, we can imagine it as a kind of emergent complication within biological order. After all, if the capacity for sociogeny is somehow in *Homo sapiens*’ “nature,” then the degree of freedom it introduces into human behavior is not a negation of humanity’s genetic inheritance but an expression of it. Using this description, then, a capacity for sociogeny does not designate a transcendental freedom but rather introduces a degree of play—of unpredictability or creativity—into speciological behavior. From this perspective, human being still exceeds the embodied determinism which, for Wynter, characterizes racist “biocentrism”; however, that freedom no longer liberates human being from its embodiment, categorically distinguishing *Homo sapiens* from non-*Homo sapiens* being. When we begin to think sociogeny as an embodied trait in this way, it takes on the double movement of Derrida’s posthumanist vision, designating a capacity that is something less than the absolute “human” freedom humanism had posited, and therefore identifying something that is potentially more widely shared, to varying degrees, among the diversity of animal life.

Again, my sense is that adopting a more posthumanist view of the human would clarify and strengthen Wynter’s project. Exorcising the human exceptionalism from her vision brings it a step closer to realizing her goal of articulating a new episteme that embraces the materiality of “the flesh-and-blood individual subject.”⁵⁷ Indeed, as Katherine McKittrick demonstrates, Wynter regularly suggests that decolonizing Western Man will mean learning to see how “our flesh and blood and brain matter” work to “unsettle and enmesh the otherwise bifurcated and dichotomized epistemological clusters of science and creativity,” or biological and sociogenic production.⁵⁸ Moreover, posthumanism’s view of the conjugation of freedom with embodiment forwards Wynter’s ambition to “move us toward a . . . correlated human species, and eco-systemic ethic.”⁵⁹ Throughout her work, Wynter calls attention to the ways in which the racism, sexism, and colonialism of the modern era are structurally conjoined with the necropolitics of the sixth extinction event now underway. All of these phenomena, she argues, arise from the same source: liberal humanism’s hierarchical division of being. They are, in other words, one problem with several

heads: an *integrated* “poverty-hunger-habitat-energy-trade-population-atmosphere-waste-resource problem.”⁶⁰ Wynter’s sense that social injustice and environmental destruction are systemic to the Western genre of “the human” underscores the urgency of decommissioning this episteme’s foundational move of disavowing human materiality and thus segregating “human” being from the entangled being-with of planetary life.

By these routes, Wynter’s critique of Western Man and posthumanism’s materialist ontology begin to coalesce more clearly. The essential intervention of both projects—what constitutes their departure from Western humanism—is their effort to renounce the transcendently autonomous human subject whose freedom is constituted through the derogation (the racialization/animalization/objectification) of embodied life. Both thus aim to deconstruct this hegemonic episteme—to disassemble, and not simply redistrict, the bounds of the human as we know it. Moreover, when read through one another, each of these projects helps the other to see where their work threatens to collapse back into the hierarchical ontology they wish to revise—where, for instance, posthumanism’s liberal politics and Wynter’s human exceptionalism betray their primary commitments to reimagining human being as a mode of being-with in which the distinction human/nonhuman no longer holds.

From a certain perspective, this coalescing vision of a thoroughly decolonized posthumanism promises to be radically liberatory. Ultimately pointing beyond the liberal politics of pluralism, these posthumanist projects challenge us to inaugurate a new episteme made to the measure not just of “Man” nor *Homo sapiens* nor even all biological life, but to the heterogeneous and radiantly interanimated ontology of worldly being. Unleashing the revolutionary generosity unwittingly implicit in Césaire’s appeal, they urge us to conceive a political ethics truly “made to the measure of the world”—an episteme no longer premised upon the manufacture of a “lesser” class of devalued and exploitable being but, rather, one that embraces all being as one densely conjoined world.

Viewed from another angle, however, it is not clear that liberation is a term that can meaningfully be applied to an ontology of entanglement. Liberation, as we know it, implies disentanglement—an unburdening that restores us to a natural state of freedom, honoring our inherent right, as autonomous selves, to self-sovereignty. But none of these things—freedom, autonomy, sovereignty, the singular “self”—remain readily legible in a world in which being is primordially relational.

In light of this problem, the holdovers of humanism within these posthumanistic discourses may, after all, prove to be strategic inconsistencies. As

my readings of Douglass, Thoreau, and Whitman have tried to underscore, the ontology of embodiment has distinctly illiberal tendencies, undermining appeals to human rights, agency, and selfhood as we understand these things. Thus while I began this chapter by suggesting that antislavery materialism may be useful to us today by helping to spotlight the absence of race as a critical term in contemporary posthumanist theory, I'd like to propose now that it also lights up a further aporia in our present discourse. There is an evident tension in these antebellum projects—in the ambivalence with which Douglass embraces animality, aware of the costs of dehumanization; in the fatalism with which Thoreau appeals to evolutionary change despite his desire to believe in the power of conscientious action; and in the manic optimism with which Whitman welcomes the prospect of his own dissolution into an unspooling material cosmos. The unease we find here stems from the incommensurability of these materialist visions with the liberal and romantic ideals these authors also held.

In these ways, these authors' antislavery materialisms confront us with the dreams deferred by a more rigorously materialist account of being. And thus, although critics like Latour and Wynter often frame their work as attempts to construct an empirical episteme that will finally be grounded in material fact rather than in the truths that (human, Western) power invents, we must learn to assess this episteme by a further standard. The question before us is not simply whether a materialist, posthumanist ontology gives us a truer, more empirically accurate account of reality. For whether or not it is truer, the question remains whether the episteme this ontology sponsors is ethically preferable to the humanism it seeks to displace. I turn to this question, via antislavery materialism, in the Coda.