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Antebellum Posthuman

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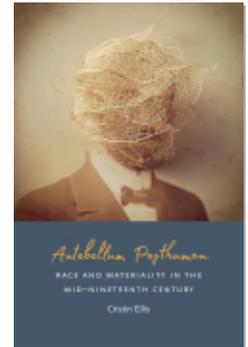
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After Romantic Posthumanism

In an important and difficult passage in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” Hortense Spillers describes an opening of freedom that paradoxically appears amid the horrific confinement of the Middle Passage:

Those African persons in “Middle Passage” were literally suspended in the “oceanic,” if we think of the latter in its Freudian orientation as an analogy for undifferentiated identity: removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet “American” either. . . . They were the culturally “unmade,” thrown in the midst of a figurative darkness that “exposed” their destinies to an unknown course. Often enough for the captains of these galleys, navigational science of the day was not sufficient to guarantee the intended destination. We might say that the slave ship, its crew, and its human-as-cargo stand for a wild and unclaimed richness of *possibility* that is not interrupted, not “counted” / “accounted,” or differentiated, until its movement gains the land thousands of miles away from the point of departure.¹

In this brief but provocative moment, Spillers invites us to detect a “richness of possibility” opened up by the sheer unpredictability of physical systems.

As she suggests, the uncertainty of this ship's fate—its vulnerability to volatile Atlantic winds and tides—lays bare the irreducibly speculative and provisional nature of any discursive account of this ship, temporarily suspending cultural authority and unmaking the identities that cultures confer. Until the ship “gains the land” and makes good on the captain's intentions for it, the precise nature of this venture remains undecidable: neither American nor indigenous language speakers can claim to define the “unknown course” they are on, nor can they say for sure if they are “cargo” and “crew” or something else—future mutineers and shark fodder; or everyone the future-drowned. For Spillers it is not only the kidnapped Africans, physically chained and culturally unmoored in the ship's hold, who are exposed to a “wild and unclaimed” unmaking; this whole oceangoing assemblage—“the slave ship, its crew, and its human-as-cargo”—exists as an “undifferentiated identity” suspended in the “darkness” of an uncertain journey.

Although Spillers is not a posthumanist, her account of oceanic suspension could easily come from the pages of recent posthumanist theory. The assemblage of ocean, ship, crew, and human-as-cargo that she conjures highlights the distribution of power across both human and nonhuman agencies in this scene. And in mapping this complex intersection of material and cultural forces (oceanic weather, colonizing and indigenous languages), she insists that neither culture nor matter is finally decisive; each is vulnerable to the other. Spillers thus qualifies the linguistic determinism of social constructivism as well as the physical determinism of biological essentialism by discovering something altogether different in this moment—not determinism but a complexity that produces uncertainty, which she glosses as an unclaimed and unclaimable freedom. In a scene of what otherwise appears to be total domination, Spillers finds bright cracks—interstices of possibility opening up in the unpredictable encounter of myriad forces: the skill of the captain's navigational science intersecting with the power of Atlantic winds, the iron fastness of the chains that hold human cargo countered by the force of that cargo's memory of her name.

But if Spillers's map of human and nonhuman entanglement in this moment is reminiscent of posthumanist accounts of “the flesh,” ultimately in this essay she provides an account of “flesh” that is quite different. In the larger essay, the force of nonhuman materiality fades from view and the materiality that concerns Spillers is specifically the flesh of human being, and the power of this human flesh to obdurately persist even after ideology has otherwise denied that being's humanity. Flesh is, as she writes, “that

zero-degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse.” What has made her account of the flesh so influential is her counterintuitive suggestion that nonrecognition may also be liberating, that existing at the “zero degree of social conceptualization” might in fact enable the inhabitants of the flesh to instantiate an alternative subjectivity not colonized by the dominant social order. Thus Spillers concludes this essay by reclaiming the “monstrosity” of the flesh, recasting the abjection of nonrecognition as an “*insurgent ground*” from which to “rewrite . . . a radically different text” of human being.²

A discrepancy exists between the legibly human agency of the flesh that Spillers ultimately champions and the posthumanist vision of material agency that briefly appears in her account of the Middle Passage. For my purposes, this article offers a case study of the difficulty of sustaining a materialist perspective of the actions and events that we call political and that we understand to be charged with ethical significance. Even Spillers, who is deeply committed to thinking about how materiality resists and exceeds ideological inscription, and who is no less deeply committed to changing the terms in which politics is imagined, nevertheless continues to organize her account of political change around the drama of recognition and the struggle between competing constructions of the human. In this sense, her essay may be postrecognition but it is not posthumanist; like the posthumanist and *posthumanist* social justice discourses I have examined in Chapter 4, Spillers ultimately suspends her vision of material complexity and entanglement to restore us to a world in which human agency is once again intelligible, and recognition of human sovereignty is once again the endgame.

The question I have promised to ask here is whether this move may be ethically preferable, whether suspending the radically materialist perspective that posthumanist assemblages offer might be necessary in order to construct a political vision we can admire. We might put this even more polemically: the question, at its most extreme, is whether a truly posthumanist materialism can sustain an ethics or a politics at all. My sense is that it cannot, but more important, in these closing remarks I would like to suggest that one great advantage of studying antislavery materialism today is that these nineteenth-century texts make the apolitics of materialism visible in ways that contemporary posthumanist discourse does not.

Consider, by way of instructive contrast, Frederick Douglass’s account of the insurgent slave ship in the climactic scene of *The Heroic Slave*. Even after Madison Washington has seized control of the ship, the white mate, Tom Grant, denies the legitimacy of the coup and Washington proceeds

to lecture to him on the justice of his revolt. But as we have seen, it is not the ethical force of Washington's words but rather his superior physical force—and then the even more overwhelming force of a sudden squall—that ends their showdown.

The wind howled furiously,—the ocean was white with foam, which, on account of the darkness, we could see only by the quick flashes of lighting that darted occasionally from the angry sky. All was alarm and confusion. . . . For awhile we had dearer interests to look after than slave property. A more savage thunder-gust never swept the ocean. Our brig rolled and creaked as if every bolt would be started The first words [Madison Washington] uttered after the storm had slightly subsided were characteristic of the man. “Mr. mate, you cannot write the bloody laws of slavery on those restless billows. The ocean, if not the land, is free.”³

Interrupting the parley between Washington and Grant, Douglass gives this sublime storm the last word in their dispute. Still refusing to acknowledge that “the principles of 1776” might apply “to one whom I deemed my inferior,” Grant is silenced by the squall that threatens to destroy them all. But this is also no merely fortuitous vortex of high wind and waves: this wind howls “furiously”; this sky is “angry.” The anthropomorphism of Douglass’s prose turns the squall into an avenging god, an impression confirmed by Washington’s pronouncement that the storm is a sign of nature’s inherent hostility to “the bloody laws of slavery.”

Just as Spillers imagines, ocean weather rises up in *The Heroic Slave* to exert its own kind of countercultural force, compelling Grant to relinquish his claim to “slave property.” Arguably, however, the only thing that makes this storm’s suspension of slavery *political* is Washington’s gloss of it—his insistence that the storm is not just interruptive but insurgent, that its material force is ethically oppositional. By contrast, when Spillers conjures the possibility of a slave ship blown off course, she offers this image as an example of the way in which matter’s restless volatility is ultimately hostile to all fixed laws and systems, slaveholding or otherwise. For Spillers, in this moment, the ultimately ungovernable dynamism of the ocean-ship-cargo-crew assemblage means that every ideological system ultimately rests upon precariously fluid ground. Bruno Latour also insists that the world’s material assemblages are perpetually unsettling to political orders. As he writes, what the materialist perspective “calls back into question with such remarkable effectiveness is precisely the possibility of *collecting* the hierarchy of actors and values, according to an order fixed once and for all.

An infinitesimal cause can have vast effects; an insignificant actor becomes central With political ecology, one is always caught off-guard, struck sometimes by the robustness of systems, sometimes by their fragility.”⁴ In contrast to Douglass’s specifically *antislavery* ocean environment, the post-humanist materialism that Latour and Spillers (in her Middle Passage moment) embrace invites us to recognize the contingency of *all* political and ethical orders. The complexity and unpredictability of material entanglement means that the “bedrock” of empirical reality is, in the long view, oceanic. This fluid materiality is at once the condition of possibility for regimes of human meaning and a force for their continual upheaval. In light of this incalculable restlessness, every future is uncertain; every order is provisional; every life is a life lived at sea.

And herein lies the crux of the problem. However much we may be tempted to conflate this restive unsettling with revolutionary insurgency, or “lines of flight” with liberation, changefulness and open-endedness in and of themselves are neither an ethics nor a politics.⁵ Posthumanism’s processualist ontology helps us to map the profusion of nonhuman agencies and affectivities at play in human experience and amidst the events and procedures that we call human politics. This mapping shows us, for instance, how lead’s mobility and toxicity can re-inflect American racial imaginaries, or how the labor of worms can change national topographies.⁶ And by learning to recognize these nonhuman dimensions of political life, we arrive at a new and more comprehensive political realism. But this powerfully expanded map of the entanglements of being and knowing does not tell us what we ought to do with its information. If the dynamic fluidity of posthumanism’s assemblage ontology promises openings for change, it cannot tell us what changes to wish for. Its materialist perspective thus helps us to recognize the more-than-human forces that populate politics, but it does not yield a materialist politics.

This is a lesson, I would like to suggest, that antislavery materialism brings home to us particularly vividly by virtue of the providentialism that so explicitly supplements the embodied politics of Douglass, Thoreau, and Whitman. In their late romantic texts, nature itself has an ethics. Thus the physical force of Douglass’s “restless billows” *is* political because for Douglass (as we have seen), there is an ethical code inscribed in the material order of nature. Likewise, the force of evolutionary transformation is political in Thoreau’s hands because for Thoreau evolution is morally progressive. And if, for Whitman, we are only temporary instantiations in a cascade of material causality (our identities, bodies, desires, and actions arriving on the crest of a wave of antecedent events, and departing in a froth

of proliferating consequences), this “vast clear scheme” of material relationality is nonetheless ethical because for Whitman this fateful system is both perfect and just.⁷ Thus even as these authors confront me with the materiality that therefore I am, the engulfment of my liberal autonomy and the subsumption of human history into natural history do not register, in these accounts, as losses. For, these authors assure us, this is an ethical world: slavery is even now being abolished by the gravitational tug of our animal instincts; racism is literally being driven from our hearts by evolution; racial equality is already an ontological fact regardless of what auctioneers or Supreme Court justices say. Thus if there is a kind of fatalism in Douglass’s invocation of “forces in operation which must inevitably work the downfall of slavery,” in Thoreau’s really passive resistance, and in Whitman’s renunciation of authorial (or political) intent, each of these authors nonetheless greets our dispossession as a kind of grace because he believes that nature’s changefulness is meliorating.⁸ Fate is providential: we are instances of an unfolding cosmos that is benevolently edging toward greater perfection.

We are, moreover, primed to notice the normativity of the natural system in these accounts because we know these authors as late romantics, and the beneficence of nature is one of those things we think of as characteristic of romantic thought. Romanticism’s nature is strongly normative: “natural” is, for the romantics, a synonym for “true” or “good.”⁹ Thus when, in “Frost at Midnight” Coleridge sends his son to the countryside so that he might “see and hear/The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible/Of that eternal language, which thy God/Utters, who from eternity doth teach/Himself in all,” he is speaking of a nature that is above all moral, not simply material as empiricism frames it for us.¹⁰ Nor is this normative view of nature limited to the ostensibly unempirical realms of romantic poetry; through the mid-nineteenth century, scientific writing was similarly convinced of the material order’s beneficence, its empirical outlook still contiguous with natural theology. Hence Louis Agassiz understood science to be “an investigation into the ways of nature, into the ways of the Creator,” and his colleague Arnold Guyot could describe the earth’s geological development as “the realization of an intelligent thought . . . of love to man, who is the end and aim of all creation.”¹¹ Indeed, the ease with which racial science converted into political doctrine speaks to how widespread the assumption was at midcentury that the material order spells out natural hierarchies of being and that natural change is progressive, with humankind at its cutting edge.

In retrospect, the antebellum moment has come to seem like the twilight of this mode of thought. The publication of *On the Origin of Species* in

1859 is often, if not wholly accurately, understood to have rung natural theology's death knell and displaced romanticism's normative nature with a vision of materiality that refuses "anything like telos or directionality . . . or a commitment to progressivism."¹² Although it would take several more years to take hold, the indifferently changeful nature that Darwin introduced drained the moralism out of natural systems. Nature could no longer be capitalized, and once no longer credited with a perspective or moral aim, it also could not be credited with a politics. Against this backdrop of romantic science and its eclipse, the renewed political impulse of contemporary materialist discourses swims more clearly into view as an atavism, an impulse to return to the premise that the study of ontology may bear ethical insights. If what the turn to ontology promises is something like a new realism—a return to the obdurate matter that social constructivism seemed to dismiss, and a reaffirmation that this fleshy reality resists "concealment under the brush of discourse"—then what we find within these contemporary materialisms is the stealing back in of suspended norms, the recolonization of a material system with ethical values.

In this Coda and the previous chapter, I have been tracking this subtle yet pervasive reemergence of normativity in contemporary materialist discourse. Thus as we saw in Chapter 4, although posthumanist materialism demonstrates the nonsingularity of being (its entanglement, its constitutive being-with), posthumanist politics tend to revert to the individualizing logic of liberal recognition, as if the proprietary values of freedom and equality were (as Douglass suggests) universally natural demands. By this route, too, the purely material relations this ontology maps start to seem morally laden: in posthumanist discourse, interdependence starts to look like community, entanglement like obligation, mutuality like equality, porosity like love.¹³ A version of this naturalization of ethics also occurs in posthumanist social justice theory. Again, as we have seen, although theorists like Wynter and Spillers demonstrate that "the human" is not a natural kind but a status conferred on some bodies and not others for ideological reasons, their politics nonetheless presume that certain material organizations (*Homo sapiens*, monsters of "the flesh") *naturally* bear humanity in them, regardless of whether their humanness goes unrecognized. This is how these *particular* nonhumanized organisms can serve, in Wynter's and Spillers's formulations, as instantiations of alternative genres of the human—because these bodies are understood to always already *be* human, making "the human" once again a natural kind. In these ways, posthumanist and *posthumanist* social justice theories reinject systems of value into the ostensibly extra-ideological

material reality to which they appeal. At the end of the day, their natures are normative as well.

My reason for highlighting this remnant romanticism is not, however, to call it out. On the contrary, I want to suggest its necessity. Because these discourses do not simply wish to be descriptive—because they have an ethics and a politics to recommend—they cannot be strictly materialist; they must be dual-facing. At the same time, however, I think that there is analytical value in marking the distinction between descriptions of materiality and affirmations of it. We might, then, think of the turn to ontology not as a way to suture the divide between matter and meaning, nor as a surreptitious attempt to disguise policy as nature, but rather as an effort to subject our politics to the persistent skepticism that materiality affords.

Jasbir Puar voices one version of this thought when she suggests that intersectional theories of identity might be productively supplemented by assemblage theory because these theories are “frictional.” Assemblage theory’s processualist materialism puts pressure on the static identities, representative politics, and recognition that intersectionality strives for. Thus, Puar proposes, “No matter how intersectional our models of subjectivity . . . these formulations may still limit us if they presume the automatic primacy and singularity of the disciplinary subject and its identitarian interpellation.”¹⁴ The question therefore becomes how assemblage theory’s skepticism of subjectivity and identity might be brought into the political realm. If we embrace nonrepresentationalism, letting go of positionality, identity, and their demands for recognition, what kinds of new politics would we do? “What kinds of political strategies, of ‘politics of the open end,’ might we unabashedly stumble upon? Rather than rehashing the pros and cons of identity politics, can we think instead of affective politics?”¹⁵ Although Puar does not answer this question, she remains committed to the sense that it has one.

I am offering a slightly different account of the productive frictionality that Puar describes here. I would like to suggest that posthumanist materialism’s usefulness to politics is not a matter of grounding (authorizing a new politics of assemblages or affects) but of ungrounding. If politics cannot *but* be a system of allocating finite attention, concern, and resources, what this materiality does is remind us that our systems of ordering are inherently partial, exclusionary, unjust; that no matter how posthumanist our politics, by virtue of being politics they will never be wholly posthumanist. I have suggested above that posthumanism provides a vastly dilated map of the unacknowledged constituents of politics—of the nonhuman agents and material agencies involved and affected—but this

metaphor now needs qualification. If this ontological realism is a map, it is a medieval one—pointing to the unknown in all directions, indicating where our knowledge fails on the scale of immeasurable quantum phenomena, on the scale of incomputable cosmic complexity, in what Spillers describes as the “figurative darkness” of the unpredictable future. Instead of being used to ground or authenticate (naturalize) a political ethics, then, posthumanism’s unmap of worldly entanglement might better serve to suggest the importance of not settling into our convictions. It suggests that embracing a particular political ethic might in fact not mean committing to a particular arrangement of politics but to constantly readjusting our attentions and revising our sense of who and what counts.

With this view, then, posthumanist materialism becomes a kind of horizon toward which our thought leans, and an abyss that our politics stare into. The reflection it does not return flags the unavoidable mismatch between our political-ideological orderings and the entangled, processual, and finally unpredictable “flesh” of the world. This incommensurability may well give us reason to hope, as Spillers proposes in describing that “richness of possibility” that even slavery could not expunge, or as, for instance, William Connolly suggests in describing the “fragility” of neoliberalism’s hegemony to the chaotic dynamics of material and social systems.¹⁶ But the first lesson of this posthumanist materialism is that possibility and fragility yield changes we ultimately cannot foresee or control. Complexity is thus a feature of this ontology that cuts both ways. If it is grounds for hope that we might tip the scales toward change, it is also grounds to believe, as Whitman reminds us, that the changes we make will never be quite (perhaps not even anything *like*) what we meant.

But in what sense is this useful? How is this reminder of the incompleteness of our knowledge and partiality and provisionality of our politics not just a license for resignation? Thoreau offers an image that will do for my answer when he writes of his desire not for knowledge but for “a sudden revelation of the insufficiency of all that we called Knowledge before.” It is, he writes, “a lighting up of the mist by the sun.”¹⁷ In other words, the value of posthumanism’s ontology may be that it ends not in the catharsis of exposure (what D. A. Miller describes as “the ‘flash’ of increased visibility”) but in the brilliance of overexposure: its makes our myopias more radiant.¹⁸ Less mystically, this materialist perspective enjoins us to a form of epistemological modesty. This is different from the ethical modesty that posthumanists endorse when they invite us to check our hubristic “anthropocentrism,” to recognize and respect nonhuman being, and to cultivate wonder for this world. I am receptive to all of these ethical recommendations, but as

I have argued, I do not think they are endemic to or entailed by this ontology. More immediately, this ontology invites us to recognize the limits of our practical capacity to project our intentions upon a complexly relational world.

Unlike ethical modesty, then, epistemological modesty does not chiefly seek to check human hubris; if anything, it argues that we ought to be more ambitious in our thinking. For if the unmap of entanglement insists that reality will always exceed our thought of it, and that our policies' effects will always overflow their intentions, by the same token it also reminds us to remain alert to the constitutive uncertainty—the fallibility, the humanness—of our knowledge. Just as a Falling Rocks sign resigns us to disaster but also makes us look up, epistemological modesty can provoke us to try to better anticipate, to the extent that we can, the unintended consequences of our actions. Thus though it may not help us to ground our political ethics, a posthumanist epistemology can help us to assess the actions we take in that ethics' name. For by training our attention on the world's systemic complexity and the externalities this creates, it encourages us to build better, more comprehensive, and dynamic models of material interconnections on spatial and temporal scales we are not used to imagining. While this work of modeling is obviously an empirical endeavor, it is also an imaginative labor, an effort to think the unthought spidering of effects and to conjure the unseen multiplicity of human, nonhuman, embodied, and discursive forces interacting upon any given site of action. This may even be a habit of thought that reading, in particular, can help us to cultivate.¹⁹ By tracing these proliferating externalities, we may find ways to fold them into better calculations of cost and risk, to take a larger view of politics' constituents and a longer view of political action so as to better anticipate what crop our seeds in fact sow. And if, like Whitman, we must be willing to accept that we cannot ultimately control what results from our efforts, we can nonetheless, like Whitman, refuse to view this as a reason to stop working. We are launched upon unknown waters, like always.