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Che Gossett: Blackness, Animality, and the Unsovereign

By Che Gossett / 08 September 2015

Black radical imaginings of abolition as a relation provide a way to think about how the caging and mass killing of animal life, the caging and mass killing of Black life, and the racial capitalism that propels premature death are connected in a deadlock.



"Animal is a word that men haven given themselves the right to give...at the precise moment when they made the animal a theorem, something seen and not seeing"
— Derrida, *The Animal That I Therefore Am*

"My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, re-colored, clad in mourning in that white winter day. The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad..."
— Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

In light of the recent spotlighting of the killing of Cecil the lion and media sensationalized outrage over this act vis a vis the glaring absence of empathy for black life and premature death, it feels important to discuss how these two are connected by white militarized masculinity and colonial fantasies about Africa.

Yet instead of positioning the animal life against black life, we might think of how Black radical thinkers have always interrogated the relationship between blackness and animalization and how the radical visions of abolition point us toward a more liberatory horizon for our world. Black people have historically been portrayed through scientific racism as animal like and this anti-black discourse has overlapped with the ways that the animal has been depicted throughout the course of Western philosophy as the desolate ground upon and against which the human, as a colonial and racial construct, has been defined. Yet, Black radical thinkers from Frederick Douglass, to Frantz Fanon and Angela Davis illustrate how the Black radical tradition offers up – as part of what W.E.B. Du Bois called "the gift of black folk" – a vision of freedom for all life. Black thought provides us with new questions, horizons and

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meanings for critical animal studies and new pathways for considering abolition as an ongoing aspiration for human-animal-life liberation.

Frederick Douglass for example wrote against the brutality of anti-black racialization as animalization and condemned violence against animals under the plantation regime:

“Not only the slave, but the horse, the ox and the mule shared the general feeling of indifference to the rights naturally engendered by the state of slavery. The master blamed the overseer, the overseer the slave, the slave the horses, the oxen and the mule and violence fell upon the animals as a consequence.”

Douglass also politically/ideologically supported and knew activists involved in the first animal rights organizations in the Western world. Throughout Douglass’s corpus of thought there are traces and inquiries into the co-constitutive nature of racialized and animal oppression.

“I now saw in my situation, several points of similarity with that of the oxen. They were property, so was I; they were to be broken, so was I. Covey was to break me, I was to break them...”

In a speech he gave in 1873, titled “Agriculture and Black Progress,” Douglass called animals companions and helpers, aligned with Donna Haraway’s notion of “becoming with” as a form of planetary relation:

“There is no successful farming without well trained and well treated horses and oxen, and one of the greatest pleasures connected with agricultural life may be found in the pleasant relations capable of subsisting between the farmer and his four legged companions; for they are company as well as helpers in his toil.”

Following this thought from Douglass offers us what Harriet Jacobs would call a “loophole of retreat” in our current moment of mass unfreedom, through which we can envision abolition as a means of worlding and “becoming with.” As a process of “becoming with,” abolition is the unfinished project of ending anti-Black racism, racial capitalism, anti-trans, anti-queer, patriarchal policing, colonialism, animal killing and caging. Animal liberationists must confront the devaluation of black life and racialization as animalization and the prison industrial complex as part of a movement for abolition.

In contrast to the vision of abolition offered by Douglass, for many in animal liberation and animal studies, abolition is imagined as teleological; first slavery was abolished and now forms of animal captivity must be, too. It is as though animal is the new black even though blackness has already been racialized through animalization. Critiques of “human exceptionalism” and anthropocentrism in critical animal studies often presume that the human in the human/animal divide is a universally inhabited and privileged category, rather than a contested and fractured one. Blackness and its relation to animality and abolition is often left in what Saidiya Hartman and Frank Wilderson call “the position of the unthought.”

Toni Morrison in her work *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* writes that “The slave population, it could be and was assumed, offered itself up as surrogate selves for meditation on problems of human freedom, its lure and its elusiveness.” I would argue that the slave population is offered up as surrogate selves for problems of *animal freedom as well as human freedom*.

Black study/thought prefigures critical animal studies’ investigation of

the human/animal binary. As Mel Chen points out in *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering and Queer Affect*, “Arguably, African slaves first bore the epistemological weight of animalization.” The colonial racialization of blackness has figured and functioned as the animalization and bestialization of blackness. Outside of the racial and colonial category of the human and its ontology, blackness reconfigures understandings of the human in a way that can be thought of as always already post human and staging a crisis for the category of the animal. As Sharon Holland’s recent work on perishment, the animal/human and the Black/Indian shows, Black thinkers were always already considering the question of the animal because of the ways in which Blackness was situated in a relation of objectification to the animal.

Following Sylvia Wynter, we might say that the genre of the animal accompanies the “genre of Man.” As Achille Mbembe discusses in *On The Postcolony*, not only is discourse on Africa “almost always deployed in the framework (or in the fringes) of a metatext about the animal” but the native registers through a “grammar of animality.” We can recognize this anti-black and settler colonial “grammar of animality” in Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*, in which Africa is symbolized as outside of history, logos and telos, and therefore as primitive, barbaric and bestial. It is this colonial and racial imaginary that the white colonial hunter as tourist still speaks to, yet, blackness remains the absent presence of much animal studies and animal liberation discourse – which speaks to how blackness functions as “the raw material” of theory and knowledge production. Blackness still figures as a surrogate body (of knowledge) for white scholarly appropriation. Abject “object of inquiry and/or study” indeed.

In addition to being accelerated in our age, violence against animals also has deep roots in philosophical renderings of “the animal” as such. As Derrida discussed in his seminars titled *The Beast and the Sovereign*, the general trend in philosophy as it looks at the animal has reinforced the colonial human/animal divide, the onto-epistemological distinction that renders the animal as without speech, discourse and reason. In his seminars and in his text *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Derrida illustrates how, since Aristotle, the dominant philosophical framing of animality has been reinforced and perpetuated – from Heidegger’s (in)famous statement about animals as “poor in the world” to Decartes’s experimentation on and definition of animals as machinic automatons, to Bataille’s figuration of animality as unfathomable, to Levinas’s assertion that both the animal and the Palestinian people have “no face” through which to stage an ethical encounter. While Derrida did went against the grain of the predominant theorization of animality and also engaged with the Black radical tradition (analyzing prison as a racial regime and writing in support of George L. Jackson in the 1970s and Mumia Abu Jamal later), he never deconstructs the racialization of blackness as animalization. When philosophy of animality speaks of the human/animal divide but fails to think about how Blackness has been placed outside of the category of the human, it also fails to think about how Black thinkers have fought to liberate Blackness from conceptual captivity as beast. Indeed, we might tweak Derrida’s *The Beast and the Sovereign* to *Blackness, the Beast* and following the work of Nahum Chandler and Jared Sexton, *the Unsovereign*.

Giorgio Agamben’s ontotheological investigation of animality in *The*

Open: Man and the Animal and also does not approach the question of how the racial folds into the animal. Indeed both his discussion of animality and his examination of biopolitics in the modern world would be greatly enhanced by thinking through the relationship of blackness to both. His claim that the concentration camp is the “fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West” in *Homo Sacer* has become in many ways, the paradigm for understanding biopolitics in our contemporary moment, and while this charge is quite accurately descriptive given the dismal carceral-legal apparatus and necropolitical landscape that includes Guantanamo, solitary confinement, etc., it leaves the racial capital and colonial architecture of that very matrix out of the picture. Agamben has been critiqued by Black Studies scholars, such as Jared Sexton in his essay “People of Colorblindness” and Alex Weheliye in *Habeas Viscus* for the ways in which his framing of the biopolitical leaves out any discussion of colonialism and racial slavery. Part of the problem of the elision of colonial and racial slavery from biopolitical discourse is that it prevents us from seeing both the genocidal pre and protohistory of the Holocaust (concentration camps in Namibia for example under German colonialism) and that historical trauma of the Holocaust is used as a political Zionist infrastructure of feeling to justify Israeli occupation contemporarily.

Achille Mbembe offers a more nuanced and historicized understanding of the biopolitical in “Necropolitics.” Mbembe names plantation slavery as “one of the first instances of biopolitical experimentation.” What Mbembe’s work shows how the figure of the animal is always already wrapped up in colonial and racial discourse. Mbembe’s formulation of necropolitics not only expands Agamben’s analysis and shows how slavery was one of the first sites of biopolitical experimentation; it also holds explanatory power for thinking about necropolitical violence against animals and how colonialism, anti-black racism and the mass extermination of animals are connected under racial capitalism.

The violence of animal necropolitics today can be seen through the technologies of mass extermination of animals under regimes of factory farming, or “Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations,” where billions of animals are killed each year and where under the racial capitalist forms of exploitation, factory farm workers are exposed to life threatening diseases.

The zoo is a biopolitical apparatus, a carceral space undergirded by an anthropomorphic cultural imaginary. As Brian Massumi writes in *What Can Animals Teach Us About Politics?*, “The zoo is not simply a space of confinement...The horror of the visible stifling of the animals’ vitality is converted into fun.” Animals are anthropomorphized as having nuclear and domestic(ated) families and thus figured as a heteronormative spectacle. A powerful image of everyday resistance to animal incarceration that was in the news recently was where a panda feigned pregnancy to get access to more food and marginally less harmful carceral conditions – as a result a team of scientists had to reschedule their livestream of it after much laudatory heteronormalizing anthropomorphic zoo fan fare. Since its inception the zoo has also always (already) been a colonial and racial enterprise. The awful history of the anti-black racist and colonial exoticizing exhibitions of people of African descent alongside animals in zoos shows how for blackness the human/animal binary is not only collapsed but is in fact mutually

reinforcing through the violence inherent in the racial-colonial grammar of animalization – how black people have been historically seen as beasts.

In his essay “The Fact of Blackness,” Fred Moten reminds us “what is inadequate to Blackness is already given ontologies.” Following this line of flight (a phrase that George Jackson gifted Deleuze) and that from Douglass, the onto-epistemological figuration of blackness as bestial also moves us to see how what is inadequate to animality are already given ontologies that are inextricably tied to colonial contexts and discourse. Black radical imaginings of abolition as a relation provide a way to think about how the caging and mass killing of animal life, the caging and mass killing of Black life, and the racial capitalism that propels premature death are connected in a deadlock. In the face of this deadlock, Black radical imaginings of abolition provides us with a theoretical infrastructure to reconsider world formative relations of life.

Che Gossett is a Black genderqueer archivist and activist who works to excavate queer of color AIDS activist and trans archives. They are the recipient of the 2014 Gloria E. Anzaldúa Award from the American Studies Association Women’s Committee, a Radcliffe research grant from Harvard University and the 2014 Sylvia Rivera Award in Transgender Studies from the Center for Gay and Lesbian Studies at the City University of New York. Che was a member of the 2013 Archivists and Librarians Delegation to Palestine and recently presented about legacies of black queer solidarity with Palestinian struggle at the Bodies in Public conference at the American University of Beirut. Che also was a presenter at the Black liberation workshop at the 2014 National Students for Justice in Palestine conference.

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Adrien Mellori
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