

[Dingwall on Ellis, 'Antebellum Posthuman: Race and Materiality in the Mid-Nineteenth Century'](#)

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Cristin Ellis. *Antebellum Posthuman: Race and Materiality in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2018. 300 pp. \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8232-7845-9; \$105.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8232-7844-2.

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Historians of race in American thought have long framed their studies in terms of the problem that slavery posed to the meanings of liberalism. How could the practice of human bondage be reconciled with ideals of liberty premised on the moral autonomy and natural rights of individual human beings? In the nineteenth-century United States, where liberal ideals coexisted with a burgeoning slave economy, slavery's defenders answered with racism: black slaves, by dint of their supposed racial inferiority, were outside of civil society and even the human species. On the eve of the Civil War, racism was so embedded in American political institutions and popular culture that antislavery thinkers and activists had not only to attack slavery but also to defend the humanity of the enslaved. Even after the triumph of abolition in the Civil War, white Northern liberals would concede—and often embrace—racist ideology when ascendant capitalism intensified social inequality within the American democracy.

The problem of slavery has remained productive for explaining the historical relationship between racism and liberalism. By now, several generations of historians have researched and argued in this vein. This historiography owes its staying power not only as a framework for historical argument but also for elevating those arguments to the level of moral philosophy. The historiography offers, above all, a powerful critique of liberal humanism that has upheld the rights of the individual along with the concentrated power of institutions that dominate and exploit individuals: slavery, capitalism, and the imperial nation-state. Hence historians of race have been especially attentive to how racial regimes have distorted our conception of humanity. In his final work, the late David Brion Davis, the progenitor of much of this scholarship, began his history of emancipation by analyzing the “meaning of animalization” during slavery.[1]

In *Antebellum Posthuman: Race and Materiality in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, Cristin Ellis takes up the problem of slavery but not its historiography. Ellis follows from a vein of scholarship that engages the same history and themes through a seemingly contrasting analytical framework. Her primary interlocutors are not historians but literary scholars and critical theorists whom she identifies with “contemporary posthumanist materialism”; whereas historians of race have been critical of liberal humanism, posthumanist materialists go further by deconstructing the human itself, arguing for an “embodied subject [that] erodes the moral distinction between human and nonhuman life” (p. 12). Unlike the “animalization” that defined slavery's racism, posthumanist materialists offer the

“embodied subject” as a political critique of liberalism’s racial essentialism and ecological exploitation. As Ellis painstakingly details, the posthumanist project has hardly been univocal. For while new materialists, such as Bruno Latour and Jane Bennett, argue for an enlarged conception of democracy that embraces the ecological, social justice theorists (Ellis’s term), such as Sylvia Wynter and Hortense Spillers, foreground histories of racialization that have already undermined democracy among human beings. It is here where Ellis returns to the history of abolitionism in the United States. Drawing on the writings of Frederick Douglass, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman, Ellis argues for an “antislavery materialism” as a complement and counterpoint to today’s posthumanist impasse. For readers not already immersed in these debates, Ellis provides a formidable introduction. Yet her book offers a fresh if ultimately unfinished analysis of antislavery thought that is worth reading across the disciplinary divide. If much of Ellis’s methodology cuts against the grain of historical analysis, the contours of her problem are familiar. What can the antislavery moment teach us about the limits of liberal humanism and the potential for collectivist politics to challenge the power of global capital, the intersecting structures of white supremacy and sexism, and the looming collapse of our planetary climate?

These large questions are addressed unevenly across the book. Ellis’s argument unfolds across four chapters. The first three probe the “antislavery materialism” of Douglass, Thoreau, and Whitman; the fourth draws out the “historical recurrence” of the antebellum crisis of liberalism in posthumanist critical theory today (p. 135). A short coda ties the two threads together, arguing that antislavery materialism offers a useful historical lens through which to see the present-day debate. In many ways, the core chapters on antislavery materialism are more provocative than the framework Ellis gives them. Rather than champions of liberal democracy and individual autonomy, these writers and activists generated strikingly illiberal formulations of emancipation, revolution, and democracy.

Following Michel Foucault’s genealogy of biopolitics, Ellis contextualizes her study of race and liberalism around “a new volatility in the Western conception of the human” (p. 2). At the turn of the nineteenth century, in Ellis’s framing, emerging sciences of human life, from biology to political economy, challenged liberal humanism on empirical grounds; they showed human beings not as autonomous moral agents but as products of complex biological and social processes. According to Ellis, it is in this “new epistemic regime” that both proslavery and antislavery thinkers made their materialist turns. Of course, not a few proslavery ideologues were quick to embrace biology as a seemingly scientific basis for the practice of racial enslavement, and they managed to shift the terms of the public debate from whether it was right to enslave human beings to whether black slaves were human at all. Abolitionists, of course, would defend the humanity of the enslaved, yet Ellis shows how complex that defense could be. Rather than return to the ideals of humanism, antislavery thinkers at different turns both grappled with and embraced the implications of materialist science. While seeking to challenge biological racism, Ellis’s three antislavery materialists pursued lines of thought at odds with their own support of liberal democracy. What emerges from their thought experiments are startling “image[s] of material community that differs in subtle but consequential ways from ... affective nationalism” (p. 17).

Readers will already be familiar with Douglass as a fierce antislavery activist and defender of the humanity of the enslaved. But, as Ellis shows, he commonly compared slaves to animals—not to uphold notions of “Black bestiality” but to emphasize the naturalness of revolt (p. 47). In his speeches throughout the 1850s and in his novella *The Heroic Slave* (1852), Douglass argued that a slave

uprising was as inevitable as a captive animal lashing out at its master or a storm on the horizon. Here Douglass was “strategically agnostic” about the status of black humanity; his argument “operates outside of the liberal discourse of human equality ... by embracing, instead, the specter of human animality and the threat of physical violence” (p. 46).

Thoreau and Whitman receive similar treatment. Drawing on an efflorescence of recent Thoreau studies, Ellis focuses on his lesser-known works of natural history that—far from a retreat of his polemical writings—register the political crises of the day. Writing a eulogy for John Brown just before composing his naturalist study *The Dispersion of Seeds* (unpublished until 1993), Thoreau compared the martyred abolitionist to a “chance wild fruit” whose hardier “seed” would “germinate” and thus change the course of human development (p. 86). Defending Brown, whose violent measures many abolitionists considered beyond the pale if not insane, showed Thoreau’s willingness to embrace illiberal measures to abolish slavery. But it also marked an alternative to proslavery racism. Whereas Thoreau’s naturalist metaphors trafficked in racial tropes, his conception of race stood against “racism’s static hierarchy of biological life” and instead announced an “ecological politics [that] emphasizes life’s mutability” (p. 93).

Ellis’s analysis of Whitman is brilliant, although the poet’s relationship to the abolitionist movement and antislavery discourse is not clearly established. An enthusiastic democrat and a materialist, to say the least, the author of *Leaves of Grass* (1855) embraced both the nation’s liberal ideals and the experience of living in all its sensuous dimensions. Historicizing his work in relation to the spiritualist movement, Ellis shows how Whitman sought grounds for human sympathy that went beyond the narrow terms of simply identifying with or recognizing the suffering of an “other.” Instead, “Whitmanian sympathy” evoked the trope of electricity to model our “material involvement with—our dependence upon and constitution through—the body of the other” (p. 126). Focusing on the slave auction scene in “I Sing the Body Electric,” Ellis puts Whitman’s well-known ambivalence toward slavery—he defends the humanity of the enslaved without denouncing the institution of slavery—in new light. As Whitman challenged readers to see themselves materially enmeshed with the enslaved (and the entire universe), he also suggested a mode of politics beyond liberalism: an “anti-identitarian” democracy premised not on the state’s recognition of individual rights but on our mutual interdependence with everyone and everything (p. 131).

Here Ellis pivots, sharply, to the present. For while Whitman’s anti-identitarian politics sought to embrace the cosmos, he left little recourse for a politics that can address social conflict and concentrated power. According to Ellis, posthumanist theorists face a similar impasse. Against new materialists, such as Bennet and Latour, who seek a Whitmanian democracy of things while downplaying histories of racism, Ellis contrasts social justice theorists, such as Spillers and Wynter whose critique of liberal humanism, in her view, ironically returns to a liberal politics of recognition. In a densely argued final chapter, Ellis addresses this impasse by marking a conceptual difference between the “nonhuman” and non-*Homo sapiens*. Whereas posthumanists conflate the “nonhuman” with any being that does not belong to the species *Homo sapiens*, social justice theorists have shown how white Western thinkers have already equated the “nonhuman” with blackness, particularly with the racialized figures of the slave and colonial subject. By elevating this conceptual distinction, Ellis makes an opening for a forthright antiracist politics within posthumanist theory while reaffirming their radical materialist project to “disassemble, and not simply redistrict, the bounds of the human as we know it” (p. 159). From this perspective, Ellis argues, “antislavery materialism” can help us

recognize and move past the lingering liberal romanticism that underpins the posthumanist project.

Antebellum Posthuman reads like two books in one: a historicist literary study of antislavery writing and political theory about race and liberal humanism. The latter does not quite match the verve of the former. Her effort to synthesize anti-racism with the ecological concerns of posthumanism is salutary but does not quite cohere. Because the problem is framed entirely within posthumanist studies, the argument does not escape its shallow orbit, making Ellis's critique appear at once politically innocuous and rhetorically overblown. It is hard to accept Ellis's claim that Wynter's presumption of human exceptionalism is an "echo of racism's biological determinism"; and it seems unfair to chide posthumanists for not rejecting "liberal political institutions that were organized to honor and accommodate the liberal humanist subject" (pp. 156, 151). For better or worse, liberal political institutions command much of the terrain of struggle for social and ecological justice, and humanist discourse continues to hold currency for the political movements engaged in those struggles. To be sure, such materialist critiques of posthumanist politics (or lack thereof) have by now been made by numerous scholars in a variety of historical and political contexts.[2] As Ellis tries to advance posthumanism as a political project, her critique retains many of its weaknesses, particularly its apparent unconcern toward class as a material dimension of social inequality and ecological catastrophe.

The book is more successful as a work of literary history and criticism, although Ellis's analysis does fall far short of a comprehensive survey of abolitionist thinking. Historians will be left wondering about how far "antislavery materialism" reached into abolitionist political and cultural practices. The absence of Harriet Beecher Stowe, for example, is conspicuous. As many literary scholars have argued, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) not only is about race and materiality but, as a widely reproduced material object, was itself arguably an agent of historical change. For a book about materiality, there is very little attention given to the varying material conditions of intellectual production, let alone the material cultures in which Douglass, Thoreau, and Whitman lived and wrote. At the fringes of Ellis's analyses, however, one can see new directions of inquiry in the history of antislavery thought, directions attentive to questions of agency and causality, ecological processes, and electric sensations.

By failing to engage with the history and historiography of slavery and emancipation, moreover, Ellis unnecessarily limits the significance of her contributions to critical theory about race and liberalism. Attention to historiography might have enabled Ellis to conduct a more nuanced debate beyond the seemingly closed circle of posthumanist critical theory. Indeed, historians of slavery and emancipation have likewise debated the political shortcomings and critical valiance of "the human," albeit from a materialist perspective that has more to do with political economy than political ecology.[3] Attention to the history of slavery and emancipation would further expand the sense of political possibility at stake in these debates. By moving from the antebellum era to the present, Ellis skips over one of the most epochal political transformations of American history and the fruits of abolitionist activism: abolition itself. Ultimately, it was the agency of the wartime state and the mass insurrection of the enslaved that eradicated the institution of slavery from the United States. What effect did slave emancipation have on how Douglass, Thoreau, and Whitman envisioned the human in relation to social and ecological structures? What lessons does this moment have for how we envision a democratic politics that can achieve social and ecological justice in the same movement?

Ellis is hardly the first critical theorist to overlook slave emancipation as a transformative event in favor of emphasizing the apparent intractability of white supremacy in American life. The oversight is all the more glaring given the analytical and political stakes of her argument. Like the best scholarship in slavery studies, *Antebellum Posthuman* seeks to refine and renew our sense of freedom: "Instead of championing freedom as a blanket principle ... the pursuit of happiness today may oblige us to reimagine emancipation as something that does not follow from breaking bonds so much as from rearranging them, finding ways to be immersed and intertwined differently, with an eye toward the contingency, fragility, and irreducible collectivity of embodied life" (p. 20). Yet such radical visions of freedom were not marginal to the history of abolition and did not await posthumanist theorists for legitimation. As many historians have documented, there were political movements afoot that closely engaged with the dynamics of slave emancipation in the United States. One was the international labor movement, and Ellis's omission of socialism as an alternative humanism and of Marxism as a critical materialist theory is especially odd.[4] Another political movement was expressed and enacted by the formerly enslaved whose efforts to reorganize their work and land usage on a cooperative basis frustrated both former masters and white liberal reformers.[5] Any future endeavor to think the politics of race and ecology together—historical or theoretical—must reckon with these legacies as well.

This is not to diminish the accomplishments of the book. After reading *Antebellum Posthuman*, it will be hard to think of Douglass without his "revolutionary animals," Thoreau without his "weird" John Brown, and Whitman without his bioelectrical poetics. Ellis's contribution lies not only in elevating materialism as a critical theme for antislavery studies but also in drawing our attention to the radical potential of antislavery thinking. She shows how Douglass, Thoreau, and Whitman took the "the struggle that was pitched on battleground of the Black body in the antebellum United States" into their innermost thoughts, yielding startling if incomplete visions of "embodied life" that exceeded the categories of liberal humanism (p. 1). Yet that black body was not simply a metaphoric battleground but an agent in the struggle. How their political and intellectual efforts to define their own humanity is an unwritten chapter in the history of "antislavery materialism."

Notes

[1]. David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014). See also Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (New York: Verso, 2014); and Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Race in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). The historiography inspired by Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), and its sequels, is extensive and comprises the core of many graduate field exams and undergraduate survey courses in intellectual history and slavery and emancipation studies. For critical reviews of the scholarship, its major themes, and the debates it continues to provoke, see Minisha Sinha, "The Problem of Abolitionism in the Age of Capitalism," *American Historical Review* 124, no. 11 (February 2019): 144-63; Walter Johnson, "Brute Ideology," *Dissent* 61, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 127-32; and Thomas Bender, ed., *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

[2]. In more than one way, the debate that Ellis identifies in current posthumanist materialism appears to replicate the debate of anticolonial and structuralist theorists in postwar

France. See Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), esp. 157-65.

[3]. For example, *Race, Capitalism, Justice*, in *Boston Review*, Forum 1 (Winter 2017).

[4]. See David Roediger, *Seizing Freedom: Slave Emancipation and Liberty for All* (New York: Verso, 2014); and Robin Blackburn, *Marx and Lincoln: An Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Verso, 2011).

[5]. For the United States, see Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Steven Hahn, *Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Dylan C. Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); and Julie Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction: From Slave to Wage Labor in South Carolina, 1860-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

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