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# Unburdening Humanity of “Man”: Black Studies and the Emancipatory Possibilities of the Flesh

By [Aditi Surie von Czechowski](#)  
July 29, 2015

What would the future look like if we didn't think about politics in terms of resistance and agency? What if we eschewed such terms that only allow us to conceptualize meaningful political change in the language of revolutionary action? What if, instead of accepting as universal the Western ideation of humanity, we privileged the particularities of non-white being-in-the-world, and not just as markers of locality?

These are the questions asked by Alexander Weheliye in *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. It approaches the figure of the human not as an ideal universal, but as a racializing apparatus that forces a distinction between those who are fully human – the white, occidental male – and their nonwhite, less-than-human counterparts. Weheliye’s pointed critique is that the long tradition of studying liberal humanist “man,” has not only evaded proper engagement with minority discourses that deal with questions of biopolitics and the human, but that even the posthumanist turn reinscribes the very same humanist subject, ignoring salient cultural-political configurations (for instance, the contemporary prison-industrial complex) and thus pushing out of view alternate instantiations of humanity. [1] Since black subjects have NOT been “fully assimilated into the human qua man,” [2] “the functioning of blackness as both inside and outside modernity sets the stage for a general theory of the human, and not its particular exception.” [3]

Flesh is not only integral to understanding these exclusionary operations, but also – and this is the novelty of Weheliye’s argument – a source for rethinking the figure of the human through its very corporality.

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Weheliye argues that there can be no such thing as an absolute biological substance, stripped of the operations of racializing assemblages that are part and parcel of modern history.

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The discourse on bare life and biopolitics – insistent as it is upon distancing itself from race and gender – provides Weheliye’s entry point for thinking about racialization and the flesh. Yet, Weheliye’s reflections are as much about the question of disciplinarity – that is, to be specific, the place of the discipline of black studies in relation to ‘theory’ – as they are about biopolitics. In short, Agamben and Foucault get racism wrong: Agamben more or less brushes aside racialization, and proposes an “absolute biological substance” anterior to race/racism, while Foucault differentiates between what he terms ethnic and biopolitical racism, thus naturalizing race as a “real object.” Weheliye argues that there can be no such thing as an absolute biological substance, stripped of the operations of racializing assemblages that are part and parcel of modern history. [4]

While it is somewhat in fashion to throw scholarly shade at Agamben, unlike many who set his argument up as a straw man, Weheliye undertakes a sustained and complex engagement with his ideas. He persuasively demonstrates the limitations of the juridico-theological thought that underpins Agamben’s conception of the human,

but more crucially, allows this critique to open up new possibilities for a radical political praxis. The concerns that underlie Weheliye’s critique of Agamben and Foucault are twofold:

1. the privileging of the holocaust as nomos and nec plus ultra of modern terror, which elides the thick historical relations behind it, and erases the *longue durée* of brutal, genocidal violence against indigenous and black bodies,
2. the misreading of race and the absence of blackness in the aforementioned accounts.

Whereas Agamben and Foucault’s state of emergency is temporally bound and suspends the rights of all citizens (and is thus remedied by the reinstatement of the rule of law), Weheliye refers us to a permanent state of emergency



where certain individuals are *legally* marked with the hieroglyphics of the flesh. Juridical recognition is that *brutum fulmen* which neither erases the apparatus through which certain people are rendered less than human, nor presents emancipatory possibilities that would explode the world of Man.

Instead, Weheliye grounds his ideas in the work of Hortense Spillers and Sylvia Wynter, black feminists whose theories provide powerful ammunition for reimagining both the disciplinary role of black studies as an intellectual and political project, as well as an interrogation into “genres” of the human, with “man” as one such genre to be abolished.

Weheliye invokes Spillers’ commitment to redirecting the institutional genealogy of black studies and questioning the association of studies of black life with the ascendance of disciplines like sociology, history, and anthropology. Spillers argues that these studies “freeze” blackness in place and time, assign the pallor of the eternal to “ethnicity,” and produce a metonymic human figure blind to the vibrant set of attachments, lived experiences, and practices, thusly also calling into question the construction of Western humanity and its constituents. [6] This understanding of the fixing of blackness as immutable supplemented her epistemological insights into the performativity of the field. For Spillers, black studies must become an object of knowledge by recognizing its own image in the mode of production of knowledge. That is, rather than assuming that black studies represents an already delineated field of objects, we must pay attention to the ways in which it contributes to the creation of its own objects of knowledge. [7] Weheliye, in turn, delimits racializing assemblages as objects of knowledge within black studies. Doing so allows us to understand race not as always already articulated, and certainly not as a biological or cultural marker, but as an “assemblage of forces” that must unremittingly mark nonwhite subjects as less than human. [8]

Wynter has been no less dedicated to rethinking black studies—particularly as a space from which to reimagine the human—and its objects of knowledge. She devotes herself to the task of annihilating Man. For her, the struggle of black feminism lies not only in upending white, liberal conceptions of gender, but in putting the genre of the human itself under the microscope. [9] Gender is enmeshed with other modalities of being and being-oppressed and is therefore a necessary element in the destruction of the equivalence of human and Man. Nonetheless, we should not mistake Wynter’s oeuvre for a simple demonstration of how women of color, among others, are not welcomed in the quarters of humanity proper. Wynter theorizes “how sociogenic phenomena, particularly race, become anchored in the ontogenic flesh,” gesturing towards the neurobiological operations through which racialization becomes equated with biological life. Here, phenomenological perception and the risk-reward neural circuits that perpetuate culturally instituted ideas about race, trigger the physiological responses that reject and devalue non-white life. [10]

Wynter’s steps towards dismantling Man provide a crucial starting point for Weheliye’s intellectual project of locating new imaginaries of being and becoming human. By understanding blackness not as an a priori fact but rather as “an integral structuring assemblage of the modern human,” we begin to have a political project that, in reconfiguring humanity as an object of inquiry, opens up different emancipatory possibilities not tethered to liberal imaginaries. [11]

Thus, extending Wynter’s and Spillers’ project of disarticulating humanity and white, Western Man, Weheliye demands that the human be instated as a central object of inquiry in black studies, and that black studies itself not be relegated to the zone of the particular. [12] To do so would unseat the purportedly universal, but defiantly Eurocentric conceptions of the human enabled by bare life and biopolitics as imagined by Agamben and Foucault. Without “demoting race and gender to the rank of the ethnographically particular,” he exposes “how these categories carve from the swamps of slavery and colonialism the very flesh and bones of modern Man.” [13] Foregrounding the question of the human allows us the dual pleasure of rethinking disciplinarity and potentiality, and the machinations of racialization which are fundamental to the construction of the human as we know it.

Against the backdrop of “bare life,” Weheliye posits the idea of *habeas viscus* – to have the flesh. Unlike bare life, flesh is not an “abject zone of exclusion that culminates in death but an alternate instantiation of humanity:” it is only through exclusionary operations that the white, occidental male is set apart as properly human. [14] The “hieroglyphics of the flesh” (in Spillers formulation) are what demarcate who is less-than-human from the human, fixing the latter squarely in the territory of the Occident. The text

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discusses two technologies that lay bare the operations of enfleshment: pornotroping – Spillers’ term for the depiction of black suffering, and the process by which (black) bodies become flesh and are thus converted to bare life <sup>[15]</sup> – and the juridical apparatus that designates personhood as property. The fact that flesh is anterior to bodied and legal subjecthood is what also, in Weheliye’s argument, imbues it with potentiality.

With the insistence on the importance of flesh, the most significant contribution of the book emerges. Weheliye’s meditations come at a crucial time, when the institutionalized structures of racism continue to violently mark black bodies as “not-quite-human.” But perhaps more importantly, he decisively and purposefully retires the tired lexicon of resistance and agency, which lead us only to the precincts of juridical (non)emancipation. Like David Scott, who seeks to overcome our romance with revolutionary progress and urges us to focus on the relationships between pasts, presents and futures, <sup>[16]</sup> Weheliye is determined to let go of the normative script of overcoming. The flesh conceals within its present self the potentiality of alternate futures, its dual nature offering us an alternate way of dismantling Man: “flesh stands as both the cornerstone and potential ruin of the world of Man.” It is that source material through which we can approach new genres of the human, not least because it “resists the legal idiom of personhood as property.” <sup>[17]</sup>

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Weheliye looks to the everyday and the ordinary to retrieve fragments of this lived life. Here, freedom is not found in the lifting of suffering, but rather within its inky depths.

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These ideas find common ground with anthropologies of suffering and ethics. Breaking through the liberal, secular understanding of suffering as inherently undesirable, Weheliye asks what freedom, what succor we may find within its confines that we cannot yet describe. What techniques of the self, what ethical self-fashioning might we turn to for liberatory clues? It is strangely enough in the testimonial narrative of the Muselmanner, imagined by Agamben only as the zombie-like, paradigmatic display of life stripped bare, that Weheliye finds potentiality and emancipatory possibility. Even in abject deprivation the starving Muselmann constructs new worlds for himself, dreams of banquets, and discusses fantastic recipes, finding a certain pleasantness in suffering. Agamben ignores this pleasure (willfully or not). For Agamben, the Muselmanner is a figure barely alive rather than someone *living*. Weheliye looks to the everyday and the ordinary to retrieve fragments of this lived life. Here, freedom is not found in the lifting of suffering, but rather within its inky depths. In contrast, bare life’s insistence upon equating humanity and legal

personhood limns the poverty of concepts like human rights and habeas corpus. Habeas viscus is not bound to the logic of the law: “it translates the hieroglyphics of the flesh into a potentiality in any and all things, an originating leap in the imagining of future anterior freedoms and new genres of humanity.” <sup>[18]</sup>

Weheliye’s dual theoretical-political aim of clarifying the operating force of racializing assemblages as well as voicing the necessity and potentiality of alternate political futures is an urgently needed intervention in conversations about the human and humanity. Not satisfied with critiquing the perils of our contemporary condition, he orients us towards new futures. In doing so, Weheliye’s *Habeus Viscus* offers intellectual victuals not only for the project of black studies, but for all those who study non-white being-in-the-world and are relegated to the conceptual ghetto of ethnographic specificity.

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#### Author’s Bio

Aditi Surie von Czechowski is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Middle East, South Asian and African Studies. Her dissertation focuses on the theory and practice of humanitarianism and its complex relationship with human rights. From 2013-2015, she conducted ethnographic research in the Nyarugusu refugee camp in Tanzania.

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Notes:

1. Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*, 9-10. [↗](#)
2. *Ibid.*, 10. [↗](#)
3. *Ibid.*, 19. [↗](#)
4. *Ibid.*, 65. [↗](#)
5. *Ibid.*, 88. [↗](#)
6. Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* (1987), 66. [↗](#)
7. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 18. [↗](#)
8. *Ibid.*, 19. [↗](#)
9. *Ibid.*, 22-24; Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003). [↗](#)
10. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 27. [↗](#)
11. *Ibid.*, 32. [↗](#)
12. *Ibid.*, 19. [↗](#)
13. *Ibid.*, 29-30. [↗](#)
14. *Ibid.*, 43. [↗](#)
15. *Ibid.*, 90-91. [↗](#)
16. David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Duke University Press, 2004). [↗](#)
17. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 44-45, 138. [↗](#)
18. *Ibid.*, 137. [↗](#)



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