

BOOK REVIEW

Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World

Zakiyyah Iman Jackson. New York: New York University Press, 2020 (ISBN: 978-1-4798-3037-4)

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(Received 28 December 2023; accepted 14 January 2024)

The title of Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* harbors a hint of irony. Historically, *becoming human* has been conceived as a process of inclusion that entails expanding the overlapping circles of legal enfranchisement, political representation, social recognition, and ethical consideration to encompass those who have fallen beyond the exclusionary limits of “full” humanity—and, as Jackson avers, “African diasporic literature and cultural production have often been interpreted as a reaction to this racialization—a plea for human recognition” (1). *Becoming Human* offers an alternative interpretation. Deeply skeptical of the category of “the human” presupposed by the politics of recognition, Jackson contends that “key texts of twentieth-century African diasporic literature and visual culture generate unruly conceptions of being and materiality that creatively disrupt the human-animal distinction and its persistent raciality” (1). Following a comprehensive, highly illuminating Introduction that weaves together the many threads of Jackson's theoretical tapestry, each of *Becoming Human*'s four chapters traces the operations of this “creative disruption” in one or more of these “key texts,” from the oratory of Frederick Douglass and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (in Chapter 1) and Nalo Hopkinson's novel *Brown Girl in the Ring* (in Chapter 2) to Octavia Butler's short story “Bloodchild” (in Chapter 3) and Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals* and Wangechi Mutu's *Histology of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumors* (in Chapter 4). The result is a lucid, original, and timely contribution to the burgeoning critical chorus at the intersections of Black feminist studies, animal studies, biopolitics, and posthumanism—one that refuses to make black lives matter on the normative terms of liberal humanism and instead seeks to understand the mediating role of black(ened) bodies in ascriptions of humanity *and* animality.

Jackson takes significant inspiration from the work of Saidiya Hartman, whose *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (1997) contends that “the process of making the slave relied on the abjection and criminalization of slave humanity, rather than the denial of it” (Jackson 2020, 27). In *Becoming Human*, this insight is corroborated by original research that problematizes the historical equation of antiblackness with dehumanization, leading Jackson to

argue that “prior scholarship has fundamentally misrecognized the logic behind the confluence of animality and racialization” (3). Rather than interpreting the legacy of Enlightenment thought in terms of “black ‘exclusion’ or ‘denied humanity,’” Jackson identifies “the violent imposition and appropriation ... of black(ened) humanity in the interest of plasticizing that very humanity, whereby ‘the animal’ is one but not the only form blackness is thought to encompass” (3). This concept of ontological plasticity, whereby “the black(ened)’s fleshly being, *in its humanity*, is turned into a form of infinitely malleable lexical and biological matter, a plastic upon which projects of humanization and animalization rest” (81, emphasis in original), lies at the heart of Jackson’s project here, and is arguably *Becoming Human*’s most significant critical intervention. Indeed, some of Jackson’s most memorable work in a rich, nuanced Introduction witnesses her engage with Hume, Kant, Hegel, and Jefferson to reveal that, historically, racialization processes have been less invested in denying the humanity of black(ened) people than in the manufacture and exploitation of a condition of “bestialized humanization” (23). For Jackson, “humanization is not an antidote to slavery’s violence; rather, slavery is a technology for producing a *kind* of human” (46, emphasis in original).

Moving decisively beyond the terms of “inclusion” and “exclusion,” Jackson presents an account of “liberal humanism’s *selective and circumscribed recognition* of humanity in black people” (20, emphasis in original), one whose attunement to biopolitical operations involving the strategic retention of a subjugated “other” is reminiscent of Jasbir K. Puar’s *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (2017) and whose insistence on the plasticity of the borders that mediate ascriptions of humanity calls to mind Nicole Shukin’s *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times* (2009). At stake in *this* account, however, is a sustained attempt to “reframe the animalization of blackness” (4)—a project premised on three arguments. Firstly, Jackson redresses the tendency among philosophers and historians to “[overlook] the centrality of gender, sexuality, and maternity in the animalization of blackness” by arguing that “black female flesh persistently functions as the limit case of ‘the human’ and its matrix-figure”—a point explained by “the fact that, historically, the delineation between species has fundamentally hinged on the question of reproduction” (4). The second of the three arguments—that “Eurocentric humanism needs blackness as a prop in order to erect whiteness”—appears somewhat less ambitious, but only until Jackson gestures toward the ramifications of this manoeuvre, which include “[giving] form to the category of ‘the animal’” (4). This allows her to install (anti)blackness as fungible material that arbitrates attributions of humanity and animality. Finally, Jackson goes in search of a “solution to the bestialization of blackness” that does not take recourse to the category of “the human” but concentrates instead on “drawing out the dissident ontological and materialist thinking in black expressive culture,” paying special attention to “modes of being/knowing/feeling that gesture toward the overturning of Man” (4).

Jackson’s excavation of this dissident thinking begins with the readings of Douglass and Morrison in the first chapter. Having demonstrated that the mechanics of the Chain of Being and the politics of sentimentalism both support the retention of the slave’s “disputed humanity” as the “limit case” of that which was “proper to man” (50), Jackson reads *Beloved* as an eschewal of “both sentimentalism and natural hierarchy” that “pulls apart and reconstellates the slave narrative form” (58). In Jackson’s account, Morrison’s novel “suggests that animalization and humanization of the slave’s personhood are not mutually exclusive but mutually constitutive,” the reason being that “the slave’s humanity ... is not denied or excluded but manipulated and prefigured as

animal whereby black(ened) humanity is understood, paradigmatically, as a state of object *human* animality” (46–47, emphasis in original)—an argument elaborated by means of a forensic reading of a key scene involving Paul D and Mister the rooster. If Paul D’s sense of self is initially conditioned by the qualified (read: abjected) humanity afforded him by Garner, his trans-species encounter ultimately permits him to redefine “his gender and being in improvisational terms rather than in fidelity to those inherited from slavery” (66). Chapter 2, which puts Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring* in conversation with Hegel and Heidegger and elaborates the figure of the black *mater*—the mythical “mother” who, in her unrepresentability, *makes (things) matter*—evinces a comparable interpretative dynamic. Again, critique and reparation are tightly intertwined: Jackson takes Hopkinson’s narrative to reveal that “myth, in particular myths of history and scientific fact, structure and obscure the black female figure,” thereby “[foreclosing] the comprehension of a perspective and comprehension from the perspective of a black mater,” only to identify liberatory potential in Hopkinson’s *own* use of myth as a “nonrepresentationalist mode of reason or onto-epistemology” apt to “unsettle hegemonic modes of racist reality” (91).

The second half of *Becoming Human* marks a shift in emphasis: away “from an investigation of the philosophical production of ‘the animal’” and toward an interrogation of “the scientific production of ‘species’,” with antiblackness again identified in this context as “an essential means of arranging human-animal and human-nonhuman distinctions” (39–40). Chapter 3, which doubles as a thought-provoking addition to the growing industry of Butler scholarship, performs a superb reading of “Bloodchild” as “situating the racial, gendered-sexual politics of the idea of evolutionary association, or symbiogenesis, in the historical discourses of evolutionary and cell biology” (40) while exposing humanism’s fantasy of the rational, autonomous human self as precisely that: a fantasy. Perhaps the most compelling aspect of Chapter 3, however, is its account of how “Bloodchild” is connected to the African American literary tradition: not, it turns out, by virtue of its “intertextual reexamination and revision of identifiable ... literary predecessors,” but rather by “*how it takes up and revises the motifs and conventions of science fiction*,” offering up for examination the way science fiction’s genre strictures are shaped by racialized, gendered, and sexual histories of conquest, slavery, and colonialism” (123, emphasis in original). Sharing its predecessor’s preoccupation with “the possibilities of mutation” (122), Chapter 4 puts Sylvia Wynter’s concept of sociogeny to work in the context of Mutu’s *Histology*—a series of artworks “notable for its constructive reorientation of the theorization of race via a reflexive methodological practice of collage” (42)—and Lorde’s *Journals*. By the time we reach the Coda, the relevance of Jackson’s research to the living, breathing reality of (anti) blackness could hardly be clearer. Her discussion of “the epigenetic study of ‘racial health disparities’” (202)—the scare quotes indicate a frightening reality indeed—will live especially long in the memory.

In one sense, *Becoming Human* can be read as a work of posthumanism in the Wolfean tradition—a deconstruction of humanism’s “specific concept of ‘the human’” (Wolfe 2010, xvii) that pays careful heed to the terms on which this (de)construction takes place. It is by refusing to submit to the inclusionist terms of recognition and assimilation that Jackson is able to ask the million-dollar (or, in light of recent attempts to quantify reparations for Transatlantic chattel slavery, *hundred-trillion-dollar*) question: “If being recognized as human offers no reprieve from ontologizing dominance and violence, then what might we gain from the rupture of ‘the human?’” (20). The potency of Jackson’s achievement resides not so much in the

asking of this question, versions of which have echoed through the fields in which Jackson intervenes for some time now, but in the precision with which her answer is constructed. Posthumanism risks sacrificing legitimacy and practicability when departs from the reductive calculus of identity politics consider “the rupture of ‘the human’” a satisfactory destination, as if the Vitruvian “boogeyman” of liberal humanism could be deconstructed by accusational finger-pointing. Not here. *Becoming Human* rolls up its sleeves and gets on with the more challenging, constructive business of conjugating the precise terms on which “the human” (and, indeed, “the animal”) are constructed. Jackson’s formulation, whereby blackness is produced by the operations of gender and sexuality and functions as a kind of ontological zero “that stabilizes and gives form to ‘human’ and ‘animal’ as terms” (59), will give scholars in gender studies, critical race studies, and animal studies plenty to chew over. Jackson achieves all this while also legislating for the humanism of thought itself—a consideration thrown into sharp relief as the project excavates the hegemonic idea(l)s that have scaffolded scientific discourse over the course of modern history. The research required is extensive, but Jackson is equal to the task. The depth and breadth of her expertise is clear throughout, as she challenges influential critical commonplaces—most obviously, the equation of antiblackness with denied humanity—and addresses significant lacunae in seminal works of theory by heavyweights such as Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben.

Though the strengths of *Becoming Human* far outweigh its weaknesses, certain edges do fray. In the Introduction, in particular, Jackson circles back to her central thesis with uncommon frequency, rephrasing it on each return in a manner that can feel repetitive—although the sense is that this is not a result of poor structure so much as evidence of an author anxious to be understood, not quite ready to trust she has made her point. The worry is unwarranted. Jackson’s arguments reliably stand their ground—though sometimes on limited textual terrain. The close readings elaborated in the first two chapters, for example, are built on relatively small islands of textual evidence, prompting one to wonder whether the dynamics Jackson identifies obtain over the course of her chosen texts in their entirety—and, if so, how. This is not to diminish the quality of the work that she performs, nor to call into question the persuasiveness of the conclusions she draws; well-chosen moments are seized upon and excavated with rigor and care, while Chapter 2 explicitly justifies the decision to focus largely on one scene. Yet the question remains, and is only reinforced by how deftly Jackson moves through a broader oeuvre in Chapter 4. The writing is strong throughout—having plotted such an illuminating route through such a vast swath of theoretical terrain, Jackson proves to be as capable a guide as she is an orienteer—but there are moments at which the stitches and seams of the book’s composition lurch into visibility: in passages that betray the ghosts of previous drafts, exposed by the (re)introduction of a thinker with whom we are already acquainted or by occasional punctuation errors that jar and obscure. For this reviewer, however, the most surprising aspect of *Becoming Human* is how minimally it engages with the work of Agamben (2004), whose oft-cited assertion that “the caesura between man and animal passes first of all within man” (16) is *itself* a caesura that Jackson appears perfectly positioned to address. When she eventually takes the opportunity, in Chapter 4, it is succinct to the point of dismissiveness: “While Agamben fails to do so,” Jackson writes, “we might name this conflict within Man: race” (160). Enough said? Perhaps—and yet, given the caliber of Jackson’s theoretical negotiations elsewhere, one cannot help but wish for more.

Irrespective of the extent of this engagement, there can be little doubt that *Becoming Human* marks a crucial intervention in the operations of what Agamben terms the

anthropological machine (37). The breadth of the ground covered—and, by extension, both the variety of disciplines engaged and the amount of prior understanding required—means that this may not be an ideal text for some undergraduate programs, but the breadth of that ground, the ingenuity of the connections drawn between its theoretical landmarks, and the readings that support those connections, mark *Becoming Human* as an indispensable volume for research and teaching alike—one entirely at home rubbing shoulders with outstanding recent works by the likes of Puar, Mel Y. Chen, Alexander G. Weheliye, and Neel Ahuja.¹ For all its theoretical ingenuity and political urgency, *Becoming Human* is finally a heartfelt paean to the subversive power of art. Its final paragraph affirms that Jackson's book "was underwritten by the belief that if history is processual and contingent, then art holds the potential of keeping possibility open or serving as a form of redress" (214). After closing the back cover and pondering Jackson's accomplishment, rare will be the reader who remains unpersuaded.

Note

1 I am thinking specifically of Puar's *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (2017), Chen's *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (2012), Weheliye's *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (2014), and Ahuja's *Bioinsecurities: Disease Interventions, Empire, and the Government of Species* (2016).

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