

Alexander G. Weheliye

Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human

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"To have been touched by the flesh, then, is the path to the abolition of Man: this is part of the lesson of our world" (138).

I begin with the last sentence of Alexander G. Weheliye's important new work because it conveys the book's unusual reach and texture. At once a critique of the ethnocentrism of modern biopolitical theory, and of the particularizing impulses of black studies, *Habeas Viscus* works to radically decenter the liberal Western humanist subject of "Man." Weheliye calls attention to the supremacy of the discourse of "Man" in the project of biopolitics as we have come to know it, and he does so through a critique of Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben. Weheliye argues against formulations of "bare life" as derivative of the "exceptional" states of non/personhood created in the Nazi concentration camps. He asks how the figure of the camp victim has come to serve as the "nomoi of modern biopolitical life," when other experiences of dehumanization, namely slavery and colonialism, have already provided a framework for thinking through forms of social and political death. He further suggests that the focus on the "state of exception," through the writ of martial law, ignores entire population segments whose lives are normatively "bare" under the prevailing juridical systems, identifying, for instance, the co-constitutive relation between race and incarceration in the US.

It is precisely for this reason that Weheliye takes issue with the idea of "bare life," arguing that it appears to "accomplish a conceptual feat that race as an analytical category cannot: it founds a biological sphere above and beyond the reach of racial hierarchies" (53). This typical construction of "bare life" as a metaphorical and transferable category thus reiterates the universalizing logic of "Man" in the humanist tradition. One striking example Weheliye offers is the utilization of the term "Muselmann" in Agamben's work, a term that is literally a German version of "Muslim," and yet is treated without racial significance. For Agamben, the *Muselmänner*--a group of concentration camp victims brought to the point of living death through starvation and psychological pain--are representatives of bare life *par excellence*, humanity reduced to its starkest form,

machines or beasts, depending on one's frame of reference (53). Yet for Weheliye, the very fact that this group was already named by the Nazis using a racial epithet (the *Muselmänner* themselves were not in fact, nor were they understood to be, Muslim) demonstrates how racial consciousness must be understood to predate, and influence, any conceptualization of bare life. This essential miscomprehension tells us that the discourse of biopolitics may, at times, repeat the very logic of dehumanization it seeks to unveil.

Equal to Weheliye's powerful destabilization of mainstream biopolitical theory is his important assertion of the overlooked contributions of black feminism to philosophical theorizations of humanness and dehumanization. He engages with a wide variety of authors on this point, though his primary interlocutors are Hortense Spillers and Sylvia Wynter. In a curious and refreshing move, Weheliye threads quotations from Spillers's canonical essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," throughout his work, and suggests a rereading of this seminal text as a critical frontier in the reimagining of biopolitical frameworks. In this way, *Habeas Viscus* offers a form that follows its function by demonstrating what it might look like to center other scholarly figures (aside from Foucault et al.) as critical conversants. An analysis of the deep interstices between race, gender, and sexuality articulated by Spillers--in an era prior to the "biopolitical turn" in cultural studies, no less--opens up into a broader examination of black feminist thought. Weheliye notes the bitter irony of ongoing perceptions of black feminist theory as a particularistic discourse, while "theories of the human" emerging from continental Western philosophers who are white and male remain universalized, *even* as they exclude race from their frameworks of analyses. The debt that biopolitics owes to black feminist theories of intersectionality has yet to be called, and for Weheliye, it is a problematic that mirrors the profound devaluing of postcolonial theory at the precise moment that Foucauldianism ascended to power. Needless to say, he does not see these two phenomena as unrelated, and he further questions the dislocation of Frantz Fanon's work on colonialism and subject-formation from theoretical conceptualizations of bare life.

Weheliye therefore follows Spillers's argument that minoritized subjects are often "treated as a kind of raw material," a material that can be used as a singular example, but never a universal incitement to discourse (39). Similarly, he engages Elaine Scarry's renowned tome on pain and torture to ask why corporeal trauma is generally understood to exist beyond the frame of linguistic articulation. He urges his reader to think in more expansive ways about the dictums of culture and language for those who always have existed under the sign of the body in/as pain (126). Perhaps for this reason, Weheliye favors terms such as "carnality," "flesh," and "viscosity," rather than "corporeality," words that traditionally are understood to reverberate below the level of audible discourse. In the case of the *Muselmänner*, he notes the role of "hunger" and "craving" in the transformation of the prisoners' senses of self. He argues that "nourishment moved at the center of their [the *Muselmänner*'] being," while "selective receptivity for all food related stimuli" became heightened. He argues for a new conceptualization of totalizing disenfranchisement that is, in the end, not entirely total, asking, "What . . . might [it] mean to claim the monstrosity of the flesh as a site for freedom beyond the world of Man" (113)? Later, he continues,

Agamben's theorization of bare life leaves no room for alternate forms of life that elude the law's violent embrace. What seems to have vanished from this description is the *life* in the *bare life* compound; hence the homo sacer remains a thing, whose happening slumbers in bare life without journeying through the rivulets of liberations elsewhere. The potential of bare life as a concept falls victim to a legal dogmatism that equates humanity and personhood with a status bequeathed or revoked by juridical sovereignty in much the same way as human rights discourse and habeas corpus do. Because alternatives do not exist in Agamben's generalized sphere of exception that constitutes bare life, the law denotes the only constitutive power in the definition and adjudication of what it means to be human or dehumanized in the contemporary world. (131)

Importantly, Weheliye also critiques black studies' theoretical engagement with the "human" as exhibiting a similar legal "messianism." He notes that the ongoing quest for inclusion within the spheres of "Man's language, world, future, [and] humanity" has often served to evade deeper interrogations of power, altering "the domain of the map, but not the territory" (135). In part, this is due to the masculinizing impulses of the human (existing as a foil for "Man"), and once again, black feminist theory is offered as an antidote. He provides Spillers's conceptualization of "monstrous flesh" alongside Toni Morrison's eulogy for flesh unloved in *Beloved*. He suggests the reconceptualization of the flesh as an alternative to thinking about "the body," an ontology now so deeply imbricated with the project of biopolitics that it has become impossible to claim in the name of agency and personhood for those outside the normative sphere of Man. It is for this reason that he titles the book *Habeas Viscus*, a concept that remains largely amorphous throughout the work, defined by a shadow relation to the writ of habeas corpus. He writes, "in contrast to bare life, biopolitics, and so on, habeas viscus incorporates racializing assemblages that facilitate the continued conflation of Man with human while also pumping up the volume on insurgent praxes of humanity composed in the hieroglyphics of the flesh" (113).

Throughout his critique of normative frameworks of the human-as-Man, and his unearthing of subjectivities that were always already in some sense "bare," Weheliye engages a wide variety of scholars. He notes an intellectual influence from assemblage theorists, such as Rosi Braidotti, Jasbir Puar, and Elizabeth Grosz. He looks to scholars of the prison-industrial complex, including Angela Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, to understand the overlapping spheres of race and criminality in the US. And he considers recent theories of legal personhood, including those provided by Samera Esmeir and Colin Dayan. Ultimately, *Habeas Viscus* is a work with vast implications for the rereading of canonical works of biopolitics, as well as the reframing of biopolitics from the "other" side. The arguments and techniques provided in the book will not only be of interest to scholars of race, feminism, and biopolitics, but also to those engaged with disability studies, affect theory, and even animal/ity studies. For this last group in particular, *Habeas Viscus* will be a haunting incantation for reconsidering the meanings

and boundaries of human and nonhuman life, where "flesh" is proved liminal, belonging neither to the realm of Man nor beast.