

## Book Review | *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World*, by Zakiyyah Iman Jackson (New York University Press, 2020)

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Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World* uses contemporary African diasporic literature and mixed-media collages to present unruly theorizations that disrupt philosophical conversations about the creation of the human, the black(ened) subject, and the animal. It does not play fair. This book deftly dismantles Enlightenment thought to propose a "black(ened) humanity," unmooring previous concepts in Black studies and posthumanism that argue that Black humanity is a "denied humanity." Jackson takes the reader through a critical genealogy of human-making, engaging with Hume, Hegel, Jefferson, and Kant to show that the category of black(ened) humanity depended not so much on an antiracist horizontalization of blackness and the animal, but rather a transmogrification of blackness that allows black(ened) humanity to be "not denied but appropriated, inverted, and ultimately plasticized in the methodology of abjecting animality" (23). Jackson intervenes in these ontological debates stating that the violence of black(ened) humanity comes from its "plasticization" through which "'the animal' is one but not the only form blackness is thought to encompass" (3). Furthermore, and perhaps most radically, Jackson argues throughout the text that the idea of "the animal" emerges through the afterlives of slavery and colonial encounters that affect human and nonhuman forms of life. This is a complete reorientation that challenges the basis of many of the fields often covered in this journal.

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Jackson showcases her precise formal analysis of literary and visual texts, certainly, but she also demonstrates that many of the fields she moves between (animal studies, Black [feminist] studies, continental philosophy, feminist histories of biology and science, and new materialisms) are actually united in their reliance on inherently antiblack logics. By engaging these fields, she ushers out the stagnant debates that circulate in regards to blackness and the (non)human and invites us to do this with her. The new formulations push us past the dead end of “dehumanization” to consider the new modes of “being/knowing/feeling” that come from imagining what blackness can be outside of a reliance of Hegel’s theory of “universal humanity.” Jackson prioritizes the works of Frederick Douglass, Toni Morrison, Nalo Hopkinson, Octavia Butler, Audre Lorde, Ezrom Legae, and Wangechi Mutu as she believes that “black literary and visual culture theorizes and philosophizes” (35). These have been the main areas where Black people could theorize about ourselves since for so long we have been plasticized, that is made “infinitely mutable,” to create the foundation by which politics, religion, and philosophy maintain their hegemony (11). Thus, we must be careful to not reproduce epistemologies that create conditions for the plasticization of blackness.

The first chapter detangles Man’s Self-making through the abjection of the animal by proposing that possibilities arise from trans-species correspondence. Jackson turns to the (neo)slave narrative, Frederick Douglass’s seminal *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and Toni Morrison’s influential *Beloved*, arguing that they provide the language through which we have come to understand the bestialization of blackness. The chapter has two sections: the first considers Douglass’s presentation of bestialization of blackness and reliance on, and later distancing from, the dominant grand theory of the Chain of Being (“*scala naturae*”), and the second provides a sustained reading of an interaction between Paul D, a slave, and Mister, a rooster, in *Beloved*. In 1845 Douglass put forth a sentimental appeal that attempted to highlight the particular violence of bestialization. He invokes a disruption of the Chain of Being, which depended on belief of a type of metaphorical “linear, hierarchical, and continuous ladder” (48) that orders all living beings according to perfection flowing from God at the top to inanimate objects and elements at the bottom. Abolitionists used this Chain as a foundation to base a sentimental argument for the abolition of slavery, even though this argument “necessarily obscured the singular nature of New World slavery’s cataclysmic violence” (53). Jackson sees Morrison’s refusal of sentimentality in *Beloved* as a generative exploration of the entanglement of race,

gender, animality, and sex that makes up black(ened) humanity. Emphasizing Mister's gaze as the moment of Paul D's undoing, Jackson demonstrates the "problem of ethics that accompanies asymmetrical relations" (59) such that an interaction between slave and a rooster dislodges hierarchical and humanistic portrayals of gender, knowledge, and being. Jackson emphasizes that slavery's conditions could turn Paul D, a man, into "an occasion for the theater of sovereign power and manipulated matter—a plastic" (66).

The second chapter, "Sense of Things: Empiricism and World in Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*," Jackson makes the seismic claim that blackness is a being, not nothingness, and more specifically, "something rather than nothing, perhaps even everything" (85). To do this, she situates Black female flesh as the matrix figure of the human through an analysis of Ti-Jeanne's physical vertigo in the novel *Brown Girl in the Ring*, thereby dismantling the Heideggerian ordering of the world into discrete categories (human, animal, stone). Following Sylvia Wynter and Hortense Spillers, Jackson places the figure of the absented Black *mater*(nal), the nonrepresentable, as the fundamental figure that unravels Heidegger's empirical logic. Vertigo here is a "measure and means for the disordering and inoperability of a metaphysics" (120) that forecloses other epistemologies of worlds, illuminating the violence of the idea that there is one "universal" world, as such.

"'Not Our Own': Sex, Genre, and the Insect Poetics of Octavia Butler's 'Bloodchild,'" the third chapter, initiates a shift in the book towards a discussion of how antiblackness infiltrates species discourse, wherein many scholars have attempted to distinguish between human-animal and human-nonhuman. Using Butler's work, Jackson argues that the interspecies relations in the book are not mimetic to human relations, disrupting common metaphors for "the discourse of species" within the genre of science "fiction." "Bloodchild" has been read as an allegory for the power dynamics of slavery and colonization. Jackson, instead, argues that Butler imagines "an articulation of embodied subjectivity that is typified by receptivity rather than mastery" (150). This utilization of receptivity concerning the body invites embracing risk and opacity inherent in a turn towards co-adaptation. Radically, Jackson states that Butler doesn't champion symbiosis, like feminist posthumanists have argued, but instead meditates on its "promises and perils...under conditions of unequal power" (129). Jackson argues the discourse of species between Gan and the Tlic, an insectoid people, is a critical ontological discourse that has been underprivileged in discussing the impact of Black science fiction writers (124–25).

The final chapter, "Organs of War," turns again to the figure of the abjected Black female body to show how philosophical thought, specifically aesthetics, and scientific classification collaborate to violate this figure to make the Human coherent. Connecting new materialisms, evolutionary discourse, and taxonomic history with a sustained analysis of Wangechi Mutu's collages, specifically *Histology of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumors*, and Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals*, Jackson engages Wynter's theorization of sociogeny to consider Black female sex(uality) as an emerging framework within intra-active multiscale systems. Intra-activity within these systems allows for a robust understanding of the body that considers the impact of the biological, psychological, environmental, and cultural in the "somaticization of politics," and that of war on these bodies, more directly (43). Jackson emphasizes the constructed Black female body in the material collages of Mutu's *Histology* work and Lorde's musings on carcinogenesis in *Cancer Journals* to show the direct effects racial domination has on these bodies.

The coda solidifies the theoretical stakes of the previous chapters into an assertion that extends biopolitics and necropolitics. Jackson argues that Achille Mbembe's necropolitical weapon is not exterior technology but rather has been somaticized within the body *through* "the biological field such that the black(ened) body, the very materiality of the organism, yields and redirects its energies to the destruction of black vitality" (204). As such, epigenetics, as an offshoot of biology that studies heritable changes in gene expression that emerge in relation to social and environmental factors, can never be the path to ameliorate the violence against the black(ened) female body's reproductive organs. We must understand that biology and epigenetics create antiblackness on *and* in the Black body as they are part of an "ecology of violence pervasive and chronic" (208). Christina Sharpe's (2016) conception of "weather," from which socioeconomic mobility can't shield the effects of antiblackness on the black(ened) subject at the somatic level, is eerily descriptive here.

The alchemical processes that Jackson nurtures in *Becoming Human* have fundamentally changed the course of my thinking with regards to (post)humanism. The book makes the stakes of thinking through antiblackness clear across the humanities and the sciences. Reading this work will demonstrate how to also rehearse parsing through the autopoiesis of our current world order (for trouble don't last always). *Becoming Human* is essential reading for those who are dedicated to doing the work to dismantle the systems that make antiblackness, rather than simply paying lip service.

## References

Sharpe, Christina. 2016. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

## Author Bio

**Ariel Stevenson** is a Ph.D. candidate in Cinema and Media Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, where she is completing her dissertation, "Niggas on the Internet: Scenes of a Black Social Life."