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BEYOND ECOLOGICAL DEMOCRACY:
BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT AND THE END OF MAN

Introduction

Wildlife Services is a subbranch of the U.S. Department of Agriculture that primarily operates in the Western half of the United States, receiving 100 million dollars of federal funding annually. One of the “services” that the agency provides is the slaughter of 100,000 native carnivores per year (primarily coyotes, wolves, bears, and mountain lions). This killing is accomplished with traps, poison, and, most dramatically, by gunning animals down from planes and helicopters; it takes place on public lands that are set apart, among other purposes, as habitat for just such creatures. The main purpose of the program is to prevent loss of livestock grazing on or adjacent to public lands, and the killing enjoys strong support among ranchers. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of the program remains highly questionable. Only a tiny percentage of livestock losses result from predation, and killing major predators has occasionally, among other unintended consequences, increased reproduction rates in targeted populations. With huge costs and marginal benefits, it seems clear that cultural forces larger than the program’s stated goals sustain such biopolitical slaughter. Some latent animosity maintains this longstanding war on carnivorous neighbors.

In its critical moment, this essay seeks to name the political ecology that compels and validates the actions of Wildlife Services—or the more familiar abject exploitation of nonhuman animals in factory farming and medical experimentation. Through the lens of political theology, this excessive and shortsighted animosity toward nonhuman animals represents a secularized legacy of the theological tradition of anthropological exceptionalism (often rooted in the *imago dei*) transformed and amplified through the Enlightenment. Beyond the ecological context, neither the animosity nor the exceptionalism under consideration here follow the boundaries of the human species. The normative conception of humanity at the heart of anthropological exceptionalism also drives the cultural logic of racialized and gendered hierarchies through the association of some human beings with animality, such that the social benefits of “full humanity” are unevenly distributed.

In its constructive moment, this essay seeks to imagine an alternative political ecology by attending to the thought of Sylvia Wynter, Saidiya Hartman, and Delores Williams. These scholars, as Black feminists, each attend to gradations and slippages within normative conceptions of humanity that thinkers more commonly associated with political theology—such as Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben—pass over. One of the wagers of this essay, then, is that the thought of

Wynter, Hartman, and Williams (among others) provides better guidance for the constructive work of political theology – especially a theology that takes stock of human interaction with nonhuman creatures. Taking Wildlife Service’s systematic slaughter as a touchstone example, both the critical and constructive portions of this essay will focus on normative conceptions of humanity in relation to proposals for “democracy” as a paradigm for the transformation of human-nonhuman political relations.

There is an impulse—especially within ecological thought and ecologically-attuned political theology, to turn toward democracy as the conceptual model through which we might best resist the exploitative degradation of Earth’s living creatures and their ecosystems. While I agree that explicitly *political* analysis provides the best theological approach to ecological concerns, I grow increasingly skeptical of *democracy* as the best model for transforming relations between human and nonhuman creatures. In large part, as this essay will demonstrate, this skepticism arises through a unique convergence of postsecular and decolonial analysis that fragments and particularizes purportedly universal concepts such as ‘nature,’ ‘humanity,’ ‘liberty,’ and ‘sovereignty.’ Of course, postsecular and decolonial discourses are not entirely aligned, but both have pressed poignant questions for the Enlightenment humanist tradition that nourishes modern liberal democracy. This essay attends to the thought of Black feminist authors in order to highlight an alternative framework for a political theology that resists ecological degradation, briefly sketching a postsecular and posthumanist political ecology marked by the fragmentation of any singular sovereignty into a pluralism of differentiated creaturely sovereignties. Democracy is not the only way of imagining divine justice in creation and may not be the best one.

Humanity as a Political Concept

To begin, I’d like to interrogate a basic claim in the thought of Nazi political theorist, Carl Schmitt. Schmitt argues that, “Humanity is not a political concept [because] no political entity...corresponds to it.”¹ Of course, for Schmitt, politics comes down to judgments about the distinction between friend and enemy – those with whom I can form alliance and those who, if it comes down to it, I can kill—just as ethics comes down to judgments between good and evil, aesthetics to beauty and ugliness, and economics to profitability.² For Schmitt, any political use of the concept “humanity” is cynical and depoliticizing because humanity “has no enemy, at least not on this planet.”³ Properly political concepts mark off the boundaries of enmity and, for Schmitt, “humanity” obscures these boundaries by falsely appealing to a category that relativizes antagonisms without providing any concrete structure that would resolve them. Since “humanity” as such is never an actor in political struggle, those who purport to act in the name of humanity are always obfuscating the lines of actual antagonisms. Schmitt regards humanism—claims to act on behalf of humanity as a whole—as primarily a mechanism for

¹ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 54-55.

² Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, 25-26.

³ Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, 54.

concealing and validating the violence of one group against another. Schmitt rejects such appeals to humanity because the task of politics is to sharpen the lines of enmity, providing a context for explicitly defined struggle, rather than diplomatically relativizing such antagonism.

Reading Schmitt's text with an eye toward the ecological politics of the Anthropocene Era—in which earth's species are driven to extinction with a species-death toll a hundredfold higher than historic rates—renders the claim that humanity has no earthly enemy dubious. Minimally, enmity is an illuminating category with which to think about humanity's relationship to creation. Such enmity is likely not reciprocal, but the global scale of accelerating ecological degradation testifies that humanity has made the Earth and its creatures to be an enemy. Schmitt is not only wrong to insist that humanity is not a political concept, "humanity" is in many regards the *originary* concept of Western politics insofar as every political order—every particular delineation of enemy and friend—simultaneously operates as a differentiation of the human community from the natural world.⁴

My first point, then, is to insist that humanity is a political concept on Schmitt's own terms because humanity generates and sustains enmity. Schmitt writes, "The political enemy need not be morally evil or aesthetically ugly; he need not appear as an economic competitor, and it may even be advantageous to engage with him in business transactions. But he is, nevertheless, the other, the stranger; and it is sufficient for his nature that he is, in a specially intense way, existentially something different and alien, so that in the extreme case conflicts with him are possible."⁵ On this definition, the *paradigmatic* enemy must be the animal living just outside the city gate.⁶ We have learned to regard nonhuman animals as essentially different and alien, categorically other-than-human, so that points of commonality surprise and amuse us, rather than causing us to reflect on a fundamental ecological or evolutionary commonality. Moreover, our "commerce" with nonhuman animals is exploitatively asymmetrical—so much so that violent conflict is more a basic presupposition than an "extreme case." Hobbes aptly indicates the fundamental enmity toward animality within the Western political order, claiming that "one may at discretion reduce to one's service any animals that can be tamed or made useful, and *wage continual war* against the rest as harmful, and *hunt them down and kill them*."⁷ It is no accident, then, that Wildlife Services has turned the mechanisms of war—planes, poisons, and firearms—

⁴ Writing *The Concept of the Political* in the 1930s, Schmitt does not consider ecology explicitly, but his brief discussion of animal fables demonstrates at least a peripheral awareness of the fundamental differentiation of human political life from the life of the natural world; 58-59.

⁵ Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, 27.

⁶ Gregoire Chamayou's account of Schmitt's antihumanism in relation to his discussion of the European conquest of the "New World" helpfully highlights animality as the paradigm of enmity. Both reactionary antihumanists such as Schmitt and the Christian humanists that Schmitt elides (De Las Casas, for example) assume the unquestionable legitimacy of hunting down and killing nonhuman creatures. See *Manhunts: A Philosophical History*, trans. Steven Rendall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 37-42.

⁷ Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, ed. and trans. Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 105-6,

against those nonhuman animals that cause even minimal and incidental harm to human endeavors.

Even if our better intentions and rosier self-conceptions would indicate otherwise, the material effects of human presence on the biosphere testify to an asymmetrical enmity between humans and other creatures in which creaturely life is generally devalued and disregarded, largely in pursuit of short-term gain. The kernel of truth in Schmitt's aphorism is that claims to represent the interests of humanity as whole invariably serve the interests of some smaller, unspecified set of human beings. So here, I should already specify that human enmity with nonhuman life is not homogenous; its sharpest relief appears around those human beings most fully integrated into the globalized market economy. Human enmity levied against Earth's creatures arises from particular modes of being human endemic to globalized capitalism and is alien to most indigenous and subsistence cultures. Yet dominant modes of being human have inundated and co-opted so many alternatives better accommodated to sustainable coexistence with nonhuman creatures. Thus, while Schmitt is right to assert that there is no single unified political "we" that corresponds to humanity as a whole, mainstream concepts of "humanity" mobilize violent enmity with an unmatched efficacy.

Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* similarly omits animality from proper political consideration. For Agamben, the originary relation in Western politics is the production of bare life.⁸ Western politics produces bare life in two ways: First, bare life functions as a mythical Ur-concept marking political life as better than the brute life that "preceded" it. Bare life is a false memory that validates political order (as bad as our political systems may be, we are still better off than the state of nature from which we mythologically emerged). Second, politics produces bare life by exclusion, ceremoniously denuding people of the law's protection and exposing them to whatever death or misfortune might befall them. This political "baring" of lives that exposes them to harm, menacingly reinforces the legitimation of the founding myth. Politics is a self-perpetuating game that operates through an inclusive exclusion: bare life is taken up into the city to be politically transformed into civilization while the mechanisms of politics simultaneously expel and exclude bare life as the constitutive outside to civilized life. This fundamental ambiguity reveals that bare life doesn't exist "out there" waiting to be organized, but is the constructed concept over which the edifice of Western politics suspends itself. The state of nature never existed except where human politics created it; it is an idea—and a routinely enacted threat—that validates our political order and justifies its brutality by positing an even worse state of affairs as a mythological background.

Agamben argues that Western political order is built on the theory and practice of inclusive exclusion, most readily visible in the "ban" that exiles someone from the subjection and subjectivity offered under the law. Extending Foucault's analysis of biopolitics, Agamben demonstrates an "inner solidarity" between democracy and totalitarianism.⁹ Agamben posits a homology between the political/legal logic

⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 8.

⁹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 10, 148, 181-2, 188.

that produced the Roman *homo sacer* – a designation that marked someone who could be killed, but neither murdered (a killing subject to punishment) nor sacrificed (a killing productive of meaning) – and that of twentieth century state-perpetrated genocides, which begin with the removal or denial of citizenship to target populations. The subjectivity formed through Western political order comes into relief through naming (and *producing*) that which stands outside the law. Because of its dire consequences, the ban's political effectiveness is at work even when it is only a threat.¹⁰

Liberal democracies remain preferable to totalitarian regimes, but Agamben demonstrates that in their production and regulation of bare life, both systems are alternate configurations of pieces on the same political chess board, rather than different games. One may slide into the other with surprising ease. Yet Agamben fails to recognize several inclusive-exclusions operating within *Homo Sacer*, both of which are important for the purposes of this essay. First, as Alexander Weheliye's excellent book *Habeas Viscus* makes clear, Agamben's description of the operation of the ban and the production of bare life presume universality, and so fail to account for racialized and gendered patterns in which lives are most often subject to the ban and which lives are disproportionately bared.¹¹ "Bare life" is never nondescript, and not all lives are bared in the same way and with the same frequency, so Weheliye makes clear that the production and regulation of bare life are inseparable from the violent logics of racialization and engendering. Agamben's analysis remains entirely myopic on this point.

Second, the omission of animals and animality from *Homo Sacer* remains striking, given the book's concentration on "bare life."¹² Human politics subject animal lives to constitutive ambiguities as pervasively as they do human beings. I would argue that on Agamben's logic in *Homo Sacer*, the human collaboration that colonizes, exploits, and excludes animals represents a political relation more originary than the (intra-human) practice of the ban. Through domestication or exploitation, select animals are knit into the socio-political order as the foundation of agriculture and commerce; such bare lives are politically transformed through inclusion. *Other* animals (and any animals of the former category who resist their placement within the political order), stand outside the law, subject to unimpugnable killing that is neither murder nor sacrifice. Returning to Wildlife Services for a moment, the inclusive exclusion of the cow within the human

¹⁰ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 28-29, 83, 109, 181.

¹¹ Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke UP, 2014), especially chs. 2 and 4.

¹² Matthew Calarco correctly perceives that every figure Agamben uses to represent the new politics he seeks is essentially human, whether the refugee, the "whatever singularity," or the Musselmann. Calarco, "On the Borders of Language and Death: Agamben and the Question of the Animal," *Philosophy Today* 44 (2000): 96-97. Calarco's criticism is only overcome, I believe, by reading Agamben's oeuvre in light of another text, namely, *The Open* (2004); see my argument in "The Logos of God and the End of Man: Animality as Light and Life," in *Divinanimality: Animal Theory, Creaturely Theology*, ed. Stephen Moore (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 146-60. In a later book, Calarco himself recognizes this broadening in Agamben's work; see *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal From Heidegger to Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 90-103.

political order (as living meat) differs from the exclusive inclusion of the coyote or wolf (as enemies and targets of state-sanctioned violence), but the human approach to both animals establishes and polices the boundary of political order as we conceive it. Distinctions between killing, murder, slaughter, and sacrifice are worked out, first and foremost, through animal blood. Victims of routinized, systemic violence are almost always animalized first, because of widespread social, legal, and religious acceptance of routine violence against animals as non-culpable. The political threat of the “ban” in both its ancient and contemporary configuration is that it reduces a human being to the state of “living like an animal” or being consigned to the *space* of the animals—exposed to the beasts and living like the beasts.

Even so, animal life is not bare of political order, though it has often been theorized as such. The outer edge of *human* politics is not the edge of political order *per se* insofar as social animals (wolves, whales, apes, prairie dogs) clearly order their lives together in culturally-mediated ways that improve their collective lot. Even wild animals are always already political—there is no bare life “outside” political order since ecology is politics all the way down.

Agamben’s tacit identification of politics with an undifferentiated and universal human condition obscures three things: (1) the racialized and gendered gradients within the biopolitical production of bare life, (2) the varied and complex political arrangements of nonhuman animals, and (3) the inclusive exclusion of animality as the originary relation of Western political logic. Seeing these omissions in *Homo Sacer* makes it clear that Agamben describes not the origin of politics as such, but the origin of “humanity” as an operative political norm, a quality or category that can be allocated and denied to creatures (both human and nonhuman) in varying degrees and in varying ways. While Schmitt fails to see enmity with nonhuman creatures through his denial of humanity as a political category with any substantial content, Agamben aptly demonstrates the operation of “humanity” as a content-laden political norm. Yet by failing to take stock (at least in *Homo Sacer*) of the internal differentiation and the outer limits of bare humanity as a political concept, Agamben’s account of Western politics overlooks the production and perpetuation of racialized, gendered, and ecological exploitations. In contrast, Sylvia Wynter remains rigorously attentive to gradients and textures in the deployment of humanity as a political concept, accounting for the ways that certain conceptual configurations of humanity inculcate the deep-seated enmities and exclusions that Agamben passes over in *Homo Sacer*.

Key within Wynter’s thought is her assertion that “humanity” only ever names a particular *genre* of the human. As a noun, “humanity” aspires to name a natural kind, to encompass the entire species of *homo sapiens* in a universal and undifferentiated way. But in political and economic discourse “humanity” always names a particular *kind* of human or a particular *mode* of being human. Concern about anthropogenic climate change is misdirected when it focuses on the role of an undifferentiated and universalized “humanity” in atmospheric transformation; or as Wynter puts it, “The Masai who were (and are) being displaced have nothing

to do with global warming."¹³ In practice, "humanity" does not name a collective noun so much as a *praxis* – a "thick" and culturally inflected *way of being human* that seldom acknowledges its historical and cultural particularity.

Yet our notions of humanity, and the stories that we tell about humanity as a natural kind, are tremendously powerful formative ideals – they frame basic self-understanding, notions of sanity/insanity, self-interest, and propriety. The "we" of common discourse that presumes to speak for/from humanity is always less universally representative and more deeply formative than acknowledged. And these contours of humanity as a *praxis* entail that there are *gradients* of humanity, degrees of conformity and divergence. As Judith Butler argues:

'The human' works as a differential norm: let us think of the human as a value and a morphology that may be allocated and retracted, aggrandized, personified, degraded and disavowed, elevated and affirmed. The norm continues to produce the nearly impossible paradox of a human who is no human, or of the human who effaces the human as it is otherwise known....The term 'human' is constantly doubled, exposing the ideality and coercive character of the norm: some humans qualify as human; some humans do not.¹⁴

"Humanity" then, in addition to indicating a natural kind – the sum total of the members of *Homo sapiens* – also operates as a powerful ideological regime that arranges gradients and hierarchies. Wynter genealogically traces out two of the most powerful historical configurations of "humanity" – taking stock of their deeply gendered and racialized contours – and names them Man₁ (*homo religiosus* and the human subject of the Enlightenment) and the currently regnant Man₂ (*homo oeconomicus*). For Wynter, the term "Man" designates these conceptions of humanity as overrepresented, normative genres of human life that have obscured and undermined other modes of humanity whose presentation does not conform to normative standards of behavior, racialized hierarchies, and gender roles.¹⁵

More pervasively and more powerfully than either Schmitt or Agamben, Wynter analyses "humanity" as an originary political concept – contested and contestable even as (or rather, *because*) it names a natural kind. By exposing social norms that that inculcate "Man" as the paradigmatic mode of subjectivity, Wynter charts the social, psychic, and corporeal violence of inclusive exclusion – a ceaseless pressure toward impossible conformity alternating with avowed enmity toward that which cannot be assimilated into the order of Man. One arena of this deep-seated enmity

¹³ Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations," in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human As Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 21.

¹⁴ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2010), 76-77; see also Wynter, "Catastrophe," 33-34.

¹⁵ Wynter, "Catastrophe," 31; "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument," *New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 281-82

is visible in the violence of Wildlife Services as well as the more quotidian violences of industrial agriculture or the various regimes of animal experimentation. By explicitly recognizing “humanity” as a fundamental and contestable political concept, Wynter is already thinking ecologically in ways that escape both Schmitt and Agamben.

Wynter also outlines a program of resistance to the violent overrepresentation of Man, a program to which I mean to return toward the end of the essay. First however, I will examine one common eco-political response to anthropocentrism within environmentally attuned literature, namely the notion of a planetary multispecies democracy. If humanity is the originary concept of Western politics and, as Wynter demonstrates, a concept linked to a disavowedly normative and unevenly distributed praxis, then the foregoing discussion might give us pause around even the well-meaning use of ideals like democracy. These proposals for a multispecies democracy are generally driven by post humanist or anti-humanist impulses, yet in light of the analysis above, I wonder whether they are only in a more distant orbit around a humanism ordered to Man’s interests. Wynter’s work, along with that of other Black feminist thinkers, provides an important critique/corrective to democracy as the horizon for ecopolitical aspirations.

Posthumanist Eco-Democracies?

Appeals to an ecological democracy come from scholars with a wide variety of disciplinary commitments and approaches. Alfred North Whitehead, already in 1929, argues that human beings are wrapped up in a “democracy of fellow creatures.”¹⁶ Aldo Leopold, uses the language of political representation, if not democracy as such, when he calls for a transformation from “man the conqueror” to “man the biotic citizen.”¹⁷ Similarly, Lynn White, of “Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis” fame, suggests that human beings are already part of a “spiritual democracy of all creatures.”¹⁸ Vandana Shiva imagines the possibilities for an “earth democracy.”¹⁹ Theologian Peter Scott argues for a representational politics that would “extend democratic, rather than moral, considerability to nonhuman nature.”²⁰ Bruno Latour imagines a “parliament of things” that overcomes the

¹⁶ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 50; see also, Rebekah Sinclair, “A Democracy of Fellow Creatures: Thinking the Animal, Thinking Ethics in Whitehead’s Philosophy of Organism,” *Process Studies* 42, no. 2 (2013): 200-220.

¹⁷ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), 204.

¹⁸ Lynn Townsend White Jr., “Continuing the Conversation,” in *Western Man and Environmental Ethics: Attitudes toward Nature and Technology*, ed. Ian Barbour (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1973), 61; see also, Matthew Riley, “A Spiritual Democracy of All God’s Creatures: Ecotheology and the Animals of Lynn White Jr.,” in *Divinanimality: Animal Theory, Creaturely Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 243.

¹⁹ Vandana Shiva, *Earth Democracy: Justice Sustainability and Peace* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2005).

²⁰ Peter Scott, *A Political Theology of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 222-23.

modern separation between nature and society.²¹ And, recently Catherine Keller has taken Whitehead's phrase, the "democracy of fellow creatures," as the title for an article on eco-feminism.²²

To be clear, I start from a position of basic agreement with these proposals. For many of these authors, "democracy" is shorthand for a heightened empathy that generates less stratified, more reciprocal relations between human beings and nonhuman creatures. Those proposals situated in the discourse of political theology reflect the conviction that the power and justice of God are diffuse and widely distributed in creation, sprouting up among the "least" of Earth's creatures rather than cascading down the steps of a clearly delineated hierarchy. My goals and vision are substantially similar. Because ecological degradation is a function of the use and abuse of power, I am already persuaded that *political* analysis is theology's best approach to ecological questions (rather than approaches that center on value, sacredness, enchantment, or a narrow voluntaristic-individualistic ethics). Nevertheless, the frequency with which specific appeals to democracy appear in ecologically concerned scholarship merits additional scrutiny for the idea.

Locating the lives of all creatures within a cosmic democracy clearly employs human language and trades in human politics; metaphor is all that we have. My questions about democracy are not about arriving at the "real" description of humanity's political relation to nonhuman creatures, but as with any metaphor, it is a question of the adequacies and failures of different framings. Is democracy a particularly helpful way of thinking about Western interactions with creaturely neighbors? What do these appeals to democracy illuminate? What do they conceal?

As a metaphor, democracy seeks to name the inescapable interdependence of all creatures on one another for basic life functions like respiration and nutrition. For the most part, these arguments make the claim that humanity is *already* embedded within a planetary democracy that is negated or betrayed by the human political economy. So, with occasional exceptions, it is less an argument about *extending* democracy to the natural world than recognizing a democracy that is already there. This pattern of thought allows democracy to serve as *both* the bedrock of ecological politics *and* as the aspirational horizon of possibility for redeemed human relationships to the natural world.²³

²¹ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 143-44.

²² Catherine Keller, "A Democracy of Fellow Creatures: Feminist Theology and Planetary Entanglement." *Studia Theologica* 69, no. 1 (2015): 1-16.

²³ Talal Asad illuminates the necessary reliance of purportedly secular liberal democracies on mythology that relativizes inequality by setting it against the background of a perfectly equitable origin and the aspiration of an equitable future; see chapter 1 of *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, and Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), especially 56-61. Asad's work here is in conversation with Margaret Canovan, "On Being Economical with the Truth: Some Liberal Reflections," *Political Studies* 38, no. 1 (1990): 5-19.

However, interdependence is a function of many political orders other than democracy, and not all interdependence is benign. Rather than democracy, current globalized capitalist modes of human interaction with creation bear stronger resemblance to colonial or feudal exploitation, than to any submerged and corrupted democracy. If this is the case, might the primary function of appeals to an invisible or submerged (but nevertheless fundamental) democracy be to provide personal exemptions from structural problems along the lines of a counterproductive romanticism regarding the “pristine” and the “wild”?

I have two concerns with appeals to ecological democracy. First, I worry that appeals to democracy obscure the asymmetrical relations of power that are generated and maintained by the operation of “humanity” as a political category. In any other political context, scholars are quick to raise suspicion when a tiny minority wields enormously disproportionate power and simultaneously appeals loudly to the values and virtues of democracy. Such suspicion is warranted in this case as well. These appeals to democracy – though they are not advanced in bad faith – play too easily toward hand-wringing romanticism about “nature” as the site of an ecological harmony and balance that human beings (if we could just get our act together) could rejoin. At bottom, that ideology is an obfuscation of actually-existing creaturely politics, a disavowal sustained by the promise of a perpetually deferred utopian order, and a kind of armchair eco-politics that cannot survive extended contact with actual creaturely relations, human or nonhuman.

Additionally, I wonder whether, as a concept, democracy is sufficiently independent from the political operation of Man (to return to Wynter’s term) to provide leverage against it. In a democracy, a *demos* governs itself by means of a superstructure that represents, in one way or another, the interests of the governed. Most often, this very superstructure determines the composition and scope of the *demos* whose interests are represented. The mechanisms of democracy – its models of agency and representation – generate intense pressures toward conformity and homogeneity. The interests of minority (or minoritarian) populations are taken into account when they are translated into registers of desire and expediency that are recognizable from the subject position of the majority.²⁴ The unity of the *demos* is *enforced* as often as it is *expressed*. As an ideological apparatus, “humanity” operates with a similar pressure toward conformity. Since “humanity” always names a culturally particular *praxis*, actually existing democracies impress the values and virtues of Man (and his cognates, civilization and progress). If, as argued above, “Man” names a political order founded on the *exclusion* of animality, then entrusting the long and short term interests of nonhuman populations to representation within an intensely human political order is unlikely to significantly ameliorate current patterns of ecological degradation. Further, the problems of minoritarian representation are doubled insofar as many of the proposals for ecological democracies explicitly designate human figures as political representatives for nonhuman subjects (the “voices of

²⁴ With reference to Muslims in Europe, Asad discusses the problems of representation for minoritarian populations at length in chapter 5 of *Formations of the Secular*, 159-80, see also 5.

the voiceless”).²⁵ To put it bluntly, citizens (and denizens) of democracies whose ways-of-life do not conform to the normative model are not well-served by the mechanisms of representation. The “space” in which representation occurs is never neutral and unmarked. A democracy of all creatures, in this light, looks remarkably like the inclusive exclusion at the heart of Western political logic.

As a descriptor of ecological relations between human beings and nonhuman creatures, I doubt that democracy is a political concept capacious enough to recognize (in an effective way) the claims that nonhuman creatures might make *against* humanity. With a history of extinctions, habitat encroachment, and trafficking, these claims are not trivial, nor sufficiently addressed through superficial policy adjustments. Moreover, insofar as the politics of Man are thoroughly entrenched in a violent differentiation from animality, any *demos* that includes humanity as a founding member faces a nearly insurmountable challenge in overcoming humanity’s foundational enmity with animality. A democracy of all creatures would entail—and this, of course, is what its advocates are after—a thoroughgoing transformation of the praxis of humanity at the level of collective self-understanding and orientation to the world. If a democracy of all creatures is the answer to anthropogenic ecological degradation, it will need to be a democracy in which humanity—if not human beings—is either excluded or radically transformed. Questions remain: Are there any political mechanisms through which democracy could eradicate current configurations of humanity, or is democracy finally another configuration of humanity itself? Are there alternate political models that might more clearly provide for the dismantling of Man and the reconfiguration of the praxis of humanity?

The End of Man: Postsecular Political Transformation

What would a politics without Man look like? Beyond the idea that humanity can have no enemies, Carl Schmitt’s more famous claim is that all the major concepts of political theory are secularized theological ideas. In most discussions of Schmitt’s claim, analogies between divine sovereignty and the sovereignty of the state enjoy the bulk of the attention. Yet, the foregoing analysis suggests that prevalent conceptions of humanity are secularized variants of Judeo-Christianity’s legacy of anthropological exceptionalism (centered in exclusive accounts of the *imago dei*).²⁶ While postsecularism names the moment of a recognition that we have never been secular in all the ways that we thought, it also names an opening through which theological literacy and theological analysis might gain critical traction on political discourse at points that other disciplinary approaches slip over. The deconstruction (in the technical Derridean sense) of the image of God and theological assertions of categorical human difference from animals/animality are necessary steps toward an ecological politics with better

²⁵ The presumption that nonhuman animals are “voiceless” is neither obvious nor necessary. See my essay, “They Fell Silent When We Stopped Listening: Apophatic Theology and ‘Asking the Beasts,’” in *Turning to the Heavens and the Earth: Theological Reflections on a Cosmological Conversion, Essays in Honor of Elizabeth A. Johnson*, ed. Julia Brumbaugh and Natalia Imperatori-Lee (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016), 26-44.

²⁶ For deeper discussion on this point, see Wynter, “Unsettling Coloniality,” 299-306.

prospects for the long term coexistence of human beings with creaturely neighbors. To carry out this deconstructive work thoroughly requires intimate familiarity with the biblical and theological heritage that knits together divine authority, anthropological exceptionalism, species distinctions, and political order.

Although the democracy of all creatures names an eco-political *aspiration* that remains questionable because its romanticism and mechanisms of representation leave insufficient room for creaturely difference, the most common alternative view of nature's politics (seen frequently in popular media) is equally insufficient. The politics of nature is not a single law dripping with blood, "red in tooth and claw." It is not difficult to see this popular view at work in Wildlife Services' slaughter of native carnivores. Representatives of the U.S. Government enter the state of nature to join the war of all against all, killing predators to make room for cattle. To read ecology romantically through the lens of democracy is undoubtedly a vast improvement over seeing the natural world as the brutish site of unending bloody struggle (to be subjugated and exploited), but it is perhaps still too unified. Recent work from Jane Bennett, Brian Massumi, Cynthia Willett, Gay Bradshaw, and Marc Bekoff demonstrates the variety and complexity of creaturely politics both in single-species communities and, just as commonly, in well-structured interspecies interactions.²⁷ Coyotes, ravens, wolves, and bears live out complex political alliances and wary antagonisms with other creatures, none of which neatly assimilate to the model of a representative democracy. What space could hope to encompass such complexity with a "one life, one vote" rule? There are many teeth, many claws, and so much fur and feathers, that a single political logic cannot possibly capture the pluriform structures of creaturely interaction.

Against every binary division of Human vs. Animal – whether overtly theological or secularized in its presentation – a politics without humanity must begin from a multiplication of animal differences and a formal commitment to honor the pluriformity of creaturely worlds. Whether one derives such an image from Derrida or from Job, the ecological politics that emerges is less that of a single overarching ecosystemic democracy and more that of a nearly infinite collection of overlapping sovereignties.²⁸ The conceptual difficulty within this framework is not – as with an ecological democracy – figuring out how to develop structures and models of representation for non-human creatures within the space of human politics, but instead is the challenge of negotiating relations between self-determined populations sharing the same geography. The model for this latter challenge cannot be the clearly bounded and singular sovereignty of the nation

²⁷ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Brian Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us About Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Cynthia Willett, *Interspecies Ethics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); G.A. Bradshaw, *Elephants on the Edge: What Animals Teach Us About Humanity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Marc Bekoff and Jessica Pierce, *Wild Justice: The Moral Lives of Animals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

²⁸ Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 124-40; Elizabeth Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 149, 271; Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign I*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 14-15; *The Beast and the Sovereign II*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 197-98.

state, but must look instead, something like the decolonial liberation of people whose interests are linked with, but not identical to, those of the broader population among whom they live. Ongoing struggles for cultural and political self-determination provide a different model for thinking about ecological politics.

The coyote world operates on its own logic, has its own avenues into transcendence, and navigates a political terrain mapped with coyote cunning. The world's creaturely peoples are interdependent, bound together in asymmetrical power relations, and only recognize boundaries mapped in the language of their own scents, calls, and movements. An ecological politics more adequate than the democracy of all creatures, in other words, conceives of nonhuman neighbors as self-determined (but not self-contained) peoples or cultures, each with a political order capable of its own integrity. The metaphor of democracy can only view nonhuman animals patronizingly as poorly-assimilated citizens within a single overarching order supposedly recognized by all.

Here, I want to draw on the thought of Saidiya Hartman, Sylvia Wynter, and Delores Williams because, amidst all the differences between these thinkers, they share a commitment to a feminist decolonial politics of self-determination that demands the disintegration of any singular, normative, and overrepresented ideal of humanity. My wager is that the same politics capacious enough to struggle against white supremacist heteropatriarchy is also capacious enough to reconfigure political relations between overlapping creaturely populations. Black feminist thinkers—exemplary among many others—remind us that there are already versions of human life that resist and repudiate normative deployments of humanity by surviving otherwise, carving out space for another way of life where there seems to be no way.²⁹

Saidiya Hartman's brilliant work *Scenes of Subjection* focuses on antebellum and Reconstruction America in order to trace out the treacherous underside of agency, subjectivity, personhood, and gender as conceptual tools of control and oppression. Hartman demonstrates not only that mainstream white America was never going to accept Emancipation as the fulfillment of founding ideals of equality but, far worse, that (finally) attributing full personhood and subjectivity to Black Americans enfolded them within an order where ostensibly equal humanity (according to the letter of the law) became a weapon that actually undermined legal protection in society and equal opportunity in life and labor. Agency was only recognized in the form of guilt (rather than liberty) and responsibility was figured only as reliable labor (rather than self-determination).³⁰ In other words "humanity" was extended primarily in punitive and exploitative ways. Black humanity remained ambiguous for mainstream white America, acknowledged only where it could be used to punish, restrict, and control.³¹ In such a context, Hartman demonstrates, resistance is both simpler and more complex than generally imagined. On the one hand, simply surviving is already

²⁹ Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 2,6.

³⁰ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 115-17, 125.

³¹ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 5, 22, 118.

an act of resistance. Building relations of love and friendship, struggling together with others, and even the ordinary pleasures and pains of day-to-day life—these are all sites of resistance within a genocidal order. On the other hand, Hartman demonstrates that liberty, personhood, and humanity are not simply universal “goods” that can be claimed by the oppressed as an entry into equal standing. These basic concepts are already skewed, defined and delimited within an order of consciousness that denigrates and devalues Blackness.

Sylvia Wynter draws the work of W.E.B. DuBois and Frantz Fanon together in order to think out strategies of resistance to just such an order of consciousness. Through Fanon, Wynter gives a stringent reading of DuBois notion of “double consciousness,” not simply as a *symptom* of living as a racialized subject within a racist society, but as the front line of a struggle, even a war, against the insidious influence of white supremacist logic as it informs the structure of consciousness itself. For Wynter, this struggle is not about overcoming “internalized racism” — as if there were a subject who preexisted the racist order and could be lifted out of it—but instead about attending to the ways that Man already shapes the basic frameworks of self-understanding and self-perception.³² With Fanon, she repeatedly insists that “sociogeny is ontogeny”; our very being-as-human is socially formed. Man is not just a superficial set of cultural ideas about human life, but a script already being enacted in our basic self-understanding and daily habits. Resisting Man, then, requires three levels of struggle: (1) to expose and explain Man/humanity as a malleable, conditioned, culturally bound set of practices that are, nevertheless, deeply formative; (2) to transform material orders of domination insofar as these material conditions are the direct result/consequences of the praxis of “Man”; (3) to establish self-determination within and against an order of consciousness whose anthropology skews toward white supremacist heteropatriarchy.³³

Finally, Delores Williams’ classic theological text, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, works critically and imaginatively from the perspective of Hagar—a biblical figure usually folded into the story of Abraham and Sarah—whose survival and struggle for self-determination in the context of enslavement and sexual violence provide a powerfully motivating analogue for African American women. In both solidarity and antagonism, Hagar *struggles with God*, whom it is not obvious that she can trust, and makes a way for herself and her family through seemingly impossible opposition. Williams layers Hagar’s encounters with God, in which Hagar renames and refigures the deity associated with Abraham, with the works of Alice Walker and Ntozake Shange (“I found God in myself and I loved her fiercely”).³⁴ Like Hartman’s text, Williams book sustains a line of thought that is more critical and diagnostic than constructive. Nevertheless, her reflections on “Wilderness experience” and on the “Black Church” as an eschatological horizon work toward a more constructive proposal.³⁵ Just as Hagar struggled with God and found a way in a wilderness that was at times sustaining and at times threatening, Williams pictures an ongoing struggle for self-determination that sometimes takes the form

³² Wynter, “Catastrophe,” 49.

³³ Wynter, “Catastrophe,” 53-54.

³⁴ Williams, *Sisters*, 54-55.

³⁵ Williams, *Sisters*, 159-60, 205.

of attending to quality of life in survival and sometimes takes the form of revolutionary liberation.

For the purposes of my argument, I want to attend to two points of commonality in Hartman, Wynter, and Williams' work (a resonance that, I think, could be extended through many other thinkers). First, for all of these thinkers, prevailing conceptions of "humanity" remain oppressive, overly restrictive and insensitive to the lived experience of those bodies and minds to whom such prevailing conceptions were never meant to correspond. There is, in other words, a marking of enmity within a category whose universality and progressive humanist credentials frequently go unquestioned. Second, the political horizon of aspiration that emerges for each of these thinkers is not an expanding democracy that enfolds a larger and larger population within an overarching structure of representation and (benevolent) management. Rather, each of these thinkers builds spaces for coalitions of self-determination and alliance, smaller sovereignties that do much of the same flattening and de-hierarchicalizing work that the banner of "democracy" promises, but with an additional resistance to the homogenizing pressures toward conformity that unite and sustain the *demos* as a locus of power.

Contention against the normative conceptions of humanity that nurture and sustain globalized capitalism remains an under-recognized but necessary component of any adequate cultural/political response to ecological degradation. This is the case, not least, because it is just such normative conceptions of humanity and human political order that generate the violent inclusive exclusions of animal life whereby both livestock and wild carnivores are caught – good as dead – in the web of human politics. Insofar as democracy is a mechanism for expanding and enforcing conformity to normative conceptions of humanity, ecologically-attuned thought must remain suspicious of democracy as a means for preservation and restoration. There is no doubt that successful campaigns of the environmental movement have utilized the representative and legislative mechanisms of democracy (the Wilderness Act of 1964 or the Endangered Species Act, for two examples), but I would argue that this approach has more to do with the dominance of democracy as a political framework than with the politics that *generates* the social and cultural momentum for such successes. The distinction here is a subtle one, but it has everything to do with human self-understanding in relation to animality. The politics of the environmental movement, when it is at its best, expresses the sovereign demands of local interspecies alliances rather than the managerial expertise of eco-bureaucrats. Human beings, caught up in relations of loyalty with nonhuman creatures, bend the movement of human political systems (ever so slightly) toward recognition of the interests of nonhuman creatures. From an ecological standpoint, the most important politics in this scene is not the representative and legislative work of the human democracy (however necessary that may be), but the formation of a creaturely alliance that escapes the orbit of normative humanity, preserving alternate ways-of-life oriented to distinct and variable ends. Such alliances, of course, exist even more frequently without human involvement (we call these alliances ecosystems), but where we are able to resist the humanity of Man, human beings too can inhabit – consciously and explicitly, if only for moments at a time – the politics of creaturely life.

At this postsecular moment, in theology's contested and contentious intersections with politics and ecology, I would argue that Black feminist thought provides a better horizon of aspiration and struggle than anodyne appeals to a cosmic democracy. I want to be careful here. I am not arguing that Black feminist thought can be appropriated or "used" for a set of eco-political ends unrelated to the ongoing struggles for justice named by such works (to do so would be a profound, but all-too-common betrayal of these sources). Rather, I want to recognize Black feminist leadership and join the struggle identified in these works because this political vision is already better attuned ecologically than our dominant frameworks of political imagination. Part of the promise of the postsecular is a fragmentation that exposes the particular heritage of overarching concepts such as "nature," "democracy," and "humanity." Theology, and political theology, then, arrive, newly chastened, into a world complicated by differences that had never been seen before—differences that the humanity of Man obscures through the normative overrepresentation of one particular mode or genre of being human. The eco-political work of attending to all that creaturely difference requires scrutiny regarding humanity as a political praxis—and "democracy" too—in order to respect the political worlds of coyotes and ravens, and negotiate a creaturely coexistence capable of sharing the earth without collapsing it into a single, all too human, world.

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