

## BY “HUMAN,” EVERYBODY JUST MEANS “WHITE”

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ANIMAL. WE, AS BLACK FOLKS, REACT VERY STRONGLY TO THIS WORD WHEN IT is used to draw any sort of relation or comparison to us. After all, the label *animal* was and continues to be one of the most destructive ever applied to us. One of the easiest ways to violate a person or group of people is to compare or reduce them to “animals.” In March 2015, the San Francisco Police Department was investigated for racist and homophobic text exchanges. *Think Progress* reported on the story, stating, “The texts made public Friday included jokes about Kwanzaa, calling African Americans monkeys, calling for the lynching of all African Americans, and even one that said, ‘Its [*sic*] not against the law to put an animal down.’”<sup>1</sup>

In her 1994 open letter to her colleagues, cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter noted, “You may have heard a radio news report which aired briefly during the days after the jury’s acquittal of the policemen in the Rodney King beating case. The report stated that public officials of the judicial system of Los Angeles routinely used the acronym N.H.I. to refer to any case involving a breach of the rights of young Black males who belong to the jobless category of the inner city ghettos. N.H.I. means ‘no humans involved.’”<sup>2</sup>

One could even argue that words like *nigger* or *thug* operate a lot like replacement terms for *animal*. Think about the ways that police (as well as everyday folks) justify violence toward black people by referring to them as “thugs” who need to be “controlled.” It’s no wonder that one way we have historically sought and continue to seek social visibility is by asserting our “humanity.”

I used to be that kind of black activist. You know: “*We’re human, too!*” But now, I question this strategy and want to investigate it in this chapter. How I see it is that the strategy of asserting one’s humanity—humanization—is a lot like animalization.

With animalization, we are conceiving of a person or group as if they are animals. But with humanization, we’re not acknowledging that one is a “human.” We’re conceiving a person or group *like* they are humans. So, my aim here is to persuade you that to demand that we be seen like we are human is racially loaded. If animalizing people is problematic, humanizing them is even worse, or so I suggest.

Since the terms *human* and *animal* are up for debate here, I will refer to what we ordinarily call humans as “*homo sapiens*” and what we ordinarily call animals as members of species “other than *homo sapiens*.”

Of course, one major assumption behind both animalization and humanization is that those who are not members of *homo sapiens* just don’t belong in the domain of moral or political consideration. I won’t treat this issue directly but needless to say I think it’s a view fraught with major problems.

Another assumption at work in these processes is that being “like an animal” is supposed to strike us as immediately intelligible. But the term *animal* refers to a fairly broad concept. There is no such thing as the general “animal,” and I can’t think of one feature or unifying behavior common only to all members of species other than *homo sapiens*. The only thing they have in common is they are not members of our species.

And what is “being human” like? At least here we have only one species to consider—*ours*. Maybe what it is like to “be human” is the

wrong question to ask. After all, isn't being human just belonging to our species? So, why should humanization be a problem?

But *is* belonging to our species *really* what it is to “be human”? I don't think so. I think most people would distinguish “animal” from “human” behavior by appealing to something like “reason,” “morality,” our transcendence of the laws of nature, or something similar.

Or perhaps some of us might even say that human behavior is not to act “like an animal.” For instance, the following passage from Douglas MacLean's article in *Philosophy & Public Policy Quarterly* (a reputable philosophy journal) would probably not be very controversial to most of us:

Just as we have naming ceremonies for newborns, involve food in our rituals, go in for weddings, and do not disturb or desecrate graves, so it is part of what it means to be a human being that we don't eat off of the ground, defecate in public, or in other ways “behave like animals.” It is only when we separate ourselves from nature in these ways that we make it possible to gain a sense of dignity, become suitable objects of respect, and make sense of moral behavior that is anything other than a set of instrumental relationships.<sup>3</sup>

Let's be honest about a few things. First, whether or not certain behaviors are ways in which we “behave like animals” is a somewhat subjective judgment. Secondly, the prioritizing of our “rational capacities” or the belief that engaging in certain practices “separates” us or puts us “above” nature are notions held by and tendencies in which only *certain* groups of people participate. And thirdly, those who prioritized our rational capacities and believed that their practices made them break with “nature” just happened to be those who decided which behaviors are reminiscent of “animals” and which weren't.

In fact, these people possess the most privilege in the world, thereby giving them the power not only to define the terms at play (*reason, nature,*

and the terms in question—*human, animal*) but also to self-designate their group as behaving and looking distinctly *human*.

The domain of the “human” or “humanity” is not just about whether or not one belongs to the species *homo sapiens*. Rather, “human” means a certain way of being, especially exemplified by how one looks or behaves, what practices are associated with one's community, and so on. So, the “human” or what “humanity” is just is a *conceptual way to mark the province of European whiteness as the ideal way of being homo sapiens*.

This means that the conceptions of “humanity/human” and “animality/animal” have been constructed along *racial* lines. What is now understood to be *biological* was really European whites' self-conception and what they believed followed about the rest of the natural world in order to make this self-conception a *truth*.

Now, before I move on, I want to consider the following. Some of you might be thinking: members of *homo sapiens* divided themselves from all other species long before race entered the scene. At minimum, this divide was necessary so that other species could be used for food, clothing, labor, and a variety of other purposes. To see ourselves (*homo sapiens*) as different from all other species, however slight the *difference*, made it possible for us to exploit the latter, especially as food, and this played a major role in our evolutionary development from a physiological perspective. But it also played a major role in our development from a *cultural* perspective, given that many of our rituals and practices incorporate the use of animals in some way.

I certainly don't dispute this fact, although the ways in which this distinction was drawn and the degree to which there was ever a *clear* distinction probably varied among different groups of people. But let's bracket that information for the sake of getting to the point. I think it's a mistake to assume that the *modern* use of and subsequent attitude toward other species is a mere continuation of this *homo sapiens* “tradition.” The introduction of race as a way of understanding geocultural, social, and individual identities completely changed our conceptual landscape. It

continues to impact, in a deep sense, how we understand ourselves, each other, and the world.

With the invention of race came the reinvention of “man” or the “human.” As the decolonial scholar Walter D. Mignolo describes it, “During the European renaissance, man [*sic*] was conceived at the intersection of his body and his mind, his body proportion and his intellect. Leonardo da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man translated into visual language what humanists were portraying in words.” As a result, “when the idea and the category of man came into the picture, it came already with a privilege” (p. 10).<sup>4</sup>

How so? Well, since European whites introduced the social construct of race for *their benefit*, they designated *themselves* and their point of reference as constitutive of “being human.” They had the power to universalize whiteness as human. So, this new language of race posited the “human” in terms of naturalized whiteness.

What do I mean when I say that racial logic changed our conceptual landscape? Looking to gender as an example might help make sense of this claim. Feminist philosopher María Lugones notes that the norms of what it is to be a man or a woman were “premised upon the experiences of middle-class men and women of European origin.”<sup>5</sup> She notes just how profoundly and cataclysmically this notion impacted non-European populations in the form of colonialism. Lugones draws on feminist scholar Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí’s book *The Invention of Women*,<sup>6</sup> in which Oyèwùmí argues that prior to colonization the Yoruba society of present-day Nigeria did not have a gender system in place. Although they had terms to designate anatomic male and female, these categories were not understood to be hierarchical or binarily opposed.

Colonialism foisted onto different societies Eurocentric-constructed gender norms such that, for instance, what it was to be a woman involved a certain degree of whiteness, whether that be manifested in the shade of one’s skin, the proportions of one’s body, the hair’s texture/length/style, the tone of voice, gait, and so on. Even to this day, conceptions of femininity and the ideal woman coincide with representations of whiteness.

Similarly, what it means to be “human” also underwent a drastic change after the introduction of racial logic, such that the term represented a particular population that had a certain way of being homo sapiens. But if this conception underwent such a drastic change after the introduction of race, it stands to reason that lots of other conceptions, especially those deeply connected to “human,” were either distorted, reinvented, or generated under this new logic. Even relations were reinterpreted.

Lugones quotes sociologist Anibal Quijano: “The invention of race is a pivotal turn as it replaces the relations of superiority and inferiority established through domination. It reconceives humanity and human relations fictionally, in biological terms.” This statement has interesting implications for how racial logic might affect our understanding of “animality/animal” and “humanity/human.”<sup>7</sup> What is really the domination of one group by another is naturalized in terms of biological kinds.

With this in mind, we can go back to a question I raised earlier regarding what we mean when we hear something described as “animalistic” or “like an animal.”

I noted that these types of descriptions involve an assumption that they are intelligible despite the fact that I really can’t think of any obvious feature or behavior in which only members of species other than homo sapiens participate or that they possess. That is, how do these descriptions make sense when there just is no such thing as “*the animal*”? I think it is here wherein the racial construction of “the animal” can really be seen.

Although individual animal species may not in themselves be construed in terms of race, the conception of “the animal” or “the general animal” operates in conjunction with its racial analog, “the human” or “the general human.” If “the human” is really an expression of whiteness as the ideal way of being homo sapiens, then “the animal” is supposed to express a *deviation* from this way of being. “The general animal,” then, applies not only to members of other species, who clearly cannot participate in such a form of life by virtue of not having even the necessary features to “be human,” but it can also apply to those members of homo

sapiens who deviate from the way whites look and/or behave, and what values and commitments they hold, and so forth.

On this interpretation, humanization is not merely the act of asserting that one is homo sapiens. That would be futile. Rather, humanization is the act of asserting one's resemblance to "humans"—white people.

When we refer to a person or a group as "animalistic," we are not really saying they bear some generic strong resemblance to species other than homo sapiens. This would make no sense because, again, there is no such thing as a generic non-homo sapiens property. What we are saying is *they don't behave or look or believe properly*, where what is "proper" is defined by Eurocentric, white ideals. In other words, they *deviate from whiteness*.

"Appropriate" ways of looking and carrying oneself are standardized by whites; "respectable" religions and "proper" rituals of belief are standardized by whites; the most "useful" ways of thinking about and engaging with the world are standardized by whites, and so on. Anything that doesn't have an air of white familiarity to it is "exotic," "primitive," "irrational," "animalistic." You get the picture.

So, now what? Obviously, I strongly support moving away from the strategy of humanization, at least in the way it currently stands. First of all, from a practical viewpoint, it just won't work. If humanity is defined in terms of whiteness, then at best most of us will be living in the shadow of what Western whites deem is the way to live, look, behave, believe, know, celebrate, and so on. More importantly, when we attempt to "humanize" ourselves, and when we glamorize "the human," we uphold the superiority of whiteness.

Having said that, I also don't think the way to move forward is to try to disentangle whiteness from our conception of "human." For instance, some might think it would be a good idea to reconceive (*really* reconceive) humanity in terms of species. Namely, any member of homo sapiens qualifies as human regardless of one's features or practices or history. But this way of thinking seems to overlook completely the fact that "human" and "animal," especially understood in relation to one another, *are deeply embedded in the grammar of racial logic*. If we want to free ourselves and others who have

suffered from the racialization of the world, why play along with the game of defining "human"? Why not move away from this imperial project altogether and recast the terms of liberation, for ourselves and for others, in a completely new language and vision of the world?

I acknowledge that I'm painting an incomplete picture here. But I wanted to express these thoughts in order to inspire some reflection. In closing, I'd like to leave you with a few conclusions that follow from the thoughts presented here.

First, I think we as black people seriously need to reconsider our relationship with nonhuman animals. When we make use of the human-animal binary to justify our attitudes toward other species, we are in fact using the very same racial logic that posits the "human" as whiteness. There is already a movement underway in which people from our community call upon members to "decolonize" our bodies, our diets, and areas of activism. But we also need to decolonize the frameworks that govern our concepts. For those of us in the West who can afford to live otherwise, our comfort with using animals, especially as meat and dairy, only reveals our comfort with white-centric modes of thinking. Dismantling racism might require dismantling our patterns of consumption, including our food practices.

Secondly and closely related, I think those of us who *do* see a need to address the situation of nonhuman animals need to steer clear of the mainstream tendency to simplify issues having to do with animality in terms of speciesism alone. Right now, a lot of tension exists in mainstream animal rights spaces, with many questioning the relevance of racial issues beyond their use in drawing up productive analogies. Understanding the "human" and "animal" in this more nuanced sense should spark a commitment in our community to understand the white/black and human-animal binaries as not merely bearing upon one another but *deeply intertwined*, with all four terms functioning to uphold the superiority of whiteness.

*Author's note: Please see chapter 17 ("Revaluing the Human as a Way to Revalue the Animal") for a follow-up to this discussion.*