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Review Essay
The End of Bare Life?

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Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014, $23.95). Pp. 224. ISBN 978 0 8223 5701 8.

Sarah Jane Cervenak, *Wandering: Philosophical Performances of Racial and Sexual Freedom* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014, $23.95). Pp. 232. ISBN 978 0 8223 5727 8.

Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, *New World Drama: The Performative Commons in the Atlantic World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014, $26.95). Pp. 368. ISBN 978 0 8223 5341 6.

Since Giorgio Agamben's influential critique of the liberal-democratic state, scholars have offered a more fulsome engagement with the ways that this formation extends Foucauldian biopolitical discourses by foregrounding the emergence of biological existence as "the new political subject." In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* Agamben argues that it is impossible to understand the development, vocation, and contradictions of the modern state "if one forgets that what lies at its basis is not man as a free and conscious political subject, but, above all, man's bare life, the simple birth that as such is, in the passage from subject to citizen, invested in the principle of sovereignty."[1] Bare or pure life is the human as animal in nature without political definition or mediation. It is the isolation of the metaphysical from the various forms of concrete life that defines and conditions Western politics. Projects that imagine political communities as grounded in belonging or endeavor to found political rights in the citizen are in vain. The figure of the *homo sacer* – the "sacred man" who "may be killed and yet not sacrificed" – is one of the most distinctive elements of Agamben's project of redefining sovereignty in biopolitical terms.[2] Contra notions of collective political sovereignty as the basis of state politics, the figure of the *homo sacer* attends to a more authoritarian model that pivots on the role of state authorities in simultaneously conditioning and dis/avowing the movement from bare life to rights-bearing subject.

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[1] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 123, 128. [2] Ibid., 8.

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Though influential, Agamben's thinking has met with resistance. Jef Huysmans and Patricia Owens, among others, have criticized the conceptual basis of bare life, arguing that it depoliticizes histories of sociopolitical struggle.[3] Three recent books in different ways further this critique and speak to the urgency of critically reconceptualizing the relationship between ontological metaphysics and politics: Alexander G. Weheliye's *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (2014), Sarah Jane Cervenak's *Wandering: Philosophical Performances of Racial and Sexual Freedom* (2014), and Elizabeth Maddock's *New World Drama: The Performative Commons in the Atlantic World* (2014). Together, they challenge the ontological salience of *bare-life* discourses and stake out new grounds on which to construct a new aesthetics of freedom. These books speak back to Agamben's critique of liberal biopolitics, providing occasion for reimagining what Owens describes as the "corporeal turn" in social and political thought.[4] While each of these texts represents a distinct approach to critiquing discourses of liberal subject formation, they collectively speak to the ongoing challenge of disentangling critical analyses from colonial impulses and processes. While it may be the case that, to quote Weheliye, "the coloniality of Man suffuses the disciplinary and conceptual formations of knowledge we labor under" (7), these new scholarly contributions advance the project of imagining alternatives.

Weheliye foregrounds black feminist perspectives in order to critique paradigms that have gained salience within Anglo-American scholarly considerations of political domination and exclusion. *Habeas Viscus* argues that critiques of liberal subject formation following Agamben and Michel Foucault fail to engage with race and gender. The "conceptual carte blanche" conferred on Continental philosophers ensures that perspectives articulated outside this narrowly defined purview of Euro-American intellectual production continue to be "relegated to the jurisdiction of ethnic locality" (6). Bare-life and biopolitics discourses are especially implicated because they vacate critical vocabularies of identitarian substance. Even while they offer a critique of liberal sovereignty, these analyses fail to question the structural arrangements that render particular subjects more susceptible to processes of political exclusion. Indeed, it is the absence of "identitarian locality" that has enabled the concept of "bare" or "pure" life to emerge in an academy that remains skeptical of deploying race in particular as a foundational object of analyses (7). For Weheliye, the deterministic submersion of race as an ontological signifier renders biopolitics unfit as an analytic for examining the correlations between constructions of humanity and what he calls "racializing assemblages" (4): the production and perpetuation of sociopolitical processes that disaggregate full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans. *Habeas Viscus* asks readers to imagine a different modality of humanity through a material repopulation of critical discourse.

Of course, the project of "imagining humanity otherwise" is ongoing within black studies. Black feminism, in particular, has long been concerned with contesting liberal political formations by making visible the discursive and corporeal violences enacted upon racialized, gendered, and sexualized bodies. *Habeas Viscus* is clearly indebted

[3] Jef Huysmans, "The Jargon of Exception: On Schmitt, Agamben and the Absence of Political Society," *International Political Sociology*, 2, 2 (2008), 165–83; Patricia Owens, "Reclaiming 'Bare Life'? Against Agamben on Refugees," *International Relations*, 23, 4 (2009), 567–82.

[4] Owens, 579.

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to this critical genealogy. Hortense Spillers, for instance, elaborates a black feminist ontology rooted in a distinction between "body" and "flesh" that correlates with a distinction between captive and liberated subject positions. Flesh – that which is beaten, gashed, cut open – is imagined here as a "primary narrative" that attributes "lexical and living dimensions" to the figure of the black woman who has been robbed of discursive distinctness.[5] Like Spillers, Weheliye is concerned with unveiling the vestibular positionality of racially marked others, who, despite being excluded from culture, enable the "mirage" of Western man to emerge. Indeed, *Habeas Viscus* advances "thinking and living enfleshment otherwise" (2) as a means of overturning bare-life discourses that preclude alternate instantiations of humanity. Enfleshment, then, understood as the violent riveting of politicized biopolitics to particular racialized bodies, contests bare-life narratives that imagine (and posit as *de jure*) a mediated linear and temporal movement from abject, animal existence to rights-bearing human subject. In other words, we are not all *homines sacri*.

Rather, bringing racialized assemblages to the foreground of discourse disrupts biopolitical assumptions about racial classification as an ideological imposition on "originally" neutral or disambiguated bodies by replacing politically homogenizing conceptions of the "the human" with a new heuristic model. "Relationality" constitutes a bid to destabilize ongoing discourses of liberal humanism that, Weheliye suggests, dismiss the humanity of those to whom is affixed the anonym of bare life:

> Once suffering that results from political violence severs its ties with liberal individualism, which would position this anguish in the realm of a dehumanizing exception, we can commence to think of suffering and enfleshment as central to humanity. I emphasize the family ties between political violence and suffering not because they are nobler or more worthy than other forms of suffering, but because they usher us away from the liberal notion of wounding that is at the core of modern western politics and culture. (14)

Contesting ideas of suffering as somehow "exceptional," as well as the notion that populations are equally at risk under Western modernity, the move toward a new relational model asks readers to interrogate the production of an ontological totality in order to perceive the authenticity of what Weheliye describes as the "traditions of the oppressed" (132): the production of new philosophical genealogies that take seriously the ongoing practices of freedom and new discursive spaces emerging out of, not despite, conditions of violence.

Cervenak's *Wandering: Philosophical Performances of Racial and Sexual Freedom* registers an equally innovative meditation on political erasure. Connecting black feminist and performance frameworks, she contemplates the conditions under which black female subjecthood and philosophical desire might be disaggregated from Enlightenment logics. Where Weheliye is concerned with "making possible the conditions for new worlds" (15) outside Western liberal politics and culture, Cervenak examines a mode of political disengagement that she finds represented in the figure of the black "wanderer" in both literature and culture, accounts of physical and mental roaming that, though undernarrated or unscripted, represent the possibility of "refusing the pull of someone else's script" (11). Indeed, it is the ontological

[5] Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics*, 19, 2 (1987) 64–81, 68.

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"unreadability" of these "trespassive enactments" that holds promise. If rendering oneself legible to hegemonic discourses facilitates the totalizing impulses of liberal discourse, then internal wandering – dreams or thoughts that go unnarrativized – and the spectacle of "nonsensical" (16) black movement represent a rejection of ontological codification.

Rejecting the conditions of visibility turns the very notion of "bare life" on its head. Like Weheliye, Cervenak advances a political ontology that both resists the narrow paradigm of universal humanity and seeks to imagine viable modes of humanity beyond the control of totalizing discourses. And she is concerned with that which lies beyond the limited ambit of human versus nonhuman philosophical dichotomies. However, whereas *Habeas Viscus* posits the enfleshed body as the locus of new knowledge production, *Wandering* imagines external and internal "kinesis" as avenues for simultaneously exceeding discourse and combating alienation. Moreover, while disrupting the currency of rational self-determination and transparency, Cervenak also unveils the cynicism at the heart of the Enlightenment's insistence on bodily and intellectual management. Revisiting the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant, she suggests that, even while "affectability" and "unruly desires" were increasingly situated beyond the parameters of the rational subject, empirical and epistemological wandering nonetheless conditioned the emergence of liberal subjectivity. The performative contradictions in Rousseau's *Confessions*, for instance, suggest how the philosopher's own private desires and embodied wanderings are in fact essential to his philosophizing, complicating his own earlier arguments that subordinate private desire to civic or public will. "Plainly put," Cervenak argues, "not everyone gets to roam freely … to wander is a privilege for those said to have already arrived at enlightenment" (35).

The ethical stakes of "refusal" complicate Weheliye's calls for a critical rescripting of emancipation narratives by advancing the political efficacy of resisting textuality itself. If "readability" has long served the prerogatives of racist, sexist, and classist epistemologies, then "resistence to verifiability" may well represent the possibility of "philosophical abundance" (3). Cervenak's desire to "untether justice from its entrapment in understanding" contests performativity as a politically viable hermeneutic. While performativity discourses typically assume the "knowability" of bodies as vestibular to liberatory identity politics, Cervenak suggests, to the contrary, that such projects – suturing freedom to readability – fail to take into account the extent to which "legibility" itself constitutes a major site of crisis for particular populations. Black women's embodied performances, so often the object of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophical production, have been especially restricted. Drawing upon Fred Moten's concept of "opaque performances," Cervenak argues that disarticulating black female identity from hegemonic ideologies demands a paradigm shift and, furthermore, considers whether resistance to understanding, rather than bodily performance, may represent the ground of radical politics.

Whereas Weheliye and Cervenak are interested in forging a new heuristic of human identity that recognizes the practices of freedom contingent on circumstances of oppression, Dillon examines how "intentional performances of excess" (199) enabled enslaved people to achieve both visibility and cultural influence in the Atlantic world. *New World Drama* begins in the mid-seventeenth century with the advent of popular sovereignty in England, an ideological ascendency that developed alongside the enclosure of "the commons": land and natural resources held in

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common by the people as a body. Beginning with this dual development, Dillon suggests that emerging conceptions of the commons as a political force at this time accrued new popular and material significance. Political rights and material embodiment, she argues, became entwined, forming a new public that was powerfully expressed in the space of the eighteenth-century transatlantic theatre.

The new commoning and collective practices examined here engage and ultimately dispute both Agamben and the recent contributions of Michel Hardt and Antonio Negri, particularly their concerns with the biopolitical power of the "multitude" over and against "the republic of property."[6] But unlike earlier assessments of the relationship between popular sovereignty and capitalist logics, Dillon is concerned with the practices of political freedom that are foreclosed by discourses that focus on the centrality of property. Through a critique of Hardt and Negri's account of the exploitation and ultimate erasure of the multitude, *New World Drama* calls attention to colonial relations. Complementing Weheliye, Dillon theorizes "relationality" as a geopolitical interaction that underlies capitalist modernity and locates "colonialist racialization" as the "bedrock of an expropriative biopolitics from the late seventeenth century forward to today" (8). This leads to one of the more striking innovations in the book, a critique of Agamben that builds upon the identity-politics critique.

"Bare labor," Dillon's term, describes the dispossessions of property and labor that underlie the economies of ownership advanced by metropolitan and Creole Europeans. It is a construction of abjection that Dillon sees portrayed in transatlantic newspapers that were sustained by the trade of slaves and visually portrayed on the transatlantic stage. Extracted by "technologies of violence," bare labor is distinct from Marxian concepts of proletarian struggle. Rather, it theorizes a mode of labor that is "stripped of the resources of social life and the capacity for social reproduction" (28). Importantly, though, bare labor allows for sociality. For Dillon, it is impossible to step fully outside the social. Social life is tied explicitly to material life and perfomative life. The figure of the "black dandy," in particular, flies in the face of bare labor and erasure. Exceeding European codes through sartorial performance, this figure suggests how the "abject" objects of enslaved labor disaggregated themselves from hegemonic authority. Fabric fashioned into clothing, Dillon argues, serves as "both stuff and signifier, textile and text" (196). Through these intersections – of labor, materiality, performance – individual people create new forms of sociality.

It is noteworthy that the most compelling critiques of Foucault, Agamben, and the Continental approach to liberalism's flaws have come from scholars attentive to the intersectional potentials of race, gender, and identity. Across this body of scholarship speaking back to Agambian critiques of the liberal state, discourses of performativity emerge as a particularly vital tool for arbitrating the production of liberal narratives that have proved seriously disabling for populations supposedly situated beyond the discursive ambit of "the human." As each of these texts suggests, this narrow construction of the human was never straightforward, but rather, to quote Cervenak, decidedly "crooked" (14). These are not arguments for an expansion of liberal humanism. Rather, in different ways, each scholar exposes the flaws of philosophical narratives

[6] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2009), 8.

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resting on the possibility of a pre-social, politically undefined (non)humanity. In contesting the philosophical foundations of "bare-life" discourses, these texts radically denaturalize the conditions of oppression and promote an exciting intellectual commitment to imagining freedom differently.

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