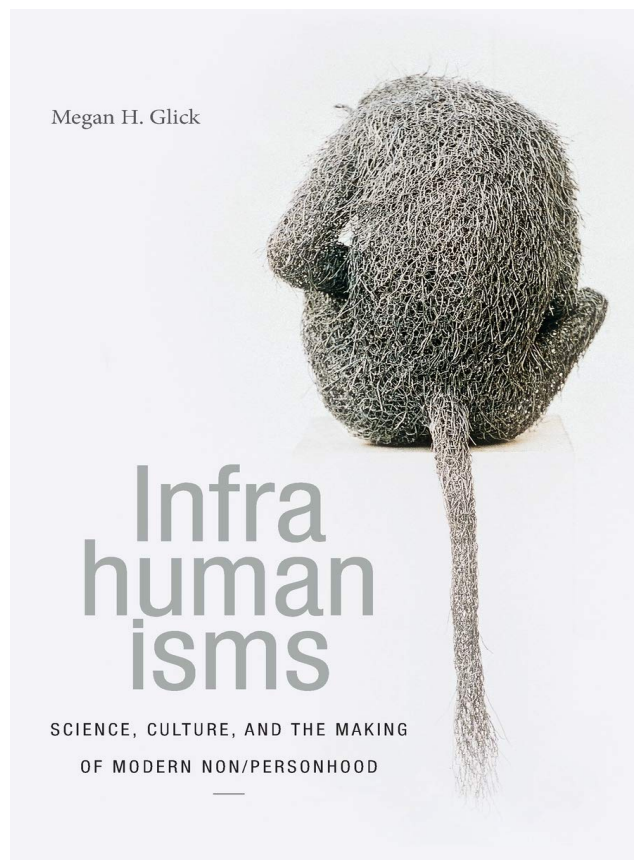


Reviews

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Challenging and Changing Humanity's Absoluteness

Megan H. Glick, *Infrahumanisms: Science, Culture, and the Making of Modern Non/Personhood*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2018. 271 pp. \$99.95, hc, \$26.95, pb.



Historically, animality has been seen as something to define humanity against rather than with. Animal studies as a field has contributed significantly to breaking down this binary and Megan H. Glick's *Infrahumanisms: Science, Culture, and the Making of Modern Non/Personhood* adds an important new element to the conversation through its emphasis on the titular term "infrahuman." Coined by Robert Mearnes Yerkes, the founding father of primatology, the term "infrahuman" was originally applied to primates considered to be the evolutionary missing link between humans and non-

humans. Glick, however, uses the term as a “framework from which to consider how the management of the human/nonhuman boundary has impacted a wide array of biopolitical phenomena” given the term’s historical use to denote that which exists on the boundary of the human and non-human (3). Such an approach is incredibly valuable because, although the social construction of sexual, racial, gender, disability, and other identities has been acknowledged, human identity remains largely biological and absolute in academic circles. *Infrahumanisms* usefully challenges this absoluteness by highlighting how infrahuman figures such as children, primates, aliens, zoonotic diseases, obesity, and pigs shaped the definition of humanity throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. While the constantly shifting focal points and analyses can make Glick’s monograph feel disjointed, there is no question that *Infrahumanisms* convincingly makes a case for humanity being “a historical production that shifts according to time and place” (9).

For a text with so much variety, Glick does an excellent job of maintaining clarity throughout the monograph. *Infrahumanisms* is unquestionably an academic work, but Glick ensures readers can follow the text’s arguments even if they are unfamiliar with animal studies, science studies, critical race theory, posthumanism, or any of the other critical schools with which the book engages. This clarity is ensured through the provision of clear definitions for terms such as “infrahuman,” as well as explanations of concepts like Michel Foucault’s biopower and Giorgio Agamben’s bare life. Beyond providing definitions, Glick is heavily invested in summary, as at the start of each of the book’s three sections, the text provides an overview of that part’s main arguments, helping to foster greater comprehension when reading the two individual chapters that make up each section.

The first part of the book, “Bioexpansionism, 1900s-1930s,” represents a strong start for the monograph, as Glick effectively highlights how children and primates affected narratives about humanity in the early twentieth century. As Glick explains, the concept of the infrahuman took shape linguistically and culturally “at precisely the moment in which the hegemony of modern, empirical scientific discourse became established, existing as the remainder of a more ambiguous past” (26). Two of these so-called remainders are children and primates. Culturally connected to a “primitive” past through their association with the animal welfare movement, children’s transformation into adults came to be seen as a microcosm of the larger human evolutionary process. To help foster “correct” evolution, creations such as the jungle gym and Boy Scouts encouraged children to engage with a “primal” past via play and nature while also encouraging them to “internalize[e] a panoptical gaze, a sense of always watching,

seeing, and attempting to know – and of being watched, seen, and known” (47). This “correct” brand of evolution helped reinforce eugenic and evolutionary hierarchies at the time by suggesting that only with proper development could children evolve into adults and become fully human.

Of course, as Glick explains in the second chapter, there was a racial element to this becoming human rather than infrahuman. Charles Darwin’s evolutionary theories induced cultural anxieties about humanity in the nineteenth century, especially about the prospect of different races sharing a common ancestor. As a result, the “search for a Western ‘white’ primordial ancestor was critical” for upholding the racial hierarchies of the early twentieth century (37). Most contemporary scholars suggest that any association with a primate or Africa at this time was indicative of racial Otherness, but Glick usefully challenges this reductionism. Early primatologists did not see all primates as the same and theorized the more “evolved” chimpanzee was the “white” African ancestor whereas the larger, more “primitive” gorilla was the “Black” African ancestor (65). Such a distinction is one previously unmentioned upon and has the potential to complicate interpretations of literary works such as Edgar Rice Burroughs’s *Tarzan of the Apes* (1912) and Franz Kafka’s “A Report to an Academy” (1917), both of which involve the primates discussed in this chapter. Glick’s historical reading of children and primates as infrahuman thus has significant implications for the study of both moving forward, especially in the fields of animal studies and posthumanism. As this section highlights, despite its supposed absoluteness, new thinking about children’s evolution and the “humanity” of certain primates at the start of the twentieth century strongly influenced who was considered human and what it took for one to qualify as such.

The next section, “Extraterrestriality, 1940s-1970s,” takes a big leap from the first in terms of time and subject matter. Skipping to the end of World War II, this section aims “to illuminate how the revision of the human/posthuman body transformed conceptualizations of human autonomy, individuality, and free will in the postwar period” by examining the relationship between Holocaust images and alien sightings as well as the rise of molecular biology and genetic engineering (82-83). While infrahumanism is still present in this section, it does not dominate the conversation as it does in “Bioexpansionism, 1900s-1930s.” In fact, the concept primarily manifests in relation to Glick’s arguments about the links between the photos of Holocaust survivors and alien sightings. In an unusual but convincing move, *Infrahumanisms* argues alien narratives were inspired by the omnipresence of Holocaust photos because alien sightings only became prominent post-WWII and the small gray aliens supposedly

spotted bore a strong physical resemblance to emaciated Holocaust survivors (92). The defamiliarization of the human body and its association with an extraterrestrial Other does gesture, as Glick acknowledges, toward the infrahuman, but this section is more concerned with the posthuman. The arguments linking Holocaust survivors, aliens, nuclear fallout, and genetic engineering are thought-provoking and will be of use to posthuman scholars, but this section's connections to the concept of the infrahuman could come through more strongly.

"Extraterrestriality, 1940s-1970s" also stays on the theoretical plane of posthumanism and infrahumanism despite the active identity controversies and debates taking place during this section's timeframe. The fourth chapter touches lightly on the Civil Rights Movement, but does not examine how Black, women, or other activists responded to links to animality, nor does it explore how such connections affected movements that sought to extend equal rights to minority groups. The arguments made in the second section, therefore, while interesting, fail to fully connect with the text's overall analysis or to offer an examination of how, culturally if not formally, infrahumanist narratives affected groups considered to be on the human/non-human boundary during the mid-twentieth century. Though not the focus of Glick's monograph, this lack of attention to infrahumanism's implications is out of place in a discussion of the era that saw the rise of a myriad of rights-based movements that had to grapple with the effects of infrahumanist narratives.

This lack of connection between the subjects being analyzed and the effects of infrahumanist narratives on those subjects extends into the last section, "Interiority, 1980s-2010s," particularly in the discussion of the AIDS epidemic (chapter 5). Chapter 5 offers an excellent overview of the history of AIDS and discusses the "forms of xenophobia and ethno-racism [that] also came to shape the discourse and politics surrounding the AIDS crisis" once the disease was linked to Africa, but these racial discourses are not fully analyzed (149). The racist reactions of Western nations, especially in relation to the idea that Africans first contracted AIDS by consuming monkey meat, are heavily discussed, as is the long-lasting association between Africa and deadly diseases, but again activism and pushback are left out of the chapter. The term "infrahuman" is also largely absent, which makes this chapter feel disconnected not only from those directly affected by the prejudiced rhetoric surrounding the AIDS epidemic, but also from the overall purpose of the book.

The final chapter on obesity and xenotransplantation gets *Infrahumanisms* back on track with its discussion of how humans are becoming like pigs through increasing rates of

obesity and also how pigs are becoming human through their use as vessels for growing human organs destined for transplantation. Pigs are a controversial cultural creature, and any animal studies scholar wrestling with the complexities of porcine portrayals in American culture will benefit from reading this last chapter. As Glick points out, pigs are both associated with Blackness and obesity, which has consequences for the human communities with which they are associated. Whereas previous chapters fall short in terms of examining the effects of cultural assumptions on the communities they are based in, chapter six does address some of these issues. For instance, Glick points out that obesity is more pervasive in low-income and Black communities and that specific laws are designed to penalize these groups, including categorizing obese children as abused, which, in turn, legally validates the removal of those children from their families (189). Such a thoughtful examination of this particular situation, along with the ethical and infrahuman implications of xenotransplantation, makes the final chapter a strong one, but it also highlights some of the weaknesses of previous sections, particularly the inattention to the effects of infrahuman status on those who inhabit this identity or who might in the future as obesity rates in the U.S. continue to rise.

The first two chapters and the final one in *Infrahumanisms* will be of use to animal studies scholars examining children, primates, pigs, and their links to humanity or infrahumanity. The other chapters will no doubt be of use to those studying science fiction, the Cold War, and zoonotic diseases, but the disparities in usefulness speak to the book's disjointedness. Infrahumanism is supposedly the connecting thread between all the chapters, but once readers get past the first section, this term is largely dropped and the cohesiveness of the monograph falls with it. There is no question about the value of *Infrahumanisms'* content, to be clear, but trying to contain so much in six chapters that span 110 years and move from children to primates to extraterrestrials to genetic engineering to zoonotic diseases to obesity to xenotransplantation necessitates some jumps in argument and subject that the book does not effectively bridge. Clearer arguments about the connections between these different instances of infrahumanism and their consequences for those subject to this classification would have helped tie the sections together more cohesively.

The book would have also benefited from a more sustained engagement with race and disability studies. There are numerous books in both fields that link animality to disability, race, or both and while Glick mentions in the introduction that *Infrahumanisms* "address[es] states of personhood that are often not formally stripped of political rights or inclusivity but nonetheless experience forms of de facto cultural and

political exclusion based on differential conditions of embodiment and identity, including race, gender, sexuality, disability, and disease status," these identities' links to animality or inhumanity are rarely discussed in detail (12). In particular, strengthening the racial analysis would have improved not only the monograph's argument, but also its cohesiveness given that this identity element is omnipresent in *Infrahumanisms*, but rarely fully considered.

Glick's monograph can be a jolting read from time to time, but it remains an important work of scholarship in the fields of animal studies and posthumanism. It introduces a useful new term to both fields and firmly establishes species categories as at least partly socially constructed rather than exclusively biologically determined. If there is one thing consistent throughout *Infrahumanisms*, it is change. Not only does the subject matter change significantly from chapter to chapter, but the definition of the human does as well, effectively proving Glick's thesis that this supposedly stable category is open to inevitable expansion and alteration.