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Tracing the Animal in the Human

Christopher Peterson. *Bestial Traces: Race, Sexuality, Animality*. Fordham, NY: Fordham UP, 2013. 208 pp. \$75 hc, \$24 pb.



Christopher Peterson's *Bestial Traces: Race, Sexuality, Animality* poses provocative and challenging questions for scholars working at the nexus of animal studies, sexuality studies, and critical race theory. Peterson explores the ontological basis for practices of exclusion that emerge in systems such as racism and speciesism, arguing that belonging always entails processes of exclusion that establish alterity by means of abjection. He claims that the repudiation of the animal in the human is the fundamental operation that structures all other forms of social exclusion. In consequence, he suggests, many political moves that attempt to overcome problems of exclusion and abjection risk simply reversing that disavowal. For Peterson, a more effective response is to avow the animality of humans in order to reverse the dialectic that produces the animal as abject. He argues, however, that avowals and disavowals are never complete — every disavowal leaves a trace of what it seeks to cast off.

Peterson constructs his argument by analyzing diverse literary texts from the 19th, 20th and 21st century U.S. and 21st century South Africa. These texts include Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Joel Chandler Harris's *Uncle Remus Tales*, Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*, and J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. He "traces" productive moments in these texts that acknowledge and affirm the animality of humans. At stake for Peterson is conceptualizing less violent approaches to alterity that move toward a postracial and post-human political landscape — while at the same time acknowledging that such spaces are always "yet to come."

One of Peterson's most provocative arguments is that the commonsense definition of race as skin color is a "restricted" and "exceedingly limited definition" that should be eschewed for a more capacious and universal definition that more fully accounts for general processes of inclusion and exclusion (100). He offers a redefinition of race as "any kind of social formation whose boundaries become legible by virtue of who it excludes" (13). Based on this re-definition, Peterson introduces his concept of "ante-racism" to describe a "general" form of racism "understood as minimal violence that conditions any relation to alterity" (100). Homophobia, classism, and sexism are equivalent forms of violent exclusion — or "racism." He argues that such forms of racism are inevitable because alterity always already entails an originary violence.

Peterson advocates analyses that situate animal representations within their "larger non-racist connotations" to prioritize analyses of species over "narrow" analyses of race (73). He argues that anti-racist scholars often replicate what Steve Baker calls the "denial of the animal" when they object to racialized people being represented as animals "without dwelling in the space of animality" (30). For Peterson these objections fail to challenge larger frames of exclusion on which *ante-racism* is predicated. He argues that these analyses leave "traces that install new boundaries and spawn new forms of inequity" (79). Such arguments reproduce a frame of "species abjection" that is the foundation for social abjection by disavowing the trace of the animality that racist discourses stick to racialized bodies.

Peterson contests Black feminist theorist bell hooks' representations that frame black female sexuality as animalistic. He claims that hooks disavows humans' animal sexuality in favor of an anti-racist conception of sexuality — reproducing the

degradation and exclusion of the animal. Such anti-racist arguments about sexuality then reproduce the terms of *ante-racism*, since a “sanctified and de-animalized conception of sexuality conditions political efforts to humanize sexual [and racialized] others” (8). By Peterson’s logic, hooks challenges racism while leaving intact the ante-racism that he understands this racism to be founded on.

Peterson advocates for representations of human sexuality that avow the animal trace that he argues haunts all human sexuality. For him, Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999) contains just such a representation. *Disgrace*, set in post-apartheid South Africa, offers a story about David Laurie, a white male professor whose life deteriorates after he has exploitative sex with his student Melanie Isaacs. Peterson argues that Coetzee disrupts a stable opposition between human and animal by framing Laurie as haunted by an animalistic sexual drive of which he has no shame. Coetzee thus disrupts the separation between the Cartesian animal as automaton and the human as rational responder that defines human sexuality as controllable and animal sexuality as wild and untamable. Coetzee does this, in Peterson’s view, by framing Laurie as having an animalistic and unashamed primal sexual desire, a representation that “eschews the conception of sexuality as calculable, predictable, and tamable” (20). Peterson here makes recourse to “nature” as if there is a transparent unmediated way to know what animal sexuality is. So Coetzee’s representation of the professor as having animal sexuality does not represent animals, but a cultural and historical construction of animals.

Peterson advocates working toward a future-oriented, always “yet-to-come” “post-racialism,” defined as “the final eradication of discrimination based on skin color” (13). He argues, however, that racism — violent forms of exclusion — can never be defeated, because of what Jacques Derrida calls “the autoimmunity character of democracy,” the failure of democracy to materialize the ideals of inclusivity that it champions” (19). According to Derrida, structures of belonging will always produce “beasts” regardless of a desire for non-violence, since alterity will always produce exclusions, such that democracy will always be a “yet to come.” Peterson argues that like an inclusive democracy, postracialism will always be “yet to come” (11). He thus frames anti-racist struggles as striving for an impossible and utopic “postracial landscape” free of violence and exclusion that can never be fully achieved because difference, conditioned by *ante-racism*, can never be escaped.

For Peterson the autoimmunity character of democracy is reflected in the experiences of racial and sexual minorities, but it is also reflected in the discrimination that those

labeled as racist experience. He claims that labeling people as racists positions them as an “aberration from the principle of equality” (19). One of his examples is Coleman Silk in Phillip Roth’s *The Human Stain*, who experiences the stain of being called a racist. Silk, a mixed-race professor who passes as white, is called a racist after he calls two students who had not attended his class by the racially charged term “spooks.” Peterson argues that the way in which Coleman is abjected because of this event points to how anti-racist strategies that seek to challenge racism enact their own frames of abjection and exclusion.

Peterson’s book contributes to conversations in critical animal studies about the ways in which species functions to delimit frames of inclusion and exclusion towards violent ends. He advocates working for strategies that dissolve boundaries that produce inclusions and exclusions based on species — towards a postracial and posthumanist space that will always be a “yet to come.” It is good to explore the relationship between the human/animal binary and the human/slave binary. But this is an exploration fraught with difficulty. For example, Peterson’s argument that “postracialism” is to be heralded as a valuable goal does not acknowledge that its contemporary role is largely as a conservative ideology that frames racial issues as being “over” in order to obscure the ways in which racial subordination continues to operate (see, for example Cho). He does not interrogate the consequences of his attempt to prioritize analysis of species over race and to redefine “race” by expanding it to signify “difference.” These moves serve to undercut the specificities that serve as means to fight racialized power within material power relations, treating as propositions of logic what are actually issues of history, power, social structures, and racial politics. In so doing, Peterson appropriates “race” as a signifier that can be used to discuss race without having to attend to racialized power.

Peterson’s definition of race and racism is problematic for assuming an analogous relation between systems of power and for situating these systems as operating like each other — rather than framing them as co-constitutive. Though he explains that he doesn’t intend to eradicate the specificity of the language around racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism, in practice this seems to be the consequence of his approach. His definition of race precludes an *intersectional* analysis that suggests that an analysis of a representation of animality can never be considered outside of the racialized and sexualized significations and power structures that subtend it. Scholars

in critical race studies and queer of color critique argue that speciesist and racist discourses are *co-constitutive* and *never prior* to each other (see, for example, Chen; Kim 2007; Morgan; Oliver; Somerville; Terry).

Peterson's argument that humans can and should avow human animality presents all humans as being equally situated in relation to significations of animality and suggests that a white man's avowal of human animality will have the same effect as black woman's. Such an argument ignores the racialized and sexualized significations that power-saturated discourses have produced in relation to these different subject positions. As a result, Peterson's demand to "avow human animality" may actually reinforce heteropatriarchal and white supremacist arguments about racialized sexuality by masking the historical power relations and cultural significations that naturalize these discourses.

Peterson's arguments in favor of foregrounding "speciesism" as the fundamental category of difference over the politics of anti-racism would be strengthened by acknowledging the subject position he inhabits and adopts. His claim that all humans should avow animality — despite the political use of the animal for racial degradation — reveals that his arguments emerge from a position of "phallicized whiteness," where whiteness functions as an "unmarked master signifier" such that the white, straight, and propertied male is the unmarked subject in theories of power (Winnubst 40). This subject decides which differences should matter for others from his place of supposed disembodied neutrality (43). In fact, Peterson approaches his analysis of race in *Disgrace* and of *The Human Stain* through a framework of "white injury," a position from which white people appropriate the language of civil rights to construct themselves as an injured group (Wiegman 116). Peterson does not interrogate the consequences of this framework for his analysis. Because his subject position is not acknowledged, Peterson does not present strong arguments for why anti-racists should value "speciesism" more than countering the history of animalized racisms that have shaped their lives.

Peterson's argument is undercut to the degree that specificity drops out of his discussion of "animal." In pursuit of dissolving the boundary between human and animal, he tends to treat all animals as materially and symbolically similar. Yet for Derrida, the general category "animal" is too reductive and effaces, for example, the difference of "lizards from chimpanzees, from mammals, non-mammals, anthropoids etc." (2008, 58). Derrida argues that that humans should encounter and think about animals "on their own terms" within this singularity, rather than thinking about animals as a universal category. He argues that encountering animals through their

particular singularity will help to break the clear and stable ontological distinction that Western metaphysics produces between human and animal, as it would complicate the very ability to talk about animals as a bounded category itself.

Peterson's analysis might expand on Derrida's proposal to radically undercut the essentializing singularity of the term "Animal" by using the concept of "*animot*" to account for the multiplicity within the broad category "animal." Such an emphasis on difference would not only allow for Peterson to explore the multiplicity effaced under the category "animal," it would also allow for language that does not collapse categories but honors the differences of race, gender, sex.

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