

'OUR' 'COMMON' 'HUMANITY'

Joshua Williams

University of California, Berkeley

In his lecture 'Raceless Futures in Critical Black Thought,' Achille Mbembe argued that racism is a question of surface – or, better, a pathological insistence that surface can signify. He drew on Fanon to suggest that racist ideation arises out of the assumption that the epidermal, chief among many registers of surface appearance, accounts in some lucid way – or else can be *made* to account in some *useful* way – for social and political disjunctions (see also Fanon 2008). It follows that anti-racism should invest in what lies beneath, choosing depth over surface in order to contest the specious claims that racism advances and the many forms of violence that arise out of those claims.

One of the most powerful evocations of depth over and against surface that anti-racism has at its disposal is the claim that 'we' share a 'common' 'humanity.' The profusion of inverted commas here is admittedly a little absurd, but there seems no better way to indicate that, while this phrase has an enormously important philosophical and political history, it carries with it an array of problems that cannot go unmarked. What sort of community is envisioned by the first-person plural 'we?' What do 'we' within this community hold in 'common' and how is that holding-in-'common' socially and politically organized? And what is meant by 'humanity' and its corollaries: 'the human,' 'humanism,' 'humane?'

The anti-racist invocation of 'our' 'common' 'humanity' is evidence of a belief in – or more likely a longing for – a state of being that is deeper than and anterior to the imposition of race. If 'we' are all 'human' after all, then surely racism and racist violence are

illegitimate; it will not do for one 'human' to oppress, exploit, torture, kill another. Consider the following excerpt from Maisam Abumorr's extraordinarily powerful essay 'A question from Gaza: Am I not human enough?,' which was published online by *Al Jazeera* on 3 August 2014 after the latest round of Israeli incursions into Palestine:

I remember when I attended a three-day workshop on international law and human rights by the ICRC in Gaza, one of the attendees asked the trainer: 'What do I do to be qualified to obtain those human rights?' The trainer replied without much thought: 'Nothing. You should be a human, that's all'.

The question now is, what am I supposed to do/ be to be qualified as a human? As far as I can tell, I live like normal humans do. I love, I hate, I cry, I laugh, I make mistakes, I learn, I dream, I hurt, I get hurt, I love pizza, I watched *Titanic* 6 times, I have a crush on Bradly [*sic*] Cooper, I get sick, I sometimes tell lame jokes to which only I laugh and last time I checked myself in the mirror I very much looked human.

(Abumorr 2014)

Abumorr's enumeration of the qualities that mark her out as 'human' turns quickly from 'lov[ing], 'hat[ing], 'cry[ing]' to culturalist markers that seem calibrated to induce the empathy of Western readers: 'I love pizza, I watched *Titanic* 6 times, I have a crush on Bradly Cooper.' Surely this is tactical; Abumorr is working, after all, to destabilize the racist imposition of radical otherness on the surface of her body as a Palestinian woman, and to do that she's chosen to appeal to the 'common' 'humanity' that binds her to members of

the international community. 'Normal humans' everywhere live the way she does, pizza and all. Even so, note how her account of herself as a 'human being' rises inevitably to the epidermal surface as other qualifications exhaust themselves. Ultimately, the only surety she can offer is that when she checks in the mirror, she 'very much look[s]' – and yet is not, and yet can't be – 'human.'

And yet is not, and yet can't be. This is the political problem with 'our' 'common' 'humanity.' Being 'human' is a claim that must be adjudicated and can therefore be denied. Abumorr has submitted her credentials for 'human' status. Those of 'us' who are empowered to do so are free to assess whether or not she has enough in 'common' with 'us' to deserve 'humanity' and the privileges it confers. In part, as 'A question from Gaza' makes clear, this is because the concept of 'the human' has become so thoroughly entwined with 'human rights' in contemporary discourse. A right demands a guarantor. Whether that guarantor is the divine or the sovereign or the law – all of which, as Schmitt and others have intuited, are more or less politically equivalent (Schmitt 2005) – makes no difference. The politics of rights is the politics of an appeal to power for recognition and protection – and, to the extent that 'the human' has become subsumed into 'human rights,' 'human beings' have been reduced to legal 'persons' that are entitled to shelter in the arms of the state and its surrogates. And yet, of course, the right is not always honored, the sheltering arms not always opened. As Orwell would have it, all of 'us' are 'human' but some are more 'human' than others (Orwell 1946). Abumorr's insistence that she 'live[s] like normal humans do' seems unlikely to put a stop to the genocidal violence that makes and unmakes her world.

‘You should be a human, that’s all.’ There’s something deeper than the politics of rights there. The ideological substrate of the ICRC trainer’s blithe insistence on the ontological dimension (*‘be’*) of what might be called ‘mere humanity’ (*‘that’s all’*) is likely the easy scientism to which many of these conversations about the depth, as opposed to the surface, of ‘human’ being are inevitably reduced. The same scientism runs beneath Abumorr’s preoccupation with the ‘normal’ and her ultimately taxonomic insistence that she ‘very much look[s] human.’ Like an evolutionary biologist, she is constructing species on the basis of resemblance. ‘We’ are all ‘human’ because ‘we’ look and act and live like ‘humans;’ therefore, ‘we’ are all members of ‘the human species,’ ‘the human race.’ The most cursory appraisal of the history of evolutionary biology and racial science throws the surety of this proposition into radical doubt. In fact, the reason that subaltern groups need to *claim* ‘humanity’ is that it has so often been denied them by those who would seek to reduce their bodies and ways of living to (perfectly scientific) examples of non-, sub- and in-‘humanity.’ An anti-racism that seeks too hastily to embrace ‘our’ ‘common’ ‘humanity’ as the answer to the divisive claims of racist thinking might very easily slip into a new brand of scientism that takes at face value the species-making claims of contemporary biology and genomics. Here I am thinking of Ruha Benjamin’s lecture ‘Can the Subaltern Genome Code? Rethinking Race, Science and Subjectivity,’ which showed the extent to which contemporary genomics, rather than unmaking racial categories, naturalizes them under the unassailable sign of ‘our’ genetic code.

Of course, a politics can be built on unstable ground and still be useful, even vital. The demand that those in power recognize the ‘humanity’ of the oppressed and the mutuality of much of their ways of living is, and will

remain, an indispensable tool in anti-racist struggle. The alternative – disavowing ‘the human’ altogether as a category of political being – is almost impossible to imagine. Terms like ‘the post-human,’ (and ‘the post-racial’), especially when propagated by elite (white, straight, male) social theorists seem to miss the point – or, worse, to move the goal posts further down the field just as subaltern people seemed poised to fully achieve ‘humanity’ and perhaps ‘non-racism’ for the first time.

And yet. There are strands of ‘post-human’ thinking running through the work of feminist, queer and anti-racist thinkers – like Haraway, for instance (e.g. Haraway 2007) – that point toward other futures. Perhaps it is possible to enfold ‘the human’ in larger categories of being-in-the-world rather than disavowing it entirely. Clearly, this will require an approach to the question of nature and the animal – a question that is in fact always already there beneath the surface. In ‘A question from Gaza,’ after claiming that she ‘very much look[s] human,’ Abumorr goes on to write ‘The world accused me of terrorism just because I refused to be killed like an animal. But, even an animal will fight for its life’ (Abumorr 2014). This is an extraordinary rhetorical and conceptual reversal, the note of derision in Abumorr’s tone (*‘even an animal’*) aside. Like many others before her, Abumorr has discovered what seems to her to be a deeper layer of being that runs beneath her ‘humanity.’ Even an ‘animal’ – even a being that has not yet attained or can never attain the status of ‘human’ – ‘will fight for its life.’ Abumorr has not exactly *claimed* animality as the basis of her struggle for life under occupation, and yet she cannot deny it. It is deeper than she knew.

I want to suggest that invoking animality or beastliness as the grounds for the struggle against racism

“I want to suggest that invoking animality or beastliness as the grounds for the struggle against racism and other forms of oppression has a great many intriguing – though of course not uncomplicated – possibilities.”

and other forms of oppression has a great many intriguing – though of course not uncomplicated – possibilities. The first of these is probably obvious, given what I’ve already discussed. The assumption of beastliness, of beastly subjectivity, when – and this is crucial – it emerges organically out of the political life of oppressed people rather than being imposed on them from on high, allows those who would engage in an anti-racist politics to contest the very category of ‘the human’ and its racializing logic of inclusion and exclusion. Can the traumas of being denied ‘human’ ‘personhood’ over and over throughout history give way in oppressed communities to a positive embrace of the non-‘human’ that will empower new forms of political subjectivity not captive to Western ‘humanism’ and its attendant racisms?

This prospect leads me to a second possibility that emerges from a politics – or perhaps an anti-politics – of beastliness. I’ve suggested the term ‘anti-politics’ because, as Derrida in particular has noted, the beast is a priori beneath and outside of the law – or at least beneath and outside of that brand of Western law that is now hegemonic all over the world (Derrida 2011). A non-‘human’ animal cannot be a legal ‘person’ and therefore can only ever be an object, never a subject, in the eyes of the state. This political disposition is analogous – though not equivalent – to that of ‘human’ animals, like Abumorr, whose application for ‘humanity’ and its attendant rights has been denied, or at least is still under review as the bombs continue to

fall. Arendt's question of what 'human' rights are worth absent political rights seems especially salient here (Arendt 1968). I would suggest, however, that at least in this case her conclusion – that what is required is a more robust politics – leads in the wrong direction. If the law, the state, the economy fundamentally cannot take on board non-'human' beasts as subjects, then the solution to the oppression of non-'human' beasts is not to expand the law, the state, the economy with dimly paternalistic promises of protections and rights, but to imagine forms of social organization beyond the law, the state and the economy. The ethical response to what Agamben would call the production of 'bare life' necessarily entails this type of (re-)imagining (Agamben 1998). A beastly anti-racism would be an anti-politics of anti-racism precisely insofar as it would demand the dismantling of political structures that are premised on the differential calculus of 'human' and non-'human:' the continual, murderous distinction between those whose lives are worth defending and those who are disposable.

The last possibility inherent in the assumption of beastliness as the touchstone of struggle against racism and other forms of oppression that I will mention here is broader still. Now that global ecological catastrophe is considerably more than an alarmist fantasy, thinking across species lines is more urgent than ever – at least if any of 'us' beasts are to survive. Here I think even the historically useful distinction between non-'human' and 'human' animals begins to break down. In the Anthropocene, all 'animals will fight for [their lives].' Imagining ways of living together, of bridging formerly unbridgeable differences in the interests of life, will be the most fundamental task of this troubled age. This is not to say that all social and political struggles are equivalent, or even that they are tactically similar. But

they are – they must be – struggles for life. It is our common task, perhaps now finally without inverted commas, to determine what that means.

REFERENCES

- Abumorr, Maisam. "A Question from Gaza: Am I Not Human Enough?" *Al Jazeera*. 3 Aug. 2014. Web. Accessed 13 Oct. 2014.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.
- Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. San Diego: Harvest Books, 1968.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume I*. Ed. Geoffrey Bennington and Peggy Kamuf. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2011.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press, 2008.
- Haraway, Donna J. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.
- Orwell, George. *Animal Farm*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1946.
- Schmitt, Carl. *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Trans. George Schwab. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.