

Call for Papers—Special Issue of *American Literature*:

## **The Plantation, the Post-Plantation, and the Afterlives of Slavery**

This special issue focuses on the plantation, the post-plantation, and the afterlives of slavery to consider how we have inherited and continue to be structured by the plantation form. This reconsideration of the plantation form heeds recent calls to reconceptualize notions of the human in relation to colonial plantation slavery to challenge the omission of race in much current theory of posthumanism, biopolitics, and bare life. As Alexander Weheliye and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson note, Giorgio Agamben's state of exception and bare life and Michel Foucault's biopolitics—arguably the predominant critical frameworks for analyzing state violence and inequality as constituent aspects of democratic formation—neglect the history and legacy of racialization, colonialism, and slavery. We invite essays that consider the biopolitics of the plantation form and its legacies in order to question modernity's human exceptionalism and the hierarchies of violent inequality it supports.

The Enlightenment conception of “Man” as a rational, conscious individual produced the subject of human rights and democratic citizenship; however, this ostensibly universal category in fact distinguished “Man” from those considered irrational, primitive, and ignorant of the rule of law—including women, blacks, and other nonwhite peoples. In the 1990s a burgeoning posthumanism critiqued the modern conception of the human as a historically contingent construct rather than transcendent truth (Donna Haraway's “cyborg,” N. Katherine Hayles's “virtual body,” and Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela's “autopoiesis”). This line of inquiry is usually traced to poststructuralist critiques of epistemological certainty, but anti- and postcolonial writers

such as Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, and later Sylvia Wynter had since the midcentury noted that the category of the human is circumscribed by its foundational role in the modern Enlightenment project that gave rise to colonial slavery. This other posthumanist genealogy provides a crucial corrective to posthumanism's continued investment in Western rationality and hierarchies of knowledge. With a focus on the plantation form, we ask how a black posthumanism transforms concepts of biopolitics and bare life to explain "how particular populations are rendered vulnerable to processes of death and devaluation over and against other populations, in ways that palimpsestically register older modalities of racialized death but also exceed them" (Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick A. Ferguson, eds., introduction to *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization*. Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press [2011], 1–2). How does a racially aware posthumanism illuminate what we mean by and why it's still necessary to say that Black Lives Matter?

Recent work in what we might call a black posthumanism has sought less to restore humanity to those rendered not quite human than to transform the category from within. For posthumous rehabilitation to full humanity does not help us recover the modes of being of those rendered bare life by the necropolitics of colonial plantation slavery. Rather, as Weheliye asks, "How might we go about thinking and living enfleshment otherwise so as to usher in different genres of the human?" (*Habeus Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press [2014], 2–3). Weheliye suggests that flesh, rather than subjectivity, provides a substrate for the being of the enslaved: "The flesh, rather than displacing bare life or civil death, excavates the social (after)life of these categories: it

represents racializing assemblages of subjection that can never annihilate the lines of flight, freedom, dreams, practices of liberation, and possibilities of other worlds” (2). Monique Allewaert also conceives of a new genre of the human, the “parahuman,” whose unbounded, interpenetrated body responds to slavery’s dehumanizing forces by combining with the plant, insect, and animal lives in the American tropics. What other genres of the human might we discover?

This recent work in black posthumanism marks a critical shift from analyzing processes of racialization (that is, discovering what ideological/economic/discursive structures enabled the West to enslave/colonize/exterminate black and colonized indigenous folk) to instead uncovering the response, experience, agency, and resistance of the oppressed. This search for minoritarian agency explains in part the deployment of new critical methods of ecocriticism, disability, and animal studies, often within the geographic frame of the “American tropics,” for analyzing slavery, colonialism, and imperialism. This approach might constitute a new turn in transnational American studies, which in its earlier phase focused more on the discursive structures of US imperialism than on the forms of resistance and self-making devised by the colonized and enslaved. It signals a shift in postcolonialism as well, away from the Fanonian psychoanalytic subject and the preoccupation with melancholia, which arguably provide only ambivalent possibilities of representing subaltern agency. However, this drive to theorize minoritarian agency poses a challenge not least because we are tempted to make broad claims based on limited archival evidence for (non)humans as autonomous, self-aware agents engaged in conscious resistance. Despite this challenge, the new critical assemblage formulates the question of agency through a “flow of knowledge, archives,

and geographic spaces” that reflects the recent expansion of “transnational and postnational American studies” to include the Caribbean, often sidelined within Latino/a or American studies (Licia Fiol-Matta and Macarena Gómez-Barris, “Introduction: *Las Américas Quarterly*.” *American Quarterly* 66, no. 3 [2014]: 493, 494).

We invite papers that rethink the human in relation to the necropolitics and biopolitics of plantation slavery. We ask, what are the links between Western humanism and racialization in the context of the conditions and legacies of plantation slavery? Essays might consider (non)human modes of being and critique orders of knowledge and value from any place within the full geographic and temporal range of American literary studies, ranging in time from the period of plantation slavery spanning the sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries to the postslavery, postcolonial periods of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries to the neoliberal present. We imagine the plantation and its reiterations as a geographical space, site, or island of biopower; as a “camp” or state of exception; and as a crossroads or border zone delimiting binaries between death/life, slave/free, nonhuman/human, labor/leisure, production/consumption, and bare life/political life. Papers might consider the plantation as a form, logic, and technology by which inequalities of power, personhood, and value are realized. How does the plantation form persist or permutate the postcolonial, neoliberal, carceral, postnational, postracial state?

Submissions of 11,000 words or less (including endnotes and references) should be submitted electronically at [www.editorialmanager.com/al/default.asp](http://www.editorialmanager.com/al/default.asp) by October 31, 2017. When choosing a submission type, select “Submission-Special Issue-Plantation.” For assistance with the submission process, please contact the office of *American*

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