Bestial traces: race, sexuality, animality

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BOOK REVIEW


In *Bestial traces*, Christopher Peterson argues against the ‘humanist presumptions’ of a hierarchical divide between *human* animals and *non-human* animals, analysing the ways in which it has enabled the bestialization (seen as *deshumanization*) of racial others and sexuality. Thus an important premise of Peterson’s work is the idea that the failure to dismantle the human/animal divide has entrenched antidiscriminatory politics (such as anti-racism) to a dialectic of acknowledging and refusal. The author, engaging with Jacques Derrida’s notions of ‘unconditional hospitality’ and ‘the democracy to come’, proposes the *(dis)avowal of disavowal* (10–11) as an approach that seeks to ameliorate the negative effect of the exclusion/discrimination inherent to our relation to alterity, that is, an approach ‘committed to a less violent approach toward alterity’ (16).

The book unfolds this argument in four chapters devoted to the analysis of several literary texts, written in different historical contexts and therefore they bring about different intertwined meanings of race, sexuality and animality. Chapters 1 and 2 focus on the construction of blackness’ sub-humanity/animality and its links to the discussion on slavery and slaves’ agency; the American literary texts analysed cover the period between mid-nineteenth century to mid-twentieth century: Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Murders in The Rue Morgue*, Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and Joel Chandler Harris’s *Uncle Remus Tales*. Chapters 2 and 3 centre more on the precariousness of whiteness (and its boundaries) as an unmarked race (and mainly of heterosexual males’ whiteness) and their imbrications to (socially censured) sexuality and sexual desire in contemporary post-*Jim Crow* America and post-apartheid South Africa through a reading of Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain* and J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*.

Although Peterson’s analysis engages mainly with approaches from literature and philosophy scholarship, I think the book raises a series of crucial issues that will be of interest to a broader academic audience. I will highlight three important contributions to contemporary discussions on race, racism and sexuality: (1) to challenge the understanding of race and racism that rests on a *fetichization* of colour and biological essentialism, bringing about a conceptualization that interrelates race to the contours of political belonging; (2) to disrupt the commonly accepted divide between humanity and sub-humanity that pervades the discussion on racial and sexual alterity, and its correlated humanist presumption of human *dignity* as human *superiority*; (3) to confront the contemporary post-racial discourse as a triumphalist idea of the desired and eventually achieved reduction of race to a non-value notion.

However, the book does not depart from a common tendency among Eurocentric philosophical approaches to display trans-historical conceptualizations and interpretations. This trans-historicity enables the transcending of the specific historical contours of race as a political phenomenon and its relationship with sexuality and animality in order
to provide what I regard as a general/universal ontology of ‘our being in the world with others’ (21). This trans-historicity is manifest in the author’s understanding of race/racism and his critique to ‘postracism’. Peterson’s disregard of the specific historical conditions that made possible the production of a racial ontology of the world – that is, the colonial/modem project since the end of the 15th century – has relevant epistemological and political consequences. Accordingly, the author’s critique to Kwame Anthony Appiah’s assertion of the need to abandon race in the name of reason is argued under the consideration that ‘we cannot give up race because we cannot relinquish our conflicted attitudes toward difference’ (15); this statement conveys an idea of race as a sort of trans-historical notion that describes the always exclusionary and violent foundations/effects of social formations based on ‘similarity and resemblance’ that we are ‘unable’ to abandon. In brief, we believe in race because we base our sense of belonging in kinship.

The consequence of this approach is to conflate a description of ‘the discrimination that marks all social relations’ (19) that it is already a narrative produced from a privileged position, with a general, neutral description of the nature of social formations based on kinship. This approach neutralizes power via the production of symmetries that conceals specific histories embedded in asymmetrical relations of power. For instance, in the analysis of Coetzee’s Disgrace, the animalization of David Lurie’s sexuality and his ‘affaire’ with a student, is considered ‘similar to the bestialization of Bigger Thomas in Native Son’ (123); in the section focused on Roth’s The Human Stain, the ‘Francophobic’ portray of one the characters (Delphine) is read as ‘the racialization of her Frenchness’, a ‘“racial” otherness’ that can be traced in her handwriting (103). These examples show the depoliticization effects of a deshistoricized notion of race that subverts the understanding of its emergence and current logics, undermining the potential of the author’s discussion of democracy, inclusivity and postracialism. Instead of a critique of the politics of inclusivity that considers its relation to the coloniality of contemporary liberal democracies, the discussion becomes a declaration of a foundationalist theory of social formations: ‘an originary violence’ (100) that pervades ‘any mode of belonging whose intelligibility as such requires the exclusion of some other(s)’ (175, note 60).

Overall, this is an interesting study that needed more engagement with the historical and geopolitical conditions of possibility of the dialectics and issues it proposes to dismantle.

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