Great Chains in the Atlantic World

Scientific racism in the long eighteenth century, although formed in the intellectual context of natural history and taxonomy, is, above all, an ideology conveniently justifying an economic event (the intensification of the Atlantic slave trade) and depends, morally, on the dehumanization of people based on the construct “race.” Christopher Michael Blakley’s Empire of Brutality approaches dehumanization from a fresh perspective, in the broader context of human and nonhuman beings from the castle trade to the colonies.

Blakley’s prologue and epilogue sandwich a collection of chapters that address different aspects of human-animal relations or networks on both ends of the Atlantic slave trade, with the voices of the enslaved variously describing dehumanization from their points of view. The prologue sets the scene with a 1723 letter to the bishop of London from a community of enslaved mixed-race Christians in the colony of Virginia protesting being treated as animals, presenting the problematic of human-animal hierarchies and the place(s) of the enslaved in these structures. The theoretical literature on this is given a thorough examination in the substantial introduction. Although not explicitly mentioned, the specter of the early modern Great Chain of Being hovers in the wings as it transmogrifies into the scientific racism that mars Enlightenment thought. Blakley makes it clear that considering the scope of this work, which encompasses geographic locations in West Africa, England, the Anglophone Caribbean, and North America, over a considerable time span, the research is presented not as a chronological history but rather as a collection of case studies and themes, offering a montage of various human-animal (sociological, economic, theoretical)
networks. The bibliography supporting this, which is quite interdisciplinary, is worth a detailed look.

Chapter 1, “Noe Booges, Noe Slaves: Animals in the Castle Trade of West Africa,” a revision of Blakley’s opening dissertation chapter as well as a published article, examines the use of animals, living or dead, as tokens of exchange (economic, diplomatic, cultural), even as human captives became tokens themselves in a global economic network from South Asia and Europe, through Africa, to the Americas.[1] Animal bodies and products circulated between continents: cowry shells (called “booges” in seventeenth-century British parlance), preferably small ones from the East Indies, functioned as money for several communities on the Gold Coast, exchanged for captives from local kingdoms; sheep from Europe were offered as gifts to local authorities for ceremonial sacrifices; and return trade of exotic pets for European elites, sort of analogous to human cargo, was prevalent. Blakley also mentions a counterpoint to this in the destructive power of various vermin, worms that attacked the slavers and their enslaved charges and rats that attacked foodstuffs and trade items. This addition rounds out a specifically environmental history of the sites of exchange.

The next chapter, “Showing Their Slaves How to Collect: Enslaved People and the Origins of Early Modern Science,” examines the roles of enslaved people in realizing the colonial and natural philosophic ambitions of their colonial enslavers, who sought entrée into scientific circles in addition to economic status, at both ends of the Middle Passage. Blakley presents the relationship of the Royal Africa Society and the Royal Society of London and its colonial correspondents; the work done by the enslaved for the natural historians among the settlers and plantation owners; and the resulting contributions of this work to European intellectual life, including Hans Sloane’s collections in England and Carl Linnaeus’s foundation of modern taxonomy, even as the enslaved are categorized by Enlightenment taxonomic hierarchies as subhuman. Blakley describes clergymen who strove to become both Virginia slaveholders and correspondents with the Fellows of the Royal Society (FRS). Naturalists, such as James Petiver FRS, collected samples from collaborators in West Africa and the Americas. African samples came from slave traders who acquired them as gifts or gathered them with the help of their enslaved servants. Plantation owners likewise sent specimens to London. Blakley surmises that most of the labor was done by slaves, and, except for some very rare instances, this labor was anonymous. The enslaved functioned as extensions of either the white owner’s identity or that of the plantation enterprise, as we see in the subsequent chapter.

The third chapter, “We Flesh Belong to Buckra: Human-Animal Labor on American Plantations,” looks at enslaved people and animals as the physical means of production, metaphoric equals, and equally subject to brutal treatment. Slaves and animals have an equivalency imposed on them in this system through means of diet, housing, punishment, and rhetoric. In other words, this chapter explores the actual system of the British plantation empire and the structure of enslavement, which can be broken down into four aspects: working, eating, excreting, and ownership by means of dehumanization. “To fully dispossess enslaved people of their bodies through labor, diet, even waste ... enslavers enacted bodily dispossession by enmeshing the lives of the enslaved with those of animals” (p. 88). These four things are themselves entangled.

The early modern agricultural enterprise employed energy delivered by a marriage of human and animal labor. On the plantation, certain tasks were accomplished by enslaved men, women, and children alone, while others with the driving or leading of draft animals by enslaved drivers and feeders. The human-animal machine did everything from preparing the soil to hauling the product. Brutal toil was considered appropriate to beasts and, in the ideology of the enslavers, a hu-
man population differentiated by race, one that was commonly likened to (other) animals. Blakley also makes note that the enslavers talked in terms of “increase” in stock equally about enslaved people and livestock, about breeding in the colonies, and about importing labor and the vessels of the Middle Passage that carried both.

Because of this racially diminished status (equivalency to animals) and because of economic considerations, the food of the enslaved was often the same stuff as the fodder of the working animals, mostly a grain-based diet. Economics and, Blakley suggests, the programmatic breaking of the wills of the enslaved led to malnutrition as a feature of plantation life. The interchangeability of sub-Saharan Africans and the horses and oxen with whom they worked was marked by food sources, such as sorghum brought from Africa, which also became an approved animal feed. Grain varieties from Europe and American maize were also considered equally suitable to people and livestock, who, in this harsh economy, teetered on the brink of starvation together to ensure profits. This is not to say there wasn’t resistance. Cooking, hunting and fishing, some gardening, and “accidental” slaughter (as seen in chapter 4) supplemented the diets of enslaved humans. Grain varieties from Europe and American maize were also considered equally suitable to people and livestock, who, in this harsh economy, teetered on the brink of starvation together to ensure profits. This is not to say there wasn’t resistance. Cooking, hunting and fishing, some gardening, and “accidental” slaughter (as seen in chapter 4) supplemented the diets of enslaved humans. However, “famine hunger” also drove people to eating diseased animal cadavers and engaging in “dirt eating” (p. 104). Likewise, the enslavers experimented with diet, doing such things as bringing in African species (such as rice)—what Blakley characterizes as amelioration rather than humanitarianism—and actually managing the stock, in their terms.

The other side of dietary experiment and management in the tight economy of the plantation was the use of dung to revive the depleted soil left behind by highly extractive crops. And in many instances, besides carrying animal manure and digging up mineral fertilizer (marl), back-breaking tasks on their own, the enslaved produced and carried human waste to be mixed with the animal waste in the fields of sugar and tobacco. For the most part, there was an equivalency here as with food and fodder. The equation is an instance of agricultural “improvement” (as part of the cult of improvement of the eighteenth century).[2] Better foodstuff yielded better fertilizer from man or beast. The understanding of “improvement of the dung” is probably best illustrated by a passage Blakley quotes from Samuel Martin’s 1750 manual: “a Caribbean planter intending ‘to grow rich with ease, must be a good oeconomist; must feed his negroes with the most wholesome food, sufficient to preserve them in health and vigor.’ Furthermore, ‘it is nature’s economy so to fructify the soil by the growth of yams, plantains, and potatoes, as to the yield better harvests of sugar by that very means’” (pp. 108-9).[3] Circumlocution leaves out direct mention of the dung.[4]

Finally, to draw the threads of this chapter together, Blakley looks at various inventories of plantations. Examples show humans listed along with animals they were responsible for, linking human and animal into functional members of the plantation operation. The documents around ownership “socially and legally reinforced the commodification of the human captives by equating them with livestock and abstracting a life into a single entry in a ledger book, inventory, or will” (p. 114). Economic assessments of the business, for example, “increase” or “decrease” of stock and roles played by slaves and draft animals, echo the “nerves and sinews” imagery discussed by Martin in his essay (mentioned also at the head of this chapter), the plantation forming a material extension of the planter’s body.

The next two chapters unbundle and significantly rework a discussion at the end Blakley’s dissertation considering agency (and rebellion) of the enslaved in this human-animal context. Chapter 4, “By One Barbarity or Another: Sabotage, Slave Resistance, and Animals,” addresses animal abuse as labor action. Blakley presents us with a case
study of the mid-eighteenth-century struggle between Virginia planter Landon Carter and Manuel, one of Carter’s enslaved plowmen. Manuel began, in 1766, to drive animals into ditches or mud on occasion, destroying what was to Carter valuable farm equipment, and later drew others on Carter’s plantation into covert labor action. This opens up the discussion of violence against the animal means of production by resistant slaves in the Atlantic world, convenient accidents arranged by otherwise powerless actors, an assertion of humanity in an inhuman position—“a Black subaltern environmental consciousness” (p. 119). This relates to the careers of escaped slaves of the next chapter and to voiced resistance examined in the epilogue below.

Chapter 5, “She Has Bragg’d: Fugitives, Animals, and the Limits of Slavery,” looks at horse theft and escape. The 1755 escape of Kate, an enslaved woman in Maryland, is the focus. Kate fled, and remained fugitive, on horseback. Horse theft, often of animals that were the charges of plantation slaves, features prominently in advertisements concerning escaped slaves. This literature in the colonial press is very telling of the status of enslaved and indentured people, as well as their value in comparison to livestock (all too similarly). But as much as it paints a portrait of dehumanization, Blakley also emphasizes the contrasting agency of the fugitive, as they stole the very means that the “centauric” owners and overseers used to oppress them (p. 129).

The epilogue tries to tell the story from the other side. First, noting the language of white indentured servants, who also complained of being treated like animals, Blakley makes pains to emphasize the radical distinction between the legal statuses of contractual indentured servants and chattel slaves (there are political concerns outside of the text that make this worth doing). There is plenty of animalization to go around, even reversal of the trope by some Black writers, calling enslavers “animals.” Setting aside European servant reportage and narratives from the pens of abolitionists, Blakley ties up the themes of dehumanization and hierarchy first articulated in the introduction through three Black (or nominally Black) voices of the long Enlightenment. After noting in passing the genre of slave narrative, published mostly in England in the intellectual milieu of the British anti-slavery movement, the author points to one formerly enslaved British author, Quobna Ottobah Cuguano (1787), as a peculiarly (in this context) philosophical critic of the racism we see in polygenist authors like Immanuel Kant, David Hume, Edward Long, and Thomas Jefferson (who appears throughout this book in this context), a tradition where “race” implies “species” (evoking the medieval Great Chain of Being). Cuguano’s philosophical argument also touches on Christian morals and the tension between the enslaved being Christian humans (see the letter in the prologue) and the treatment of such moral beings as domestic animals like dogs. The second “Black” voice is the anonymous “A Slave” who wrote to Jefferson in 1808, a writer whose resistance to animalization was to invert that structure, dehumanizing the dehumanizers, as it were, emphasizing “inhuman treatment,” while noting the failure of the United States as a Christian nation in achieving liberty for all, a theme echoing the arguments of other enslaved and formerly enslaved informants of the late eighteenth century, particularly clergyman Lemuel Haynes, who decried potential citizens being likened to “Beasts of the Field” (p. 146). The narrative of Mary Prince (1831) represents the trauma of slavery in the Atlantic and Caribbean Islands, as well as England. Again, the language of animalization characterizes the experience of the memoirist, for example, the auction block, transportation, violence, and disruption of any semblance of human family life. Blakley returns to the 1723 Virginia letter and to the unique legal status of Black people in the Atlantic world. Nevertheless, these actors would resist “a legal regime that equated people of African
descent with animal chattel,” intent on reducing them to “a doglike state” (pp. 149-50).

There is a lot going on in Empire of Brutality, and it would be unfair to criticize the work for what is left out, because it quite literally covers a lot of territory. I mention the Great Chain of Being largely because it does not come into Blakley’s argument explicitly the way it does in works quoted, like those of David Livingstone Smith (Making Monsters: The Uncanny Power of Dehumanization [2021]), in allusions in eighteenth-century sources like Jefferson’s or Cuguano’s writings, or in the period literature of taxonomy and scientific racism. But this metaphor is instead set aside to examine relationships to actual animals in an effort to make the analysis distinctly environmental. There is also a hint of a theological thread in dehumanization related to this hierarchical concept that deserves another look, but that might be another book.

Notes


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