


KEYWORD

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Abstract

Recent disruptions in technology, geopolitics, and the environment have contested what it means to be human, a source of social and political anxiety about the future. Taking inspiration from African and African diaspora writers and scholars, Lee attends to theories of the human that emerge from contemporary experiences on the African continent. The essay provides a countercanon by centering debates about the human and their attendant attempts to transcend it (more-than-human, posthuman) in African experiences and knowledges. Doing so offers alternative conceptions of human–nonhuman relations that unravel the co-imbrication of colonialism, capitalism, and anti-Black racism that undergird the modern condition.

Resumo

As recentes conturbações tecnológicas, geopolíticas e ambientais puseram em causa o significado de se ser humano, o que provoca ansiedade social e política em relação ao futuro. Inspirando-se em escritores e académicos africanos e da diáspora africana, Lee debruça-se sobre as teorias do humano nascidas das experiências contemporâneas no continente africano. Ao centrar os debates acerca do humano e suas tentativas de o transcender (“mais que humano”, “pós-humano”) nas experiências e nos conhecimentos africanos, este ensaio propõe um contracânone. Assim, geram-se concepções alternativas das relações entre o humano e o não-humano, as quais revelam a estreita correlação entre colonialismo, capitalismo e racismo antinegro que subjaz à condição moderna.

Résumé

Les récentes perturbations technologiques, géopolitiques et environnementales ont mis en doute ce que signifie être humain, une source d’anxiété sociale et politique quant à l’avenir. Lee, en se basant sur des écrivains et des universitaires africains ainsi que sur la diaspora africaine, s’intéresse aux théories de l’humain qui émergent des expériences

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contemporaines sur le continent africain. L'essai propose un contre-canon en mettant en avant les débats sur l'humain et les tentatives de le transcender (plus qu'humain, post-humain) dans les expériences et les savoirs africains. Par conséquent, il propose des conceptions alternatives des relations entre humains et non-humains qui démêlent l'imbrication du colonialisme, du capitalisme et du racisme anti-Noirs qui sous-tend la condition moderne.

Keywords: more-than-human; multispecies ethnography; posthuman; humanism; digital

Introduction

At first glance, the image in [Figure 1](#)—which circulated widely on social media in 2019—recalls a history of Africans in the Americas making claims on their belonging to humanity. In the photograph, a group of West Papuan activists held up signs accompanied by drawings of monkey faces that declared “I’m NOT MONKEY,” to protest a slur often used by settler Indonesians for darker-skinned West Papuans. The protesters were also inspired by the global Black Lives Matter movement and saw many parallels between the injustices they faced as a racially marked minority in Indonesia and the struggles against anti-Black racism (Chao 2021).

One striking element about the protest was the refusal to be seen or treated as nonhuman animals. On the one hand, declaring “I’m NOT MONKEY” continues a tradition of protest by abolitionist and Black civil rights movements in the Americas. Refusing dehumanization, these protest signs recalled the Wedgwood anti-slavery medallion from 1787, which depicted a chained Black man kneeling with the inscribed words, “Am I Not a Man and a Brother?”¹ It also recalled protest signs wielded by marchers supporting a 1968 sanitation workers’ strike in Memphis, Tennessee. Declaring “I am a man,” these signs affirmed one’s belonging



Figure 1. West Papuan activists protesting in Jakarta, Indonesia in August 2019 with signs that read “I’m NOT MONKEY.” Source: <https://twitter.com/febprofirdaus/status/1164447634796318720>.

to humanity, underscoring the respect and dignity demanded by Black sanitation workers (Figure 2).

On the other hand, rather than identify with being human, the West Papuan signs insist on their holders' difference from monkeys, denying their dehumanization into a simian species. I seize upon this difference between one claim—demanding inclusion in a universal humanity (“I am human”)—and the other—protesting dehumanization (“I’m not monkey”)—as a generative moment for thinking more deeply about a persistent tension in conversations about the human in African and African diasporic thinking. Demands for inclusion in a universal humanity, which scholars have traced to abolitionist struggles against slavery, gradually gave way to articulations of alternative understandings of the human. This latter point was soon recognized as an anti-colonial humanism that would spark global movements to free ourselves from European imperial governance and thought. Writing in 1961, Frantz Fanon called on all colonized peoples to “invent a man in full, something which Europe has been incapable of achieving” (2004, 236). He charged that European humanism was vacuous and steeped in hypocrisy; it promised equality, progress, and solidarity only to violate those very values when it came to oppressing people deemed lesser than human. Fanon (2008, Chapter 5) noted how Blacks were cast as nonhuman animals, whereas Aimé Césaire (2000, 42) referred to colonization as “thingification.”

The emergence of an anti-colonial humanism transformed social theory. The Algerian revolution, in which Fanon fought on the side of Algerian independence, was crucial to the formation of poststructural thought. It sparked critical analyses of imperial and racial formations of the human, ushering in an anti-humanism that saw the human as a prejudiced construction of liberal



Figure 2. Sanitation workers on strike in Memphis, Tennessee. Ernest C. Withers, 1968. Source: Photograph. The Museum of Fine Arts Houston.

Enlightenment ideals (Braidotti 2013, 16–26). When Michel Foucault (2007, 422) wrote in *The Order of Things* that “man is an invention of recent date,” the phrase summarily captured the many interlocking systems of knowledges that construct an ethnocentric form of the human, one that excluded women, queer people, people with disabilities, and communities of color. Newer political movements and writings were inspired to embrace a more pluralist humanism, recovering histories and reclaiming slave rebellions, indigenous states, trade unions, and anti-colonial organizing as central players in the production of the modern world and our understandings of being human.

In the words of Sylvia Wynter (2003), “Man”—understood as the all-knowing figure of the European Enlightenment—has always been “overrepresented” as a historical actor with epistemological dominance. Therefore, knowledge of the world was skewed in favor of the experiences and perspectives of white European men, whose bodies and thoughts assumed the foundations of the world’s knowledge systems. In her calls to move beyond “Man,” Wynter wanted to replace Man with a theory of the Human. Abolitionist and anti-colonial thinkers did not merely challenge the cultural and political dominance of European humanism but sought after different conceptions of the human anchored in places and thought systems that were overlooked, erased, or marginalized by Euro-American hegemony.

The search for new understandings of the human would quickly become tenuous. Subsequent developments in computing, medical and genetic biotechnologies, and climate change compelled scholars to reevaluate what it is to be human. Before anyone could settle on a definition of the human, social, technological, and ecological disruptions sparked debates about moving beyond the human. Technologists began talking about transhumanism, which refers to efforts for transcending and enhancing the human through scientific and technological means. These efforts to surpass human biological and cognitive limitations are situated within an ascendant and larger set of ideas called posthumanism. Generally, posthumanism refers to the realization that humans are reliant on, and therefore inextricably bound with, different classes of living and nonliving entities, including animals, plants, microbes, aliens, technologies, rocks, air, and their molecular vibrations (see Braidotti 2013; Wolfe 2010).²

Scholars who are attentive to race remained skeptical about attempts to transcend the human, pointing out how they leave existing racial categories and inequities unquestioned. Assisted reproductive technologies, for example, scramble normative ideas about human kinship and genealogy (Franklin 2013), but they also reinforce racial imaginaries of privilege and belonging (Moll 2019). Discussions about the environment draw attention to humans’ responsibility for climate change, but they still obscure the unequal burden carried by marginalized communities in Africa who must live with toxicity and environmental disasters (Hecht 2018; Yusoff 2018). New technologies such as conversational artificial intelligence (AI), mediated by onscreen chatbots or physical robotics, claim to be postracial, but these innovations often assume whiteness as a universal marker for the human while relying on human labor and mineral extraction from Africa to operate its systems (Birhane 2020; Greene 2016; Smith 2011).

This essay tries to confront these seemingly irreconcilable tensions in understanding the human. Indeed, such tensions are probably part and parcel of the definition of human. In a book dedicated to the same keyword, its authors struggled to offer a definition for “Human” (Rees and Sleight 2020). They show instead that meanings of the human emerge from contested negotiations with potentially nonhuman others, constantly slipping away from stable or uniform definitions. They therefore explore how human is understood alongside and against such categories as beasts, hominins, machines, and aliens (extraterrestrial and immigrant). Apes, AI chatbots, and extraterrestrial life, the authors argue, are roped in to expand or constrict who deserves the appellation human. Humanity, then, is constantly being (re)defined by whom it includes, a definitional quality that those in power—legal experts, lawyers, scientists, religious authorities, political leaders, and scholars—confer onto others in a certain time and place. Shifting definitions of the human do not challenge understandings of the human so much as they expose their cultural and political contingencies.

I propose that we look to African critiques of the human as an analytical framework for tracking how differences between the human, subhuman, and nonhuman are made and contested. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson and others note that contestations of the human frequently reveal the appropriation of Blackness by humanistic discourses to define the limits and limitations of humanity (Jackson 2020; Wilderson 2020, Chapter 5). Following Jackson (2020) and Weheliye (2014, 8), I treat the human as “a heuristic model and not an ontological fait accompli.” This means carefully tracing how African and diasporic thought expose the constellations of power that delimit certain meanings of the category human. These works bring an awareness to the category’s own shifting boundaries and, in doing so, suggest several ways for contesting the knowledges and institutions that determine them.

This essay pays particular attention to moments where thinkers and community activists challenge ideas about the human, sometimes through demands for inclusion in a universal category, sometimes through new propositions for defining the human, and sometimes by (dis)avowing identification with the human. Despite their varied positions, they collectively and usefully mobilize definitions of the human as part of larger social struggles that challenge particular configurations of power, knowledge, and politics. By contesting and therefore calling out these shifting evolutionary, genetic, historical, social theoretical, and racial boundaries that have defined some as more human than others, these critiques figure the human not as merely a liberal category of belonging in which inclusion is sought, but as a theoretical framework for articulating political visions.

My contribution here is not to provide an overview of indigenous African philosophy about humanism in relation to the nonhuman, a topic that many others have explored in sophisticated detail, particularly as it relates to *ubuntu* or *utu* (Horsthemke 2015; Ramose 2009; Rettová 2023). Because the human is always relational to an Other (Oduor 2021), many of these authors have also extended the concept of *ubuntu* to other animals, plants, and the environment. Rather, and to paraphrase Archie Mafeje, I describe this essay as a

search for endogenous forms of thinking about the human rather than a pursuit for indigeneity or alterity (Adesina 2021). My own ethnographic research in East Africa, which examined how people thought about and cultivated relations with rodents through scientific and humanitarian research projects, confronted me with a challenge to assemble a theoretical foundation in humanism that did not center the European Enlightenment. This essay is a result of that effort, in which I propose a countercanon for thinking about the human drawn from African and African diasporic experiences (see also Matory 2018).

Finally, my choice to begin this essay with the image of a West Papuan protest invites questions about the boundaries of African studies and draws attention to the globalization of Black and African thought. Readers of Achille Mbembe's *Critique of Black Reason* (2017, 5–6) would be right to interpret the West Papuan protest as one instance of “the becoming Black of the world.” By this phrase, Mbembe intends to highlight how historical experiences of enslaved and colonized Africans may usefully serve as critical analytical tools for tracking the planetary effects of a neoliberal capitalism turbocharged by technological and environmental engineering. In the context of West Papua, “becoming Black of the world” would refer to the settler-colonial extractivism and the dispossession of land and freedom experienced by West Papuans.

However, this is only one half of the whole story I wish to tell. “Becoming Black of the world” may also refer to the rich, universalizing theoretical grounds based on African and diasporic contexts, from which all scholars can draw upon in their work. As Paul Gilroy (2009) argues, Black rebellions and intellectual interventions into liberal European discussions about justice and equality have played an integral role in the formation of what we today recognize as human rights.³ Gilroy's “different genealogy” (2009, 6) of human rights inspires me to ask after a different genealogy of a universal human centered in Black and African thought. West Papuan activists who were inspired by the grammar and strategy of Black Lives Matter protests reveal the critical leverage afforded by thinking about the human from Africa.

Beyond the littorals of the Atlantic Ocean, Black thought has long inspired movements and dreams of a common language for global justice, stretching from the Indian Ocean all the way to the Western Pacific.⁴ This essay charts new points of reference for scholars in and beyond Africa to participate in these ensuing debates about the place of the human at a time of global predicament. After a section that revisits anti-colonial definitions of the human, I discuss scholarship about relationships with nonhuman animals from Africa and the diaspora and show how they challenge and extend the “more-than-human” turn in the social sciences. I then steer through critical scholarship about digital practices as examples of African contestations of an increasingly technological human. Most of the material I reference is in English and Kiswahili, but I have tried to include ideas from Lusophone and Francophone Africa as well as West African languages and Arabic-speaking North Africa.

“A New Man”

The very category of the human may not be understood outside of the history of racism, slavery, and colonialism. Nevertheless, African and Black efforts have gone beyond these restrictions in what Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Patricia Pinky Ndlovu (2021, 26) describe as “decolonial self-definition and self-reconstitution,” which include, among others, *Négritude*, Ethiopianism, African Personality, Afrocentricity, and the African Renaissance. Across these attempts to redefine the human, the African continent plays a central role. It serves as an indispensable place for generating debates about the human, whether as the “cradle of humanity” in evolutionary science, as a source of indigenous philosophies of humanism (such as *ubuntu*), or as a place for composing critiques of the human, such as those forged through anti-colonial struggles. Crucially, critiques of the human from Africa have transformed how we in the humanities and social sciences have understood humanity.

The twentieth century saw several varied attempts at redefining the human from African contexts, often as a retort to white supremacy and colonization. “We must look elsewhere beside Europe,” Fanon writes, “[to] develop a new way of thinking ... and create a new man” (2004, 239). Léopold Sédar Senghor proposed a humanism that could be built out of African forms of life and civilization, what eventually became known as *Négritude*. It is “a certain way of being human, above all of living as a human,” Senghor writes (quoted in Thompson 2002, 144; see also Wilder 2015). This appetite for a new humanism inspired political projects that relied on Africa-centered autonomy and creativity. Kenneth Kaunda’s idea of *Zambian humanism* (Kaunda 1974) or the use of *ubuntu* as an official foreign policy for the South African government (South African Government, 2011) form the intellectual background for post-colonial constitution and development.

It is important to note that anti-colonial theories of the human in Africa have always been part of political projects, which share several characteristics. First, their leaders recognize that the work of creating a new kind of human is a long, arduous process. Sérgio Vieira (1978), a Mozambican politician and poet, for example, insisted in an essay about postcolonial modernity that “O Homem Novo é um processo,” or “The New Man is a process.” Secondly, creating new humanisms was more than a philosophical or theoretical project. It involved engineering society, investing in science and technology, providing education, cultivating the arts and aesthetics, and ensuring dignified livelihoods. This explains why visionaries of the new human were also often politicians. They had experiences organizing and advocating for a decolonization that they hoped would inaugurate a new African subject.

Much of the inspiration for this new African subject was anchored in an idealized vision of local customs and histories, such as cooperative village life in the case of *Ujamaa*, or in the case of *Négritude*, the rich, sophisticated precolonial past of West African kingdoms. Others sought to erase local traditions. In explaining *O Homem Novo*, Vieira warned against a rigid conservatism where patriarchs ruled over youth and women (1978, 26). Others were even more ambitious, aiming for a new Black universalism as a counterpoint to European

dominance. Senghor, for instance, described the need for new kinds of solidarities. “Man is therefore a composition of mobile life forces which interlock,” he writes, “a world of solidarities that seek to knit themselves together” (Senghor 2001, 224). African feminist scholars have pointed out, however, that these political projects are limited to fashioning “a new man,” often erasing the contributions that women have made to decolonizing efforts (Bouka 2021). The practical implications for bringing into existence a new kind of human subject sometimes meant destroying long-standing social structures to create new ways of organizing society with respect to gender, faith, and economic production. Dissidents of a ruling party’s political projects were sometimes subject to authoritarian enforcement, involving eviction, imprisonment, and death (see Bobin 2020; Lal 2015).

So much of the scholarly work in the humanities and social sciences is indebted to analytical frameworks that come from an anti-colonial humanism. These works are nonetheless invested in expanding whom the liberal category of the human includes. Joël Glasman (2020), for instance, shows how the determination of a “minimal humanity” is a central calculus for humanitarian intervention by various international agencies. Other more recent work around migration also characterizes the Sahel as a space of liminal humanity, what migrants term *al-barzakh*, the transition between death and resurrection described in the Qur’an (Bajalia 2023). As the world begins to confront climate change, pollution, and toxicity, however, scholars of the environmental humanities find that human-centered approaches may not be adequate for thinking critically about the plants, animals, and abiotic elements that undergird life on the planet. They search for new ways for humans to live better among other organisms, the weather, as well as the toxic and vital elements that are shaping our environments.

More-than-Humanism

The Subcommittee of Quaternary Stratigraphy (SQS), part of the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS), voted in 2024 to reject a proposal that would designate the current geological epoch as the Anthropocene, a term which explicitly recognizes humans (“Anthropos”) as a transformative geological force that has caused disruptions to the planet’s climate and biodiversity. Despite this rejection, scholars in the humanities and social sciences, as well as artists and political activists, have continued to use the term, pointing to its power to name humans as responsible for climate change, and therefore accountable for mitigating it.

The Anthropocene highlights the inextricable relationships that bound “culture” to “nature,” showing how on one hand elemental, biological, and planetary processes, and on the other human social practices and cultural ideas, are always being shaped by one another (Haraway 2008; Latour 2017; McNeill and Engelke 2016). The frequency of acute and slow-moving natural disasters on the planet—including flash floods, cyclones, and prolonged droughts—are closely linked to political and social decisions that drive the mass consumption of Earth’s

resources. Given this view, Chakrabarty (2012; 2021) argues that the Anthropocene distinguishes a conception of the human that is significantly different from its anti- and postcolonial predecessors, one that is necessarily attuned to the geological agency of humans in shaping planetary history.

This recognition that human activities have always shaped nature and our ideas of it prompts historians and anthropologists to find new methods for analyzing the entangled relationships between people and other beings. When “lines separating nature from culture have broken down” (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010, 546), new methodologies are required for studying human experiences as always already *more-than-human*. The recent emergence of multispecies ethnography, environmental histories of plants and animals, and literary analyses of nonhuman characters represent a shift from earlier studies of people and their environments. Scholars pay close attention not only to the impact of human activity on the environment but also to how environmental actors—plants, animals, lakes, wind, and microorganisms—participate in the constitution of political and cultural phenomena. These nonhuman actors actively interrupt human projects, change social relations, and bring with them their own (natural) histories.

In Uganda, for example, Jacob Doherty (2019) describes marabou storks as a kind of avian infrastructure, shaping key waste management practices that also expose Kampala’s geography of class segregation. These marabou storks themselves occupy an ambiguous social position, considered an urban pest who usefully separate out organic waste. In other contexts, *more-than-human* relationships are cultivated as strategies for coping with industrialization or experimenting with new expectations of masculinity. In northern Tanzania, Stacey Langwick (2018) investigates how anxieties over industrialization’s toxic discharge encourage people to experiment with potentially medicinal plants. In southern Mozambique, Julie S. Archambault (2016) attends to the ways that young men explore loving relations with their lush gardens as alternatives to commodified forms of intimacy.

This slew of newer work in multispecies relations in Africa challenges the trope of a pristine and wild nature on the continent that has animated colonial and postcolonial conservation projects.⁵ They show that people relate to nature in messy and myriad ways, with plants, birds, and insects inhabiting cities and gardens. They also offer conceptions of environmental practices in Africa that move beyond the precolonial or indigenous while still grounding them in an attention to specific places and histories. Public health programs for reducing the incidence of malaria or dengue fever may introduce new practices for eradicating or genetically modifying mosquitoes. Anthropologists have shown that such programs rely on existing knowledges about human-mosquito relations in a community (Beisel and Boëte 2013; Kelly and Lezaun 2014).

These *more-than-human* approaches provide a stark contrast to a conception of African nature as something under constant threat, first from colonial hunters and then from inadequate postcolonial environmental protection (Neumann 1998). Nature parks took on a fortress mentality that imagined a clear separation between people and nature. Indeed, this ongoing separation of people from nature—regularly enforced with fences and guards—coincides with disputes

about land ownership and displacement. Poaching and labor became dominant ways to represent African participation in conservation projects.⁶ Nonetheless, human-wildlife conflict serves as an important reminder that not all multi-species relationships are desirable or convivial. During my research into human-rodent relations in Morogoro, people frequently recount close-shave encounters with wildlife, including snakes, crocodiles, and lions. Joshua Matanzima (2024), who researched Tonga, Korekore, and Shangwe livelihoods along the coasts of Lake Kariba, begins his book with a horrifying story about his sister-in-law, who was dragged into the lake and killed by a crocodile. In the Kunene region of Namibia, human and elephant inhabitants of the area jostle over access to water (Schneegg and Kiaka 2018). These examples show that people are constantly negotiating various degrees of entanglement with other animals and are not necessarily eager to forge new relationships with nonhuman others, some of whom pose a danger to human lives and livelihoods.

This apprehension about more-than-human entanglements also concerns a semantic discomfort that has long collapsed Blackness into animality. In *Afro-Dog*, Bénédicte Boisseron draws on Du Bois's work to introduce another kind of "double-consciousness for the universal black folk, which is the feeling of being both human and animal in the eyes of others" (2018, 84). Boisseron discusses various examples from the United States and the Caribbean that explain the thorny relationships between black people and dogs. Dogs, for example, were used to chase and hunt down fugitive slaves. During the civil rights era, riot police worked with German shepherds to intimidate and control protesters.⁷ In Tanzania, I was warned about approaching unfamiliar dogs because they are usually trained to aggressively guard wealthy compounds. Josh Doble (2020) argues, for instance, that dogs in postcolonial Kenya and Zambia were trained to be "racial weapons" for guarding hotels and gated communities. They embodied the racial and class assumptions of their owners, including learning to detect the "smell of Africans" and exhibiting aggression towards the poor (2020, 77–78). In the Rwandan genocide, the killing of Tutsis and moderate Hutus was compared to the use of DDT pesticide to exterminate cockroaches or vermin (*inyenzi*) (Munslow Ong 2016). Colonial pest control or pesticide spraying programs, environmental historians have shown, did not always distinguish between vermin (rats, tsetse flies, mosquitoes) and people, often designating both for management and eradication with poisonous chemicals (Lee 2023; Mavhunga 2011; Wenzel 2016).

Although Boisseron (2018, 36) highlights the uncomfortable entanglements of race and animality, she also gestures at the possibility of cultivating close relationships with animals, what she calls "interspecies alliances" that resist interpreting the connections between Black people and animals as only denigration or disdain. This approach resonates with the emergent field of Black Ecologies, which looks to the interconnections between race and nature as generative sites for kindling insurgent, emancipatory practices. Alexis Pauline Gumbs's (2020) work is a recent example of this move, her book being an ode to marine mammals and to the Black feminist potential that marine mammals offer for survival, perseverance, and wonder. The literary scholar Joshua Bennett (2020, 8) positions the animal in Black American literature as a figure through

which a “more robust vision of human, and nonhuman” can emerge. This is echoed in what environmental humanities scholar Cajetan Iheka (2021, 180) has called a “planetary humanism,” where humans and other animals share an ethical relation when it comes to confronting vulnerability in the face of exploitation and extinction. These essays go beyond acknowledging the suffering and subjection that result from the racist construction of Black proximity to animality. Bennett, crucially, advocates for “a critical embrace” of Black sociality with nonhuman animals to articulate possibilities for resistance, poetry, and a vision based in “wildness, flight, brotherhood and sisterhood beyond blood” (2020, 4).⁸

Indeed, more recent work has focused on the inclusion of nonhuman subjectivities in contemporary African writing as creative avenues for articulating various forms of resistance to postcolonial dictatorships, ecofeminist politics, and struggles against the ravages of neoliberal globalization. One compelling example is Evan Mwangi’s (2019) analysis of postcolonial African literature, which revolves around human and animal relationships. He engages African literature that features people and animals collectively confronting the precarities of the postcolonial condition, such as poor governance, crumbling systems, and morality debates over queer sexualities. Mwangi’s work is situated in a wider concern for practices of storytelling that contemplate good conduct and social responsibility through human–animal relations. The *sungura*, or hare, often appears in folk stories throughout East Africa, where it finds itself in trouble usually from an environmental threat, such as drought or a predator. The *sungura* then comes up with a plan to outwit or outplay its enemies. Such stories “reflected real struggles in the human world,” (Thiong’o 1986, 10). Told again and again, with differing versions and endings, they are thought experiments that grapple with the various ethical implications of certain actions among people and between people and other animals (Beidelman 1993).

Collectively, these works offer new theories of being human that emerge from attempts to cross, connect, or conserve the fissures between human and other beings in environmental contexts. They represent different analytical frameworks for thinking about the (non)human, and the implications of a politics that affirm—or elide—the differences between human and other beings. In their attention to the palpable ways that the animal becomes a crucial force in human struggles and endeavors, these works propose possibilities of more-than-human solidarities that challenge the very foundation of species differentiation, a practice itself fraught with a history of race science (see Burton and Ghoshal 2024). In recognizing shared vulnerabilities among human and other beings, these works confront a world already transformed by planetary climate change. As Iheka (2018, 164) suggests, these more-than-human frameworks “may help us become better at being human” by searching for collective solutions that depend on recognizing and building new connections with the nonhuman world. Humans may practice environmental care, ensure dignified livelihoods, and foster radically inclusive communities within these multispecies milieus, figured through practices of relating beyond the human.

Digital Human

The rise of digital technologies presents another area of dispute for settling questions about the place of the human in increasingly automated and virtual worlds. Cajetan Iheka (2021) maintains that violent resource extraction and the disposal of toxic waste in Africa are *doppelgängers*. The mounting abundance of digital technologies on the planet deposit mounds of motherboards and metal that in turn expose casual laborers to potentially harmful chemicals, as anthropologist Samwel Ntapanta (2021) documents in his work among upcyclers and recyclers of electronic waste in Dar es Salaam (2021). These works expand the more-than-human to encompass not only critters but also the social and environmental impact of computers and data cloud servers.

In many African contexts, the digital should not be seen merely as a future reality but a consistent, negotiated presence alongside ongoing debates about modernity and development. For one, Africans were early adopters of digitally mediated services for communication and for handling cash transfers, banking, payment, and loans long before these systems were adopted in Europe and North America (Adams 2021). Secondly, commentary about technological innovation has always been germane to African experiences of time and change (Mavhunga 2017; Twagira 2020). Narratives about magic (or witchcraft) are quick to adapt and tap into the power offered by new technologies. Wizards and sorcerers in Zambia (see Mufuzi 2014) and elsewhere, for example, incorporated electrical wires and gadgets early on in their practice, viewing them as objects possessing enhanced energies for current times.

Over the past few years, international organizations and businesses have celebrated Africa's digital transformation as part of a new Industrial Revolution. They believe that digital technologies can help many African nations "leapfrog" development in the agricultural, industrial, health, and education sectors, short-circuiting the linear progress of modernity encouraged by development experts. The effects of digital technology on society, politics, and the economy are certainly being noticed. Scholars have shown how digital technologies are inflecting social movements (Nyabola 2018), reshaping practices of archiving African history and historiography (Mark-Thiesen 2023, 8–9), transforming mobile communication (Odumosu 2009), while also precipitating dreams about economic innovation (Hassan 2023).

Yousif Hassan (2024), a public policy scholar, notes that the rapid uptake of AI as part of African-led development initiatives represents more than technological innovations. The incorporation of algorithmic machine learning into the provision of state services, agricultural practice, and educational systems is simultaneously about state-building and political visions on the continent. Hassan's work also highlights the skepticism that several development practitioners in Africa harbor toward efforts to replace or resolve issues of state-building with technological innovation. Such projects, Hassan argues, often come with specific "sociotechnical imaginaries" (Jasanoff and Kim 2015) about how people, profits, and power should relate to one another.

Indeed, the advent of automation, machine learning, and generative AI has precipitated concerns about the “rising irrelevance of the human” (Nhemachena 2019; see also Nhemachena, Kangira, and Chiripanhura 2021; Adams 2021). Sylvia Tamale (2020, 289) warns how digital technology “facilitates processes of Othering and marginalization in new and more efficient ways,” enabling precise systems that surveil, categorize, and therefore control marginal populations such as migrants, sexual minorities, and restless laborers in the mines and factories that produce digital hardware. The “convergence, and at times fusion, between the living human being and the objects, artifacts, or the technologies that supplement or augment us is at the source of an emergence of an entirely different kind of human being,” writes Achille Mbembe (2021, 219).

Scholars skeptical of the digital revolution often point to continuities of disempowerment between colonial and present modes of data extraction. Digitalization projects continue a tradition of using African labor and resources to collect and manage information that aid in refining systems of surveillance, control, and domination (Biruk 2018; Tilley 2011). The operation of powerful computing technologies that collect, sort through, and propose interpretations of data requires constant physical and affective labor from people, the detrimental effects of which are still not fully understood. Meta, the technology company that owns Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, faced lawsuits in 2022 and 2023 from Kenyan and South African content moderators who review online media for hate speech, pornography, and sexual violence (Valmary 2023). In these lawsuits, workers complained that their repetitive click-work exposed them to psychological trauma, for which they received little mental health support from Meta.

In return for the services provided, technology companies extract personal data from users through their platforms. Companies analyze these data to further refine their digital systems, usually in ways that make such platforms increasingly indispensable—and profitable—while rendering human work and intervention disposable through automation and intellectual property law (Couldry and Mejias 2019). Over time, entire national economies and societies become beholden to the code that these companies use to structure what people see, read, and interact with. Michael Kwet (2019) calls this phenomenon digital colonialism, drawing parallels to the construction of railways and other infrastructures under colonialism that concurrently undermined artisans, facilitated resource extraction, and eased the surveillance of information and people. The extraction of data from Africans feeds into an algorithmic colonization (Birhane 2020) that reduces the human into enumerable data points, categorizable through systems that reproduce racial and gender bias (Buolamwini 2023).

Such extractive practices are not limited to information. The African continent holds up to 30 percent of the world’s critical mineral reserves, including copper and cobalt in the Democratic Republic of Congo, bauxite in Guinea, lithium in Zimbabwe, and graphite in Madagascar and Mozambique. These digital minerals are key to manufacturing batteries that ensure constant, long-lasting power to cell phones, laptops, and electric vehicles. They are also at the center of various armed conflicts and potential genocides (Audu 2023). The anthropologist James Smith (2011) noted a kind of paradox in this situation. Smart phones that make seamless global connection possible often depend on

radical, violent reconfigurations of people's relationships to natural resources. They involve forced evictions and labor in order to construct the supply chains necessary to detach these minerals from their place.

The critical response against the rise of mineral and data extraction is, as some scholars insist, to prioritize the human by refusing to treat people and their data as "raw material free for the taking" (Birhane 2020: 391; see also Zuboff 2019; Amrute, Singh, and Guzmán 2022). Scholars concerned about digital colonialism encourage the incorporation of African ethics and experience into debates about digital technologies. Many of these works cite the general idea of collective humanity, ubuntu, as a potential guide for responsible AI governance (Gaffley, Adams, and Shyllon, 2022; Mhlambi 2020). African experiences for discerning between the actual and the fake offer much-needed expertise for an age of disinformation and conspiracy theory. Patricia Kingori (2021) and others, for example, highlight well-practiced strategies and interventions that Africans deploy to evaluate the fakery of designer goods, university essays, and online information. They look to global internet phishing scams and the presentation of fabricated personalities as moments where African experiences might offer new techniques for evaluating authenticity and trust online (see also Fuh 2021; Newell 2021).

Indeed, for some time now, African and African studies scholars have invited others to understand new technologies through the lens of African metaphysics and animism, which propose critical frameworks for contending with the increasing ambiguity and convergence between humans, matter, and representations (see Mbembe 2024, 45–51). Digital technology's ability to widely spread information and embody virtual selves is seen as akin to juju (Nyamnjoh 2020), sorcery or witchcraft (Geschiere 2021), where ideas about nonhuman spirits collapse into those of digital avatars. Sasha Newell and Katrien Pype (2021, 8) argue that Africans already have detailed frameworks for recognizing the extrahuman, "the web of cognition, agency, animacy, and relatedness that extend into the actual and virtual realms of the social," that draw on systems of knowledges and experiences that embrace all kinds of powerful beings, from the distant past and future, and in this and other worlds. Collectively, these authors call for future work that draws on these epistemologies to offer analytical models for thinking about and contending with the other forms of human emerging in a digital age.

Creative expression about digital and newer technologies is also another place for experimenting with the human. Think, for instance, about Black Terminus AR, a team of digital artists headed by Damien McDuffie based in Oakland, California. They have worked with artists in Senegal, Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa to create augmented reality (AR) experiences. They bring murals, street art, and other visual media of people and animals to life when an artwork is scanned using a smartphone application. Or think about digital artworks from African artists that enable "queer agency" (Mwangi 2014), the freedom for determining when and how to express one's gender and sexuality in sometimes unwelcoming places. Digital artworks such as *Letu* by Arafa C. Hamadi, a non-binary queer multidisciplinary artist based in Tanzania and Kenya, and their collaborator, Nyokabi Kimari, feature 3D worlds built through digital rendering

processes. These worlds become safe havens where the artists listen to music, do yoga, read, and enjoy life. “The only place I can claim myself is the internet,” Hamadi says as they explain the rationale behind their artwork (Amani 2021).

Letu’s digital worldbuilding disrupts the binary code that structures digital technologies, imagining virtual utopias where queer East Africans may live, love, experience joy, and form community. In lieu of a binary conception of the human, Hamadi and other queer Africans propose creative and complex ways for leading “amphibious lives” (Otu 2022) that powerfully challenge binary categories of gender and sexuality. This resonates with the emergent genre of speculative science fiction called Africanfuturism, which encompasses stories written by African authors that blur the lines—often in ethically ambiguous ways—between ancestral tradition, engineering, decolonization, and the construction of possible future forms of human beings (see Okorafor 2020).

Africanfuturist and digital artworks reclaim the human from its reduction into digital bytes. These scholars and artists demonstrate the possibility for curating and crafting media that centers what Aisha Kadiri (2021, 19) calls “digital humanity.” Describing *Afrozensus*, the first national survey of Black people in Germany, Kadiri highlights an example of a digital data collection project that nonetheless challenges state blindness to the racial hierarchies of civic experience in Germany. Rather than concede to the forces of dehumanization, these different digital practices altogether become part of a toolbox for crafting possible, liberatory reimaginations of technoscience (Benjamin 2025).

Conclusion: The Human as an Analytical Framework

If we return now to the West Papuan activists that opened this essay, we learn from Sophie Chao (2021) of the simultaneous acts of refusing and embracing the figure of the “monkey.” People who protested being called “monkey” also variously think through the simian as an empathetic symbol of their political struggles. Monkeys in zoos, Chao writes, prompt West Papuans to express interspecies solidarity against being confined as prisoners of a settler-colonial state. More radically, Chao recounts a conversation where a West Papuan man embraced the moniker as resistance against state projects that force him and his community to become human like other Indonesians (281). Here, the monkey’s nonhuman status is reclaimed to enact a politics of refusal against being incorporated into a settler-colonial state and its limited visions of being human.

Inspired by strategies and political discourse from global movements against anti-Black racism, the West Papuan struggle is a compelling instance of “becoming Black of the world” in two senses. First is in the sense of Mbembe’s analysis that Blackness, as a phenomenon of racial strife and capitalist pillaging, is gradually becoming a planetary condition (Mbembe 2017). Secondly, I also read Mbembe’s phrase as an invitation to consider how African and diasporic critiques of the human offer a counter canon for “becoming Black in the world,” for rethinking the universal human in ways that lead to insurgent, liberatory futures. The human, rather than something to be denied or deconstructed, becomes a figure for strategic political critique and mobilization.

To be sure, connections between Blackness and animality continue to haunt contemporary discourses about the human. In the foregoing, I have sketched out how anti-colonial thinkers and activists write against this connection, claiming belonging in the human while reshaping global meanings of human rights, humanism, and humanitarianism. Other thinkers and activists acknowledge the troubled histories and practices that continue to dehumanize Africans and Blacks. They seek instead to articulate other visions of being human, sometimes leaning on those very connections between Blackness and animality, and Blackness and the virtual. Altogether, they suggest that the human—as understood through abolitionist, anti-colonial, and more-than-human thought in African and diasporic contexts—is a powerful analytical framework for tracking constantly shifting definitions of the human. By thinking deeply and critically about the human, this counter-canon clarifies and challenges powerful systems and discourses that condition who counts as human.

Most recently, the human served as a critical framework for African intervention in the question of genocide and war. In 2023, South Africa brought an application to the International Court of Justice alleging that Israel's killing of (at the time) almost 20,000 people in Gaza in the wake of terrorist attacks that took the lives of 1,195 people in Israel breached the United Nations Genocide Convention. The South African legal team relied heavily on arguments that highlighted the use of dehumanizing speech by Israeli officials to talk about Palestinians (South African Government 2023, 59–70). South Africa's own history of racial segregation and dehumanization became a crucial analytical framework for analyzing other apartheid elsewhere.

Commenting on the future of African studies, Hlonipha Mokoena (2022) observes that Africa has an intriguing relationship with the human. On one hand, the continent is figured as the original site of human evolution and civilization (Scott 2007; Diop 1974). On the other, Mokoena notes, Africa has often served as humanity's conscience, carrying the burden of both condemnation and recuperation of a universal humanism built upon colonization and the enslavement of peoples. The implication of these twinned humanisms is that African thought and experiences should matter in crafting a universal humanism for our collective and future times. The co-imbrication of Africa's fate with all of humanity's future suggests that theories of the human thought and practiced in Africa may serve as an inspiration and instigation for more humane futures.

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Notes

1. The “Am I Not a Man and a Brother?” medallion was made in 1787 by the English potter Josiah Wedgwood and acted as a political emblem for the Society for Effecting Abolition of the Slave Trade. It is today part of the collections of the Philadelphia Museum of Art: <https://philamuseum.org/collection/object/354968>.
2. Scholars of Black literature have also found trans- and posthumanism a useful analytic. See Hill (2019).
3. In the German context where I am writing, Anton Wilhelm Amo is increasingly recognized as the first Black German professor who as early as 1729 gave a presentation titled “On the Rights of Blacks in Europe” (see also Menn and Smith 2020, 1–59).
4. For an overview of how discussions about race and caste circulated between the Dalit intellectual B. R. Ambedkar in India and Black intellectuals in the United States, see Yengde (2023). Recently, there has been a growing interest in what some scholars call the “Black Pacific”; this includes decolonial encounters between Indigenous peoples of Oceania and Black people from the Caribbean, Europe, and the Americas (Shilliam 2015), the history of race science and the classification of Negritos (Khor Manickam 2009), and African American presence in East and Southeast Asia as part of US military imperialisms (see, e.g., Hyun 2022; Lucious 2005).
5. On the representation of Africa, particularly in natural history, as a land of pristine nature and primitive people, see Haraway (1984).
6. Several scholars have written about the many ways that Africans have challenged this separation of people from nature. Jacob Dlamini’s *Safari Nation* (2020) recovers the experiences of Black South Africans who lived, worked in, visited, and shaped Kruger National Park. Other scholars have focused on the ways that race shapes who gets to access and benefit from wildlife conservation. For instance, Yuka Suzuki’s *The Nature of Whiteness* (2017), based in Zimbabwe, and Grace Musila’s “Farms in Africa” (2015), based in Kenya, examine how white wildlife ranchers and tourists position themselves as global environmental conservationists.
7. Boisseron (2018, x–xi) also points out that comparisons of Black human experiences and animal ones persist in contemporary emancipatory struggles, such as equating the mistreatment of animals to past experiences of slavery, as seen in a People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) campaign slogan “The Animal is the New Slave.” See also, for example, an article titled “Slaves by Nature? Domestic Animals and Human Slaves” (Jacoby 1994) that documents how both Blacks and whites in the nineteenth-century American South made these comparisons, sometimes as justification for and sometimes as critique of slavery.
8. Johnson (2019) describes this as “fugitive humanism.”

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