

### Antebellum Posthuman: Race and Materiality in the Mid-Nineteenth Century

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## Review

**Willoughby, Christopher D.E.**

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**Ellis, Cristin.** *Antebellum Posthuman: Race and Materiality in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*. Fordham, \$30.00 ISBN 9780823278442

In *Antebellum Posthuman: Race and Materiality in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, University of Mississippi Professor of nineteenth-century literature Cristin Ellis troubles historical depictions of the relationship between materialism and racism in the mid nineteenth-century United States. Through an analysis of the anti-slavery writings of Frederick Douglass, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman, Ellis argues that these writers used materialist conceptions of the human body to argue against slavery and white supremacy. In making this argument, Ellis seeks to undercut simplistic depictions of antebellum racial discourse as pitting liberal humanists against biological racists. Through this analysis, Ellis restores an antebellum precedent for anti-racist materialism. Ultimately, Ellis intends to add anti-racist and social justice theorizing to posthumanism's toolbox, and, as Ellis argues, Douglass, Thoreau, and Whitman already have created a profound anti-racist materialism.

The monograph consists of four chapters, with each of the first three focusing on a featured author, and the last unpacking the theoretical stance of contemporary posthumanists as well as their critics. In the case of Douglass, Thoreau, and Whitman, Ellis underscores how each of them in different ways broke from liberal humanism and adopted "biologism" in response to the growing influence of a pro-slavery racial theory—also known as polygenesis—that argued that African descendants were a separate species from whites. In the first case, Douglass subverts liberal concepts of natural rights based in enlightenment humanist logic, and rather depicts the strive toward freedom as biologically rooted. In short, all humans seek freedom as a part of their natural condition rather than as act of an individual will.

According to Ellis, both Thoreau and Whitman's anti-racist, materialist writings of the 1850s were influenced by pre-Darwinian evolutionary theories, as well Darwin himself. For Thoreau, the potential evolution of both bodies and species fundamentally undermined racial essentialism. Likewise, in his poetry, Whitman not only depicts the human body and species as ever changing, he also renders their physical barriers as highly permeable, dissolving the border between individuals and species. According to Whitman's framing, humans are connected to each other as well as every other living being, be they plant or animal. Like contemporary posthumanism, Whitman destroys the borders between races, but also those separating different forms of life more generally.

In the last chapter and coda, Ellis takes these antebellum anti-racist materialisms, and uses them to formulate an antiracist posthumanism. Ellis argues for the uncoupling of the moral categories of human/non-human from homo-sapien/non-homo-sapien. According to Ellis, this uncoupling can call into question the ways in which moral hierarchies such as racism have been grafted on to biological difference. Rather than provide a simple political program, Ellis sees posthumanism's potential residing in its ability to complicate our understanding of the material world, ultimately undercutting oversimplified divisions between the human and non-human.

Despite Whitman and Thoreau's positive use of the evolutionary and Darwinian turns in mid nineteenth-century science, Ellis provides little discussion of how Darwinian logic as well as Darwin's own writing ultimately strengthened racial science rather than weakened it, leading to the rise of social Darwinism and eugenics. In general, this represents a larger problem in the monograph. Outside of the scientific racism that she seeks to undercut, Ellis often leaves other scientific concepts undertheorized and unproblematized. In her description of pro-slavery racial science, she describes many of its proponents as "nonscientists" (32) and their biology "begins to appear antibiological" (5). Leaving aside that most of the "nonscientists" Ellis describes were medical doctors (one of the highest degrees of scientific training available in a period largely predating professional scientific schools), Ellis unintentionally promotes the notion that biology and science more generally stand outside larger historical forces, making scientific racism appear to be an aberration from "good science" rather than an inherent problem in scientific truth claims. In general, it seems that Ellis's analysis would be improved by greater engagement with scholarship from the history and sociology of science.

Despite this significant oversight, Ellis's monograph is ultimately successful in complicating traditional depictions of antislavery theory as inherently connected to liberal humanism, instead highlighting how many prominent opponents of slavery adopted materialist frames. While most useful to other critical theorists and scholars of nineteenth-century literature, *Antebellum Posthuman* should be of interest to cultural historians of science, race, and the debate over slavery in the mid nineteenth-century United States, highlighting the ways in which literary figures and other lay figures actively engaged in and influenced scientific debates.

*In 2016, Christopher Willoughby received his PhD in history from Tulane University, and is a Postdoctoral Fellow at Emory University's Bill and Carol Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry. He recently published an article on antebellum racial science and medical theory in The Journal of History of Medicine and Allied Sciences, and in August 2018, The Journal of Southern History will publish his article rethinking the antebellum physician and racial theorist Samuel Cartwright.*