

Humanity without Feathers

The title of this essay is not simply an echo of Woody Allen's neurotic reversal of Emily Dickinson's "Hope is the thing with Feathers"; it alludes, of course, to the venerable enumerative definition, as old as Plato, of man as a "featherless biped capable of speech and reason." It is not, despite its longevity, a particularly useful definition. Indeed, its inadequacy had been more or less apparent from the moment of its inception, when the Cynic Diogenes, according to an anecdote that eighteenth-century writers liked to cite, reportedly "threw a Cock strip'd of his Feathers, and quite naked, in the Middle of Plato's School; crying, 'Here is Plato's Man.'"¹ Yet this problematic definition of man as a featherless biped raises questions central to the history of humanitarian sensibility and to the late eighteenth-century debates over the abolition of the British slave trade that will be my central focus below. For if one of the principles underlying humanitarianism involves the imperative to alleviate another's suffering simply because that other is human, then the matter of who exactly will be understood and felt to be human (and based on what criteria) becomes a question of some urgency. This essay traces the way eighteenth-century abolitionists used tropes and figures borrowed from sentimental literature to delineate the parameters of the human. Sentimental texts furnished antislavery writers with the rhetorical tools needed to excite the "humanity" of metropolitan readers toward the suffering of enslaved people in distant climes—which suggests the second way the title "Humanity without Feathers" might be understood: to refer to the difficulty of making the humanitarian imagination wing across great distances to establish connections between local acts and distant suffering.

The late eighteenth-century British campaign for the abolition of the slave trade has often been singled out as an inaugural chapter in the history of modern humanitarian sensibility, distinguished from earlier garden-variety forms of charity or philanthropy by both its nonlocal sphere of action and its categorical investment in humanity as such.² Answers to the central question which has preoccupied historians and cultural critics—why, at this particular juncture, did the distant suffering of West Indian slaves become the object of such intense popular interest in Great Britain?—have often focused on the fundamental role played by sentimental literature in fostering humanitarian sensibility. Thus Thomas Laqueur has shown the ways humanitarian narrative—in its use of detail, in its attention to the body "not only as the locus of pain but also as the common bond between those who suffer and those who would help," and in its demarcation of the "lineaments of causality and of human agency"—created "'sympathetic passions' [that] bridged the gulf between facts, compassion, and action," while Lynn Hunt has argued that the eighteenth-century

epistolary novel, by fostering empathy for and identification with particularized albeit fictional characters, taught its readers “to think of others as their equals, as like them in some fundamental fashion” and thereby helped consolidate the principles underlying human rights.³ Sentimental tropes and figures furnished the imaginative tools that enabled metropolitan readers to recognize the possibility of alleviating the suffering of remote populations and, by arousing and channeling metropolitan sympathies, enlarged the sphere of individuals *felt* as well as understood to be fully human.

When one examines the structures of identification that characterize sentimental sympathy and analyzes what precisely it is in other people that the sentimental understands as an incitement to sympathy, however, it becomes apparent that sentimental form produces an unstable definition of humanity. The sentimental operates on an ad hoc basis, selectively exciting feelings about particularly moving examples of suffering and recognizing these subjects exclusively based on the fact of that suffering. As a result, the subject produced by sentimental antislavery is granted only a diluted form of humanity grounded in pain and victimhood, a humanity that is only as enduring (or as fleeting) as the recognition of the metropolitan subject who bestows it. The sentimental processes that underpin humanitarian sensibility thus expose the difficulty not only of deciding who will be included within the sentimental community but also of designating what formal traits provide sufficient basis for a definition of the human. The instability of sentimental humanity both in form and in content, that is, exposes a critical discontinuity between the sentimental basis of eighteenth-century humanitarian sensibility and what I take to be the categorical imperative of modern humanitarianism: its enjoinder to alleviate suffering based on “the conviction that all people have equal dignity by virtue of their membership in humanity.”⁴ If sentimentality evades (or cannot capture) a coherent notion of “humanity,” what might be the consequences of this sentimental “humanitarianism without humanity” both for eighteenth-century antislavery discourse and for modern discussions of humanitarianism and human rights? It is by no means clear that modern discourses of humanitarianism and human rights escape from the dilemmas posed by sentimental humanity.

Enumerative definitions of the human—the “featherless biped” and others of its ilk—are the straw men of the British debates over abolition, not only because of their content but also because of their form. Additive definitions create a checklist of traits (speech, reason, feathers) and then reel individual cases in and out of the class of human based on the possession of these traits or the want thereof. Thus Africans, Peter Packard argues in his 1788 pamphlet *Am I not a Man? and a Brother?*, are “in logical definition what Man really is; namely, . . . a risible, rational, two-footed, unfeathered animal,” for “all animals who possess these distinguishing qualities are men.”⁵ It is true, Packard admits in a withering aside, that “since their acquaintance with the European dealers in Human blood, . . . they have never been known actually to laugh, because laughter is an exertion expressive of joy and happiness, [but] I suppose . . . that it will be allowed that they are not feathered, and that they have two feet. They are possessed then of three out of the four Logical particulars that constitute a Man” (12–13). Dismissing skin color as an inessential trait, Packard sternly concludes that “we ought to be very cautious how we peremptorily pronounce any one *Not* of the Human race merely from different circumstances of external appearance” (11).

Antislavery writers repeatedly attack enumerative definitions for creating a dangerous game of theoretical hokey-pokey that puts some beings in and takes others out of the circle of those who would count as human. “If you admit the *form* of men as a justification of slavery,” the abolitionist Thomas Clarkson writes in his 1788 *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, “you may subjugate your own brother; if *features*, there you must quarrel with all the world; if *colour*, where are you to stop?”⁶ The bankruptcy of such tabulated checklists of humanity sends eighteenth-century writers feverishly scrabbling for a shared trait or evasive feature that will serve as a gatekeeper to the class of the human—a quest that often dead-ends in an abstraction, “humanity,” that amounts to a tautology: humanity is that which makes humans human.⁷ “Il y a des hom[m]es,” as Dumarsais wrote in his 1730 *Traité des tropes*, “mais *l’humanité* n’est point, c’est-à-dire, qu’il n’y a point un être qui soit *l’humanité*.”⁸

The definition of humanity that eighteenth-century writers sought to devise in the course of the debates on the abolition of the slave trade is, in short, significant less because of its content than because of its form. I noted above that the centrality of sentimental tropes and figures in these debates reveals a form of humanitarian sensibility that operates without a clear definition of humanity: what it is, who has it, how it is to be expressed, what moral obligations it entails.⁹ This means that sentimental form capitalizes on and reproduces an elastic definition of humanity that undermines the categorical imperative of humanitarianism. Simply put, sentimental humanitarianism cannot operate from the “conviction that all people have equal dignity by virtue of their membership in humanity,” because the sentimental doesn’t have a stable or logical definition of “humanity” to work with. And this lack of a logical definition of humanity should perhaps be unsurprising, given that the sentimental mode in the eighteenth century was notoriously indiscriminate in its choice of objects, embracing not only human beings but also lapdogs, dying birds, and (as one eighteenth-century critic grumbled) “efts, toads, bats, every thing that hath life.”¹⁰ This indiscriminacy is, however, both the strength and the weakness of sentimental form in this context. On the one hand, it is precisely because sentimental form is indifferent to content—because the sentimental does not require or operate from a rigorous definition of the human—that it can expand to embrace hitherto excluded populations: the impoverished, the disenfranchised, the enslaved. On the other hand, because there is no categorical or universal principle at work in the sentimental—specific individuals (and specific groups) are yo-yoed in and out of the human purview on a case-by-case basis—the sentimental is erratic in its operation and provides a poor basis for ethics or for arguments grounded in human rights. Sentimental objects have value because the sentimental subject has feelings about them, and that value is thus contingent and liable to vaporize. On its own, sentimentality threatens to offer something akin to Justice Potter Stewart’s definition of pornography: I know humanity when I see it.

Of course, the problem the abolitionists encounter is that this humanity is *not* seen. People allow the slave trade to continue, the famous abolitionist William Wilberforce declares, “because they do not see; because some among us, receive the profits, and do not see, the sufferings of their fellow creatures; because the objects, as they actually exist, are not allowed to obtrude upon their vision, and interpose the reality of things between these Gentlemen’s consciences and their calculations.”¹¹ What

Wilberforce elsewhere calls an obscuring “African medium” and “African logic”¹² prevents “objects as they actually exist” from being perceived, as the traffic between conscience and rational calculation is short-circuited by profit and interest. What permits the metropolitan subject to circumvent content (“the reality of things”) seems at first glance to be a medium or form, but the fact that it is a specifically “*African medium*” suggests that content recasts the form. The reality not “seen” is not absent; instead, “the objects, as they actually exist, are not allowed to obtrude upon their vision,” which means that the suffering objects are simultaneously present and absent, acknowledged and disavowed, within mental reach and out of sight. “*Not or no longer seeing—vanishing, disappearing, looking the other way—is the ubiquitous other side in the history of human rights,*” as Thomas Laqueur notes. “‘We did not know’ was, and is, the way we say we did not see.”¹³ What Slavoj Žižek, following Peter Sloterdijk, calls cynical reason governs the “African logic” of Wilberforce’s gentlemen: it is not that “they know not what they do,” but rather that “‘they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it.’” The “African medium” and the “African logic” sanction an enlightened false consciousness in which “one knows the falsehood very well, one is well aware of a particular interest hidden behind an ideological universality, but still one does not renounce it.”¹⁴

Wilberforce supposes that feeling can dispel the haze produced by the “African medium” and can countermand the interested dictates of the “African logic”; the emotions stirred by the encounter with brute content—the incontrovertible fact of African suffering—will undo the mystification of form. The task of the sentimental is to incite feeling so as to overcome these barriers in order to make that humanity visible. Sentimental tropes thus create detailed, particularized descriptions of suffering others: synecdoches allow the suffering of masses to be condensed into a single unthreatening figure; apostrophes call into immediate presence the suffering victims of colonial conquest; personifications borrow human traits to make abstract qualities like humanity and avarice and systemic forces like commerce and progress into intelligible causal agents.¹⁵ Sentimental narratives foster the desire to alleviate suffering, by producing the symbolic relays and causal connections necessary to grasp how local acts might produce consequences even across immense distances.¹⁶

Thus Wilberforce in his opening speeches on abolition creates a kind of primer on the ways and means of exciting sentimental feeling, as he endeavors to transport his interlocutors emotionally and imaginatively:

Let them but represent to themselves a vessel, in a sultry climate, heaped to the very brim with these unhappy wretches, torn from their homes in the way he had described . . . If the Committee could be transported where they might behold this dreadful spectacle, and after having taken a general survey of its multifarious wretchedness, if they were then to listen to each man’s particular tale of sorrow, they would want no other argument for the Abolition.¹⁷

Seeking to avoid boring his interlocutors with what he calls “the dull, dry uniform detail of similar instances of barbarity,” Wilberforce dilates upon a few particular cases, offering his parliamentary audience a sequence of sentimental stimulus packages designed to overcome the insularity of the self, the myopia of self-interest, the affective

entropy that dilutes the will to right action, especially when the sufferers in question are in a remote clime. Yet in his insistence that one need only see the spectacle of misery and hear the tale of sorrow to be convinced, Wilberforce presupposes a spontaneity of sympathetic feeling belied by the elaborate sentimental machinery he puts in place to create it.

For unlike sensibility (which designates the susceptibility or sensitivity of a particular individual and is a quality of a subject), and unlike sympathy (which involves the capacity to feel for or empathize with another and is an interpersonal relation), sentimentality is a literary form: a rhetorical structure designed both to incite feelings in readers and to direct those feelings toward their “proper” objects. In this sense, sentimentality must be understood as a response to eighteenth-century disquiet about the potential vagrancy of emotions and the threat they pose to self-possession. Inasmuch as sympathy involves experiencing another’s feelings (that is, feelings that are by definition not one’s own), it breaks down the division of self and other; absorption in another’s affect—the messy identifications and sometimes inexplicable sympathies we experience—may imperil the identity of the feeling subject. And since the risks of this imaginative extension of self become that much greater as the other in question becomes that much more other, sentimental tropes in the abolitionist debates become critical in policing the vagrancy of emotion, ensuring that affective forays do not go too far, ascertaining that readers cheer for the right team. Sentimental tropes, like so many rhetorical sheepdogs, rouse and drive feelings; they also prevent them from straying in the wrong direction.¹⁸

Because it polices the movement of emotion between feeling subjects and objects of feeling, sentimentality can weld the affective response to other people to broader structures of human classification. Since feeling as well as reason governs the perception of another’s value, the fact that the sentimental text structures the circulation of feeling helps reconcile formal and sentimental definitions of the human: sentimental texts endeavor to bridge the gap between technical definitions of the human (grounded in the categorical perception of kind) and the felt perception of who is a person (the affective relation of humanity as kinship).¹⁹ Sentimentality is designed to overcome the fact that, as Wilberforce puts it, “the very circumstances of these poor people being distinguished by their colour from the rest of the community, prevents their calling forth the feelings of sympathy; they are a marked species, they are looked upon as a different race of Beings, and are not considered as being entitled to the same humanity and tenderness, which the worst of men would allow to be the right of those whom they acknowledge to be their fellow creatures.”²⁰ It is not that we automatically have feelings for others because they are human; it is because we have feelings about others that they come to be seen as human. Indeed, the humanity at stake in Wilberforce’s remarks is not that of the slave but that of the metropolitan subject; the humanity in the passage refers not to the “marked species” or the “poor people” who are not seen as “fellow creatures” but to the “humanity and tenderness” of the sympathizing reader. Feelings of sympathy create the humanity of the feeling subject, not the humanity of the object felt for.

Wilberforce, like most abolitionist writers, slips almost indiscernibly between the two primary senses the word possessed during the period: humanity as shared species

category and humanity as sympathy or benevolence.²¹ (In the eighteenth century, of course, the word “humanitarian” did not exist in the modern sense; it referred to religious doctrines about Christ’s human nature.²²) Thus when, in the course of the abolition debates, Lord Grenville asks, “If we were to define humanity, what should we say it was?” his answer makes no reference to the slave. Humanity is, he replies, “a sympathy of feeling for the distress of others—a desire to accomplish good ends by good means,”²³ and it is firmly lodged in the metropolitan subject. Indeed those who elicit feelings of humanity—the poor, the disenfranchised, the enslaved, and animals—are almost by definition lesser or other, not quite human in the same way. Some have humanity; others are it.

Throughout the century, the abstract trait that makes humans human is “humanity” in the sense of benevolence, as sympathy supplants reason as the defining trait of the species, the characteristic that separates humans from other sentient creatures.²⁴ As Susan Maslan puts it, “Despite commonplace assumptions about the Enlightenment, the primary qualification for inclusion within the category of the human was the capacity to feel, not the capacity to reason” (358). To “*Man* only of all Creatures under Heaven,” William Clagett wrote in 1686, “God has given this quality, to be affected with the Grief and with the Joy of those of his own kind; and to feel the Evils which others feel, that we may be universally disposed to help or relieve one another.”²⁵ Clagett’s emphasis on the instrumental intent behind the designs of divinity makes the promptings to right moral action intrinsic to the very nature of the human. Yet as Clagett’s very title *Of the Humanity and Charity of Christians* indicates, this distinctively human quality of charity often contains unrecognized checks on its purportedly universal principles grounded in creed, in nation, in language, in race.

Eighteenth-century moral philosophers likewise affirmed compassion or fellow-feeling as the common trait of humankind. “Sympathy with distress,” as James Beattie puts it in his *Elements of Moral Sense*, “is thought so essential to human nature, that the want of it has been called *inhumanity*.”²⁶ Although benevolent fellow-feeling is said to be an inherent trait, it proves to be an unstable feature, not least because its expression depends upon an uncertain connection to its objects. Expressed in and through relations to others, sympathetic humanity cannot be a property that inheres within an individual. Thus it is not entirely clear whose humanity is in question when the abolitionist William Wilberforce observes that the slave driver, “looking down upon his Slaves as a set of beings of another nature from himself, can have no sympathy for them, and it is sympathy, and nothing else than sympathy which . . . is the true spring of humanity.”²⁷ The fact that cruelty must exist to furnish occasions for humanity to express itself, moreover, reveals the circularity at the heart of claims of moral humanity. If, as James Steintrager has argued, the eighteenth century witnesses “the movement of the mark of humanity from reason to pity,” the human “claim to greatness” through compassion is jeopardized by the existence of gratuitous cruelty.²⁸ In the course of the century, it is increasingly *inhumanity*—cruelty as an end in itself—that is singled out as the distinguishing trait of humans. “One *Lion*,” as the *Universal Spectator* put it in 1747, “never makes another *Lion* become his *Slave*, and do his *Drudgery*.”²⁹

Indeed, in many cases, the other with whom the sentimental reader identifies is

not the victim but the community of like-feeling souls who weep over the victim. Thus James Ramsay, in his 1784 *Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of Slaves*, begins with the plight of the slave before turning almost immediately to the spectator:

Do we wish to form adequate notions of their misery? Let us imagine (and would heaven it were only imagination!) masters and overseers, with uplifted whips, clanking chains, and pressing hunger, forcing their forlorn slaves to commit every horrid crime that virtue shrinks at, and with the same weapons punishing the perpetration . . . till the whole man sinks under them. But to make the representation complete, we must also draw humanity, bleeding over the horrid scene, and longing, eagerly longing, to be able to vindicate her own rights. . . . But whom shall we find willing to sacrifice his amusement or his pleasure, to obey the call of humanity? Who to relieve the sufferings of the wretched slave, will boldly encounter the oppressor's rage, or offer up selfish interest at the altar of mercy?³⁰

The passage opens with a collective invocation (“let us imagine”) that invites the reader to contemplate the spectacle of clanking chains and uplifted whips, a representation that, Ramsay tells us, is “incomplete” without the triangulating presence of “humanity” to preside over our feeling response. The reader is meant to identify not with the suffering slave but with the position of an emotionally correct spectator (literally humanity personified) able to furnish the correct answers to the two questions with which Ramsay concludes his peroration, although—given that personifications are used in the absence of persons—Ramsay’s personified humanity creates a strangely hollow proxy for the human beings he calls upon to “relieve the sufferings of the wretched slave.” The humanity of the sentimental community in Ramsay’s account is forged out of a shared relation to a common but excluded object—the slave—about whom humanity has feelings. Although the feelings Ramsay tries to excite connect individuals and create sympathy, they do not create likeness or equality. Instead, sentimentality generates a situation in which the subjects who sympathize and the objects who elicit sympathy confront one another across an affective and cultural divide in which one set of people feels *for*—has feelings about and instead of—another. This double movement of empathy and usurpation suggests that for sentimental literature, the question should be not only “can the subaltern speak?” but also “can the subaltern feel?”

In Ramsay’s account, the slave is further marginalized by the fact that it is not the slave but the personification of “humanity” that bleeds and longs to vindicate her rights. Here the dyadic relationship between self and suffering other is triangulated, as what Joseph Slaughter calls “the banal metaphorical analogies between people like and unlike us” are supplanted by the mediating presence of a surrogate who reroutes “the metaphorical feat of imaginative identification with the sufferer . . . into a metonymical relation between the reader and the humanitarian figure who is an exemplary extension of our better angels.” It is less a kinship with the sufferers, Slaughter notes, than “a sense of responsibility to the moral integrity of one’s own class of humanity,”³¹ and indeed, the sequence of rhetorical questions with which Ramsay concludes involves not the alleviation of the slave’s suffering but rather the reader’s desire to claim humanitarian distinction—distancing himself or herself from the unfeeling indi-

vidual unwilling “to sacrifice his amusement or his pleasure.” In turning from the image of suffering slaves to the image of the suffering humanity witnessing that suffering, Ramsay constructs a viewpoint of humanity that, as Ian Baucom puts it, “*produces* humanity *as* a testamentary effect of bearing witness, *as* a determination to take some melancholy property in it.”³² In taking a sentimental stake in the scene, the witness claims a kind of affective property over it, property that in turn becomes the basis for claiming that the witness (not the victim) possesses humanity as an attribute or property.

Effusive displays of deep feeling potentially become declarations of a superior stock of humanity, the surplus value siphoned off from another’s suffering. Sentimental investments and appropriations yield excellent return, what Baucom calls “the social profit earned on . . . the melancholy property individuals take in other persons and events” (Baucom, 200). And indeed any number of proslavery Parliamentarians suggest that the abolitionist do-gooders should pay interest on the moral profits extracted from these sentimental transactions. “Not one [of the petitions sent to Parliament] had the honesty to say, we are ready to compensate for our humanity,” Lord Sheffield laments (Cobbett, 29:1229), fusing the question of how and whether to compensate the West Indian plantation owners for their loss of (human) property with the claim that antislavery Parliamentarians should purchase their own “humanity” in payback for moral pleasures received. “There was no question of weighing English gold against African blood, and the profits of Europeans against the miseries of Africa; these were things not to be compared,” one Mr. Windham declares, “but there was a question, namely, weighing humanity against humanity, and comparing the means proposed with the probable attainment of the object” (Cobbett, 32:893). Windham’s declaration that English gold and African blood cannot be compared constitutes an absurd denial of the literal exchanges between these two incommensurables performed in the slave trade, for moral incommensurability does not prevent the economic exchange of unlike things. That Windham turns the discussion to the impossible, tautological exchange of *like* things—of humanity for humanity—creates a logical impasse, an absurdity, that blocks out the *other* referent of “humanity”: not the relative weight to be given to different ideas of “humanity” but the actual fact of enslaved human beings.

For Windham and others of his ilk, the economic price of abolition outstrips any moral returns. The abolitionists wish to pay for their consciences on someone else’s tab. “Humanity,” the Earl of Abingdon claims,

is a private feeling and not a public principle to act upon: it is a case of conscience and not a constitutional right. . . . What right has any body of men, however numerous . . . to set up their humanity against the humanity of other people; and, to satisfy that humanity, to call upon Parliament . . . to repeal their own acts; and this, too, in a case, where not only public faith is to be violated, public justice sacrificed . . . tens of thousands of subjects ruined, millions and tens of millions of property lost. (Cobbett, 30:658)

The earl’s insistence that humanity is a “private feeling” banishes the humanitarian from the domain of the political. Constituting the private virtues of the abolitionists

as public vices, the earl designates humanitarian concern as a sentimental indulgence rather than a question of ethical obligation or political right. The only rights the earl wishes to discuss are the West Indian property rights abrogated by abolition.

Such comments reveal that proslavery writers are among the most acute analysts of the value-structure of sentimental humanity, albeit with the green-eyed perspicuity of someone thumbing through the blueprints of an enemy's coveted nuclear arsenal. One anonymous 1790 proslavery pamphlet, for example, reconstitutes the property or attribute of humanity claimed by the abolitionists as a form of literal owned property: a commodity that should be hoarded or consumed at home rather than shipped abroad. Recapitulating arguments that abolitionists lavish resources on remote suffering that might better be devoted to the British poor, the pseudonymous "Othello" argues that Britons cannot afford to squander humanity on their African brethren:

Our present store of humanity, I doubt, is little enough for home-consumption; we ought to consider, if we run ourselves out, that, although we may open our ports for it, as we sometimes do for American wheat, yet it might not come in quantity and quality sufficient for all our purposes, neither for them nor any of our neighbours. . . . Therefore as long as we can use our own humanity with propriety amongst ourselves, notwithstanding it is a perishing commodity, I hope we shall have no occasion to seek abroad for it; and I trust it will be more prudent in the mean time to lay an embargo on rather than export it to a losing market.³³

The telescopic philanthropy of the abolitionists amounts to a wasteful expenditure of a scarce good, an expenditure, moreover, that unsettles the balance of trade in a broader mercantile economy of humanity. Humanity's half-life—it is a "perishing commodity"—here marks not the frailty of human lives but the ephemerality of humane feeling, a kind of compassion fatigue. In this zero-sum economy, there is only so much humanity to go around. Although the author tries to restrict humanity to the sense of "benevolent feeling," the figurative construction of humanity as a commodity to be stored for home consumption, shipped, or weighed in the balance of trade converts it from an abstract property into a material one: the term cannot but remind the reader of the humanity bought and sold in the slave trade.

Yet to treat humanity as a scarce, easily exhausted resource is to draw its very essence into question. Is humanity truly humanity if only neighbors need apply? What happens to values such as equality or liberty if they are restricted to a select group? While the proslavery lobby argues that nearby ills should trump distant suffering—the abolitionists should clean up their own backyard before turning their eyes abroad—the antislavery speakers argue that the local and partial application of universal principles undermines their legitimacy. Thus James Martin argues that "he should never believe those persons really sincere, who were loud in their protestations of love to liberty, if he saw that love confined to the narrow circle of one community, which ought to be extended to the natural Rights of every human inhabitant of the globe,"³⁴ while William Fox indicts British chauvinism for narrowing the compass of the rights of man: "Can our pride suggest to us, that the rights of men are limited to any nation, or to any colour? . . . Are then the offices of humanity and functions of justice to be

circumscribed by geographical boundaries?”³⁵ The fact that Britons spring to defend the liberties of their fellow countrymen while responding with indifference to the plight of slaves in the West Indies betrays the way local affections and national interests create a restrictive universality that sentimental feeling can only partly overcome.

Fox’s commingling of the discourse of humanitarianism (“the offices of humanity”) and of human rights (“the rights of men,” “the functions of justice”) suggests the difficulty in dis severing them. Nevertheless, his effort to ground the rights of man in humanity, rather than, say, citizenship or a common relation to God, is undermined by its sentimental origins, for the definition of humanity derived from human pity binds humanity to suffering, which is of course by no means the unique province of humans. Jeremy Bentham’s famous and much-quoted protest against the fact that slaves and animals alike “stand degraded into the class of things”³⁶ opens with a critique of additive definitions of humanity (the “featherless biped” model) that expands the category of those entitled to humane treatment to embrace animals. “The French,” he tells us, “have already discovered that the blackness of the skin is no reason why a human being should be abandoned without redress to the caprice of a tormentor. It may come one day to be recognized, that the number of the legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the *os sacrum*, are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate.” Bentham’s language—the passive voice of “it may come to be recognized,” the notion that humans and creatures are “abandoned” rather than conducted or delivered into evil—obscures the agency that inflicts the suffering as well as the agency that might end it. The definitive question governing our acts, he concludes, should not be “Can they *reason*? nor, Can they *talk*? but, Can they *suffer*?” (309n).

In shifting from the notion that thought, reason, speech, and even recognizable morphology qualify another for humane treatment (that is, the right not to “be abandoned to the caprice of a tormenter”), Bentham transforms the gauge of responsibility from the question of whether another is seen to be possessed of particular abilities or attributes, to a negative capacity, a capacity that is an incapacity: that is, to suffer. “Being able to suffer is no longer a power,” Jacques Derrida points out; “it is a possibility without power, a possibility of the impossible.”³⁷ Although the emphasis on suffering creates some of the premises of humanitarian intervention (the obligation to act to alleviate another’s woes) and human—or animal—rights (the right not to be made to suffer), it also has some unintended consequences in the context of the slavery debates. For this emphasis on suffering—a quality shared by human and animal alike—at times undermines claims about the essential humanity of the enslaved, because it leads to a blurring of the very distinction between slave and brute that abolitionists sought to assert elsewhere in the debates.³⁸ The abolitionists endeavor to turn this possible collapse of human and animal to moral ends by using it to illustrate the essential category error at the heart of slavery: “Even if the objects of it were brute animals,” Charles James Fox declares, after detailing the horrors of the middle passage, “no *humane* man could expose them to be treated with such wanton cruelty. If the merchandize were totally inanimate, no *honest* man could support a trade founded upon such principles of injustice.”³⁹ That said, when Fox complains that “it was not

his Fault . . . that he was reduced to the degrading necessity of speaking of human beings, as if they were horses,”⁴⁰ he is drawing attention less to assertions made by some of the proslavery writers, than to a logic internal to his own argument—a logic that, by stripping away the characteristics that distinguish humans from one another, reduces all to mere or even bare life.

For if we began with an additive definition of man—featherlessness, two-leggedness, rationality, speech—the sentimental quest for this lowest common denominator of humanity increasingly works us toward a subtractive definition that leaves as its remainder poor, bare, forked creatures, necessitous beings, capable only of suffering. The one “to whom humanitarian action is addressed,” as Rony Brauman puts it, “is not defined by his skills or potential, but above all, by his deficiencies and disempowerment,” and this deficient being is a by-product, in Brauman’s account, of the processes of identification humanitarianism solicits.⁴¹ Because it “starts with the concern to reduce the suffering of other beings, effected through a process of identification that permits closeness to the other,” humanitarianism “expresses the idea that humanity is a homogeneous totality that, in spite of its diversity, embodies a fundamental unity” and thus “erases the irreducible difference constitutive of each individual as a unique person” (47). The “fundamental unity” to which humanitarian feeling appeals, that is, blocks out the recognition that “the singularity of the human in relation to the animal world resides precisely in the plurality of guises it assumes, as well as in its aspirations” (47). The “closeness to the other” that facilitates identification entails the paring away of the plurality through which the singularity of the human is expressed in search of a human “commonality”—a commonality usually fashioned after the likeness of the feeling subject.

The humanitarian precept that beneath, behind, or before allegiances, nationality, ethnicity, or race, lies the human thus proves to be deeply problematic. At the same time as it promotes a seemingly encouraging vision of a shared species being, it risks leading us to a model of humanity that eradicates the “irreducible difference of each individual” to which Brauman refers as well as broader claims to political personality. It is useful to recall in this respect the noncorrelation in eighteenth-century thought between “human” and “person”: the category of the person *includes* nonhuman entities like corporations and *excludes* human beings such as slaves, the poor, women under coverture.⁴² The “human” takes on an important role as the catch-all category for those who did not count as persons. Because of the way humanity is defined, that is, the recognition of humanity carries with it no entitlements or political prerogatives: in sentimental discourse, nothing ultimately closes the gap between what Barbara Johnson calls a “lyric ‘person’—emotive, subjective, individual—and a legal ‘person’—rational, rights-bearing, institutional.”⁴³ The sentimental evocation of the slave’s humanity offers us not a potential subject or citizen with rights and duties but something closer to what Hannah Arendt reminds us was a “human being or *homo* in the original meaning of the word, indicating someone outside the range of the law and the body politic of the citizens, as for instance a slave—but certainly a politically irrelevant being.”⁴⁴ On these terms, the humanity produced by the sentimental is a minimal form, carrying with it no prerogatives, except to suffer.

The humanitarianism produced by the sentimental is likewise minimal, addressed

to the human being understood as “one who is not made to suffer”—to an entity that is by definition a victim, incapable of possessing rights, much less of enforcing its claim to possess them. It is for this reason that the laudable aim of preventing or alleviating suffering may lead modern humanitarian and human rights discourse to what Wendy Brown has called an “antipolitics,” in which the “what’s not to like” aspect of helping the downtrodden masks its unintended side-effects or unremarked consequences: “there is no such thing as *mere* reduction of suffering or protection from abuse—the nature of the reduction or protection is itself productive of political subjects and political possibilities.”⁴⁵ Humanitarian sensibility (when it is the only relation taken to others) may strip its objects of agency, individual and collective, leaving us with a version of humanity perilously close to that offered by Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Arendt’s influential analysis of the plight of refugees in the wake of the repartitioning of Europe following World War I showed that human rights do not precede political rights; rather political rights (the rights of citizens) determine the recognition and scope of human rights. Once “human beings lacked their own government and had to fall back upon their minimum rights, no authority was left to protect them and no institution was willing to guarantee them.”⁴⁶ For Arendt, human beings without citizenship are reduced to “the abstract nakedness of being nothing but human” (300); human rights are the rights of those who are *only* human beings, of individuals who have been stripped of all other predicates, of nationality, religion, ethnicity, race, gender. Notwithstanding Enlightenment efforts to derive rights from the nature of man (rather than from natural law or God), humanity alone cannot guarantee what Arendt calls the “right to have rights” (298). On these terms, the bestowal or attainment of the title of “humanity” is a Pyrrhic victory at best.⁴⁷

Certainly the abolitionists congratulate themselves on “rehumanizing” the slave—“we have,” Wilberforce triumphantly proclaims in 1791, “gained one victory: we have obtained, for these poor creatures, *The recognition of their human nature*, which, for a while, was most shamefully denied.”⁴⁸ But the sentimental method of humanization usually generates a subject in the thrall of victimhood, restricted to a state of innocence, passivity, and political impotence. Indeed, immediately before Wilberforce celebrates the fact that the abolitionists’ exertions have “obtained for these poor creatures the recognition of their human nature,” he argues that they must be denied civic rights—arguably a necessary deferral of the dream of emancipation given the British political climate at the time, but one that promises the slave a debased humanity (and reserves to the abolitionist the right to confer that humanity). It is true, Wilberforce acknowledges, that slaves

had the same feelings, and even stronger affections than our own; but their minds were uninformed, and their moral characters were altogether debased. Men, in this state, were almost incapacitated for the reception of civil rights. . . . The first return of life after a swoon, was commonly a convulsion, dangerous, at once, to the party himself, and to all around him. Such, in the case of the Slaves, Mr. Wilberforce feared might be the consequence of a sudden communication of civil rights. This was a feeling it would be dangerous to impart. . . . You must conduct

them to the situation in question . . . and not bring the situation to them. To be under the protection of law was, in fact, to be a freeman.⁴⁹

The convulsions of the individual body recovering from a swoon here threaten to convulse the body politic as the disease-like “communication” of civil rights compromises the slave population. If the slaves at the outset of Wilberforce’s peroration “have” the same feelings as their European ventriloquists, by the end of the passage it is the Europeans who must protect the slaves from “feelings it would be dangerous to impart.” That Wilberforce collapses protection into freedom at the close of the passage disenfranchises the slave under the guise of paternalism, as slaves serve out a perpetual apprenticeship in an ongoing process of civilization that is never quite consummated. To offer beatitudinous relief to the slave—to feed the hungry and clothe the naked—is to restore humanity but also to withhold the political powers ostensibly asserted through rights.

Whether rights can be “communicated” in the way Wilberforce describes is, moreover, itself a question worth raising. To speak of rights as something that can be given or bestowed is to ossify them into a catalog to be attained, possessed, held; it is to constitute rights, in Jacques Rancière’s words, as something that can be grasped by “the identification of a single x.”⁵⁰ The abolitionist arrogates to himself the power to decide whether the slave will “have” rights and the prerogative to designate what the “single x” of the slave’s rights will be, rather than treating rights as generative principles to live by. If, as Rancière argues, rights such as “*freedom* and *equality* are not predicates belonging to definite subjects,” then one cannot simply add “rights” to a laundry list of traits that humans possess (along with bipedality, featherlessness, and reason) (303). “Political predicates are open predicates,” Rancière argues. “They open up a dispute about what they exactly entail and whom they concern in which cases” (303). Rights should thus be understood not as nominal possessions (something some humans “have” and others do not) but as entitling their claimants to “a sphere of implementation of these predicates,” as an “opening of an interval for political subjectivization,” in which subjects *use* rights that they do not (yet) possess (303, 304).

For rights too easily devolve into something to be “given.” If, as we saw above, “humanity” may be constituted as a good or commodity in a national balance of trade to be hoarded, expended, exchanged, rights may similarly be converted to a token in a global market in prerogatives and privileges. Indeed, in Rancière’s analysis, rights become a kind of hand-me-down to the disenfranchised. When rights appear empty or worthless,

of no use, you do the same as charitable persons do with their old clothes. You give them to the poor. Those rights that appear to be useless in their place are sent abroad, along with medicine and clothes, to people deprived of medicine, clothes and rights. It is in this way, as the result of this process, that the Rights of Man become the rights of those who have no rights, the rights of bare human beings subjected to inhuman repression and inhuman conditions of existence. They become humanitarian rights, the rights of those who cannot enact them, the victims of the absolute denial of right. (307)

Seen from this angle, the distribution of human rights becomes another token of the disempowerment associated with humanitarianism, part of a charitable donation that bundles them in with material necessities (clothes, medicine, food). And since the rights that emerge from a “humanitarian’ lack of rights” cannot be enacted or enforced by those who are oppressed, “someone else has to inherit their rights to enact them in their place,” which means that the empowered who charitably gifted rights find their gift returned in the form of what Rancière calls a “right to humanitarian interference” (308). Stripped of everything, the rightless can only be restored by proxy: even as the sentimental victims acquire speech and feeling only by virtue of their ventriloquizers, so too can their rights only be enacted in their stead. The sentimental construction of the disempowered both performs and licenses the act of substitution on which this right to humanitarian interference is based.

Sentimental humanitarianism cannot deliver rights because it can only imagine the bestowal of rights in the form of a gift (to be given to subjects when they are deemed ready), an element to be eventually superadded to a being whose primary mode is suffering. If, as Claude Lefort has argued, “rights are not simply the object of a declaration, it is their essence to be declared,” it is because the act of declaring rights is both constative and performative: it describes the fact of their possession (without depending upon an external source to confer or grant them) *and* constitutes at the same time the human being “as the being whose essence it is to declare his rights.”⁵¹ Sentimentality cannot envision rights as something that must be declared or enacted by the parties in question, inasmuch as the very structure of sentimental description produces subjects whose suffering victimhood renders them incapable of making a performative declaration. Inasmuch as one cannot declare rights for another, that is, the ventriloquizing structure of the sentimental traps the slave in a structure of grief that cannot be converted to grievance, of complaint than never leads to vindication.⁵² The very form of the sentimental text undermines the possibility of recognizing the rights that the slave should already possess.

Even where eventual freedom is held out as a promise—as in the abbé Raynal’s widely read work on eighteenth-century colonialism, the *Histoire des deux Indes*—it comes hedged round by caveats and provisos that at best amount to an avuncular “we’ll see.” “While we are restoring these unhappy beings to liberty,” Raynal counsels, “we must be careful to subject them to our laws and manners, and to offer them our superfluities.”⁵³ The possibility of liberty is accompanied by the progressive tightening of ever-subtler Foucauldian disciplinary screws, as the acts of “restoration” undertaken by the collective “we” seem less a matter of restitution than of domination through the subjection of these “unhappy beings” to “our laws and manners.” Raynal’s use of the present continuous (“while we are restoring these unhappy beings to liberty”) initiates a process of emancipation that it does not achieve, and his choice of pronouns keeps all agency firmly in European hands, while the solidarity of his presumptive “we” implicitly places his readers on one side of the moral and sentimental divide.

These examples suggest how easily the eighteenth-century language of sentimental denunciation yields to the terms for imperial redemption, as antislavery becomes the moral banner under which Britain takes up the white man’s burden in pursuit of its colonial empire in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and humanitarianism

becomes the cover story for neo-imperial intervention in the twentieth and twenty-first.⁵⁴ Yet sentimental figures do not invariably or exclusively produce kinder, gentler visions of imperial dominion in the form of what Michèle Duchet calls the “humanitarianism of conquest.”⁵⁵ And notwithstanding the argument made above about the problematic content and form of the working definition of humanity created by sentimentality, we should not lightly dismiss the power of the sentimental in enabling writers and readers to imagine the experience of other people, and in compelling them to claim responsibility for their role in producing that experience. The sentimental enabled and impelled eighteenth-century readers to envision modes of action that might eliminate or attenuate suffering, even across great distances. That said, recent claims that have sought to conjoin the habits of sympathy inculcated in sentimental texts to the emergence of human rights overstate the case in asserting that sentimental identification engenders a belief in political equality or even human commonality. Sentimentality produces hierarchy and difference as much as it creates reciprocity and likeness.

Yet sentimental texts may produce *other* kinds of revolutionary possibilities not unconnected to human rights, and for this reason I want to conclude with a passage drawn from the first French edition of Raynal’s *Histoire des deux Indes*—a passage that, perhaps tellingly, did not make it into subsequent French editions. Raynal (and his main collaborator Diderot) were no strangers to the sentimental in their depiction of European colonial relations with other populations—almost every appearance of the narrative “moi” in the text is accompanied by a tear. It is thus all the more surprising that Raynal draws on Samuel Richardson’s 1747–48 sentimental novel *Clarissa* not in the midst of one of his tearful indictments of European depredations, nor in the course of one of his sympathetic apostrophes to the suffering natives, but instead in his discussion of the right of West Indian slaves to rise up against their masters. Raynal draws on Clarissa’s famous “penknife” scene, just after her rape by the libertine Lovelace, when Clarissa threatens to kill herself with a penknife if Lovelace dares to approach her again. Raynal writes:

If you lay your hands on me, I will kill myself, Clarissa said to Lovelace; and I would say to him who attacked my liberty, if you draw near, I will kill you, and my reasoning would be better than Clarissa’s, for to defend my liberty, or what is the same thing, my life, is my first duty; to respect that of another is only the second. All else being equal, the death of the guilty is closer to justice than the death of the innocent. Would one say that he who would make me a slave is not guilty, that he exercises his rights?⁵⁶

Eighteenth-century readers of Richardson’s novel typically asked why Clarissa did not marry Lovelace, not why she didn’t kill him, but what is truly bizarre about this passage is that Raynal thrusts Clarissa into the position of the “black Spartacus,” the slave who would rise against the West Indian slave masters—or rather, Raynal’s narrator uses Clarissa to think himself into that position. Why does he mention Clarissa at all? At first glance, it is tempting to say that Raynal uses Clarissa as a kind of sympathetic warm-up exercise, limbering up the reader for the greater imaginative stretch of identifying with the slave, but in fact, the initial identification with Clarissa

is not only refused but condemned: Clarissa is wrong to threaten self-slaughter, and the narrator explicitly distances himself, and by extension the reader, from Clarissa. In Raynal's version, the sentimental innocence of the victim produces not a scene of passive suffering to be alleviated by the protective agency or tearful communion of the reader but rather a license to kill. Pitting self-preservation against the sixth commandment (thou shalt not kill), Raynal authorizes revolt not as a right but as a duty (devoir), and in the process, he makes the discomfiting suggestion that suffering innocents who depend upon pity, benevolence, and mercy may need force to uphold their claims to justice. The capacity for violence possessed by the violated or the downtrodden should not in Raynal's account be turned solipsistically back on the self.

The passage from Raynal potentially offers a way to traverse the gulf between man and citizen, between those who have no rights (who are only human) and those who have them (who are also citizens). The slave and Clarissa alike are relegated to the domain of the nonperson; both are barred from the political life and rights of the citizen. They both nevertheless manage to exploit the border separating bare life and political life. Clarissa's threats of self-slaughter are effective because the law that does not protect her in life will act to avenge her death; the loss of her biological life will reinstate her as an entity before the law.⁵⁷ Raynal's slave takes the biological life of the master (whose political status cannot protect him from the slave's vengeance) and thereby wrests recognition from the juridical order. In refusing self-slaughter, the slave converts the threat to his biological life into a matter of political import, renegotiating the threshold between "mere" human and rights-bearing individual through an *act* (rather than through the addition of a predicate—humanity, rights—that would establish his status as a subject.)⁵⁸

Raynal appeals not to sympathy but to reason and the calculus of greater and lesser evils. That Raynal couches a passage about the possibility of justice and equity in a series of mediated comparisons—of the narrator to Clarissa and of both to the slave; of one form of reasoning and another; of relative duties and rights—allows the passage to enact the failure of the promise of equity. The reciprocity Raynal celebrates in this passage is not the sympathetic exchange of feeling but the symmetry of vengeance. That Raynal justifies the slave's act through a plea to a higher order of obligation shakes the entire social edifice, by creating an extralegal act of revolt in the very image of the law. "That the law initially has the form of a *lex talionis*," as Giorgio Agamben has observed, "means that the juridical order does not originally present itself simply as sanctioning a transgressive fact, but instead constitutes itself through the repetition of the same act without any sanction."⁵⁹ In arrogating to himself the right of vengeance, the slave elevates a rival form of law through the sanctioned violence inherent, according to Raynal, in the duty to "defend my liberty or . . . my life." Yet the logic of an eye-for-an-eye has the potential to reignite a cycle of violence in the face of an approximation of a justice that can never quite be realized. In the passage, even irrevocable acts do not produce definitive forms: "the death of the guilty is *closer* to justice" but is not said to achieve it. If, moreover, one takes the concluding question—"Would one say that he who would make me a slave is not guilty, that he exercises his rights?"—to be literal rather than rhetorical, the passage itself ends with

Raynal ferociously lobbing the ball into the readers' court with the open invitation of a return.

I conclude with this passage because it suggests that the political potential of the sentimental may not reside in its elevation of suffering others to the status of the human but rather in the ways sympathetic identification with the place of another may produce a different vision of political action. For sentimentality must be read vis-à-vis other discourses. The history of humanitarian sensibility is only one aspect of the history of this period, and the sentimental strain is only one aspect of that history. Sentimentality was certainly not the only move in the abolitionists' playbook, and calls for sympathetic feeling—then as now—were tempered and supplemented by appeals to reason, to policy, to interest, to principle, to faith. And sentimental figures, as the passage from Raynal suggests, are not the monopoly of the privileged elite but may be conscripted to quite different ends by the exploited, the disenfranchised, or the enslaved. Yet for all its shortcomings, the patterns of thought and the habits of sympathy inculcated by the sentimental help to produce a belief in the possibility of individual and collective acts to produce change and in the necessity of creating forms of shared accountability that—with or without humanity—enable our imaginative reach to extend beyond our intellectual grasp. That said, the answer to the question “what is a human being?” should only *begin* with the notion that a human being is “one who is not made to suffer.”

NOTES

I would like to thank Joey Slaughter as well as Sam Moyn and the audience at the ‘Historicizing Humanitarianism’ conference at Columbia University for their commentary on this essay.

1. Ephraim Chambers, *Cyclopaedia, or, An Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences*, 5 vols. (London: W. Strahan, J. F. and C. Rivington et al., 1778–1788), vol. 2, s.v. Definition of the thing, or real definition.

2. The history of the abolition is too extensive to summarize in a note. Work that has taken up its relation to humanitarian sensibility includes David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1966); Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery: British Mobilization in Comparative Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); David Turley, *The Culture of English Antislavery, 1780–1860* (London: Routledge, 1991); the essays collected in Thomas Bender, ed., *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: The Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Charlotte Sussman, *Consuming Anxieties: Consumer Protest, Gender, and British Slavery, 1713–1833* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000); J. R. Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Antislavery: The Mobilisation of Public Opinion against the Slave Trade, 1787–1807* (London: Routledge, 1998).

3. Thomas Laqueur, “Bodies, Details, and the Humanitarian Narrative,” in *The New Cultural History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 177, 178, 179; Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 58. More recently, Laqueur has returned to “the story of how ‘human,’ not as shorthand for ‘reason’ or for some other essence of a species or as the bearer of abstract rights, but as the word for the ethical subject—the protag-

onist—of humanitarian narrative, came into being in the late eighteenth century,” placing this story of specifically human life in relation to the modern commitment to commemorating and remembering the dead. For Laqueur, not only humanitarian attention to life—the suffering of living creatures—but also acts of remembering the dead of war and disaster prove to be bound up in modern human rights: “the bringing to public recognition of the dead who had been made nothing because they had been regarded as nothing” calls into being narratives that acknowledge the value of the dead—their humanity, their violated rights—in order to (re)incorporate them “into a remade world of the living.” These narratives of “suffering and vanishing—of pain and dying unremembered—constituted a claim to be regarded, to be noticed, to be *seen* as someone to whom the living have ethical obligations.” Laqueur, “Mourning, Pity, and the Work of Narrative in the Making of ‘Humanity,’” in *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy*, ed. Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D. Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 38, 39.

4. Nicolas de Torrente, “Humanitarianism under Attack: Reflections on the Iraq War,” *Harvard Human Rights Journal* 17 (Spring 2004): 4. De Torrente’s complete definition is: “The most important principles of humanitarian action are humanity, which posits the conviction that all people have equal dignity by virtue of their membership in humanity, impartiality, which directs that assistance is provided based solely on need, without discrimination among recipients, neutrality, which stipulates that humanitarian organizations must refrain from taking part in hostilities or taking actions that advantage one side of the conflict over another, and independence, which is necessary to ensure that humanitarian action only serves the interests of war victims, and not political, religious, or other agendas” (4).

5. Peter Packard, *Am I not a Man? and a Brother? With all humility addressed to the British Legislature* (Cambridge: J. Archdeacon, Printer to the University, 1788), 12.

6. Thomas Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, particularly the African*, 2nd ed. (London: J. Phillips, 1788), 131–32. Proslavery Parliamentarians only rarely claimed that Africans were less than human and generally (though not invariably) avoided the question of racial difference. The discourse of race was frequently employed by abolitionist MPs seeking to discredit the opposition by attributing beliefs about African inferiority to them, but it creates the terrible historical irony that the intensification of discourses on race toward the end of the eighteenth century at least in part issues from the language of those who sought to end the slave trade.

7. Ephraim Chambers’s *Cyclopaedia* offers us a typical definition: “HUMANITY, the Nature of Man, or that which denominates him *human*.” *Cyclopaedia*, vol. 2, s.v. humanity. The *Encyclopédie* mocks the circular logic that produces such concepts: “Pour avoir des noms qui exprimassent les essences des substances,” the *Encyclopédie* observes, philosophers infatuated with models of abstract logic “ont fait les mots de *corporéité*, d’*animalité* & d’*humanité*, pour désigner les essences du *corps*, de l’*animal*, & de l’*homme*: ces termes leur étant devenus familiers, il est bien difficile de leur persuader qu’ils sont vuides de sens.” *Encyclopédie*, ARTFL database, s.v., definition. Habituated to the tautological logic that creates such concepts, people cease to recognize their vacuity, even as these concepts come to wield immense power in the world. The tautology of these definitions may, however, be converted to self-fulfilling progressive narrative when they acquire “a temporal dimension and a plot trajectory.” In Joseph Slaughter’s important account of human rights, “The legal tautology of inherency assumes the activity of a transitive verb, converting the human personality and its dignity from a condition or quality into a project. The proleptic version

of inherency-in-becoming anticipates a future anterior perspective from which a projected inalienability of human rights will have been recognized as inalienable.” Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 79, 80.

8. Dumarsais, *Les tropes de Dumarsais, avec un commentaire raisonné . . . par M. Fontanier*, 2 vols. (Geneva: Slatkine, 1967), 1: 332. What Derrida remarks of the animal also holds for the human: if “there is no Animal in the general singular, separated from man by a single, indivisible limit,” still less can the plurality of living creatures be “assembled within the single figure of an animality that is simply opposed to humanity.” Jacques Derrida, “The Animal that Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 47. This issue of singularity is not only a question of representative exemplarity but also a matter of producing the subject—humanity—to which predicates such as rights may be assigned. As Susan Maslan notes, the doubling of the rights-bearing individual in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* should remind us that prior to 1789, “humanity had never been the subject of rights: rights were distributed on the basis of social class, of religion, of community” (360). Susan Maslan, “The Anti-human: Man and Citizen before the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2/3 (2004): 360. The assumption that human rights are eternal and self-evident or that humanitarian sensibility is automatic and irresistible is undermined by the fact that the entity said to bear rights or incite sympathy has to be brought into being: a subject needs to be constructed to which the predicate may be attached.

9. Richard Rorty’s “Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality” opens with Plato’s featherless biped in order to contend that the theoretical delineation of the category of the human does not have a material impact on rights discourse. Respect for human rights, Rorty argues, issues not from the belief in foundational truths about the commonality of human nature (whether it be a question of feathers, feet, or rationality) but from a progressive sentimental education that incites sympathy for the suffering of others. That is, the humane treatment of others (which Rorty seems to fuse with human rights) issues not from ethical principles or moral knowledge based on appraisals of shared species membership but from the reception of “long, sad, sentimental . . . stories, repeated and varied over the centuries, [which] have induced us, the rich, safe, powerful, people, to tolerate, even to cherish, powerless people—people whose appearance or habits or beliefs at first seemed an insult to our own moral identity, our sense of the limits of permissible human variation” (133–34). Whether or not Rorty’s “long, sad, sentimental story” leads to a desire to alleviate suffering, or to avoid inflicting injury on others, his emphasis on the preservation of others from suffering reads more as a justification of humanitarianism than as a vindication of human rights. This essay takes issue with a number of Rorty’s claims and assumptions: his failure to recognize the ways sentimental stories go awry; his assumption that feelings of toleration or tenderness would promote human rights rather than paternalism; his depiction of sympathy and identification as producing symmetry rather than inequality; and his characterization of the thoughts of “most people—especially people relatively untouched by the European Enlightenment” in terms of a childlike, even infantilizing, rhetoric of “good” and “bad” (126). Richard Rorty, “Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality,” in *On Human Rights*, ed. Stephen Shute and Susan Hurley (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 111–34.

10. Vicesimus Knox, *Winter Evenings, or Lucubrations on Life and Letters*, 3 vols. (London: Charles Dilly, 1788), 2:264.

11. *Substance of the Debates . . . in the House of Commons on the 10th June, 1806, and in the House of Lords on the 24th June, 1806* (London: Phillips and Fardon, 1806), 37.

12. Wilberforce repeatedly employs figures of obscurity to explain how Britons can blind themselves to the facts of the trade, but also acknowledges the moral loopholes devised by clear-sighted but self-interested individuals to justify continued evil. The proslavery interests “seemed, if he might so say, to be enveloped by a certain atmosphere of their own, and to see, as it were, through a kind of *African medium*; every object that met their eyes, came distorted and turned from its true direction. Even the declarations made by themselves on other occasions seemed wholly new and strange to them; they sometimes forgot not only what they had seen, but what they had said . . . There was not only an African medium, but an *African logic* too: it seemed to be an acknowledged maxim in the logic of Africa, that every person who offered a slave for sale had a right to sell him. However fraudulent the manner might be in which the broker had obtained the slave, if they paid him a just price for him, all was right, it was a perfectly fair *bona fide* transaction.” Great Britain, Parliament, House of Commons, *The Debate on a Motion for the Abolition of the Slave-Trade in the House of Commons on Monday and Tuesday, April 18 and 19, 1791, reported in detail* (London: W. Woodfall, 1791), 9, 10.

13. Laqueur, “Mourning, Pity, and the Work of Narrative,” 41.

14. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 29.

15. I have explored these questions at greater length in *Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

16. See especially Thomas L. Haskell, “Capitalism and the Origins of Humanitarian Sensibility, Part 1,” and “Capitalism and the Origins of Humanitarian Sensibility, Part 2,” in Bender, ed. *The Antislavery Debate*, 109–60.

17. *Debate on a Motion for the Abolition . . . on Monday and Tuesday, April 18 and 19, 1791*, 11; William Cobbett, *The Parliamentary History of England from the Earliest Period to the Year 1800*, 36 vols. (London: T. C. Hansard, 1806–20), 29:258.

18. Proslavery forces endeavor to hijack the abolitionists’ appeal to feeling, arguing that the MPs’ sympathies should be directed not toward the slaves but rather toward the planters with whom they share a common cultural identity. As one William Young noted, “These poor negroes are men, and have the feelings of men, we ought also to remember that the West India planters, and those concerned in this Traffick, are men also, and have the feelings of men; nay, that they have had the same education, and have the same sentiments as yourselves.” *Substance of the Debates . . . in the House of Commons 10th June, 1806 and in the House of Lords 24th June, 1806*, 43.

19. This process of altering the census of the human world—of instilling the moral perception of newly recognized cultural facts involving, for example, the humanity of slaves—entails hard cultural labor: “The redesign of the boundary between the categories of man and thing,” as Philip Fisher argues, “was an act of cultural work, as well as a legal and military matter, because the moral and perceptual change that alone could make effective a formal change had to be done by means of moral and perceptual practice, which includes repetition and even memorization.” Once these novel moral lessons have been digested as facts, Fisher argues, they become self-evident, and the cultural labor performed in asserting these truths must be forgotten. It is for this reason that the sentimental figures that did such hard work in insisting on the humanity of children, women, slaves, in retrospect come to seem painfully crude, shrill, trite, stereotypical. Philip Fisher, *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 4. The transformation Fisher ascribes to the sentimental may also be enacted through the critical investi-

gation of the epistemological and social obstacles to justice in what Sarah Winter terms “the novel of prejudice.” Whereas the sentimental novel depends upon emotional identification with very moving characters, Winter’s novel of prejudice extracts stances and actions from customary practice and meaning in order to measure them against the values that subtend universal human rights: justice, dignity, and equality. Rather than producing a sentimental community through sympathetic identification, the novel of prejudice exploits the fault lines and contradictions within societies and individuals, appealing to reason as well as to compassion in order to expose the gap between what one believes or knows and what one is doing. The progressive structure of the novel of prejudice lies neither in the reform of individual characters nor in reader response (moments of sympathy that leave the structural order intact) but rather in a novelistic structure that reveals the institutional forms that naturalize prejudice and sanction the inconsistent application of universal principles such as rights. Sarah Winter, “The Novel of Prejudice,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 46, no.1 (2009): 76–102.

20. Great Britain, Parliament, House of Commons, *The Debate on a Motion for the Abolition of the Slave-Trade, in the House of Commons, on Monday the second of April, 1792, reported in detail* (London: W. Woodfall, 1792), 7–8.

21. Johnson’s *Dictionary* offers four definitions of “humanity”: “1. The nature of man. 2. Humankind; the collective body of mankind. 3. Benevolence; tenderness. 4. Philology; grammatical studies.” Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London: W. Strahan, 1755–76), vol. 1, s.v. humanity.

22. The term “humanitarian,” as Raymond Williams shows in *Keywords*, emerged out of theological debates in the early nineteenth century which “described the position from which Christ was affirmed as a man and not a god . . . by analogy with *unitarian* and *trinitarian*.” Through its “association with the developmental sense of humanism,” the word acquired its modern affiliation “with new kinds of action and attitude belonging to the now specialized sense of humane . . . [as a] deliberately general exercise or consideration of WELFARE.” Williams draws attention to the word’s pejorative connotations throughout the nineteenth century, before its modern rehabilitation: “through much of C19 the use of humanitarian was hostile or contemptuous (as in mC20 *do-gooder*). But it is now one of the least contentious of words. It was probably its conscious social generalization of what had been seen as local and individual acts and attitudes which attracted hostility.” Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 150, 151. The fact that the descriptor “humane” is most frequently used to describe the proper treatment of animals—despite the fact that the Royal Humane Society was founded in 1774 “for the recovery of persons apparently drowned”—suggests the way definitions of humanity are stabilized in and around relations taken to others not fully considered or constituted as human.

23. *Substance of the Debates . . . in the House of Commons 10th June, 1806 and in the House of Lords 24th June, 1806*, 90.

24. For Sir William Davies, it is “Nature [that] has implanted in us a most tender and compassionate Sense and Fellow-feeling of one another[']s Miseries, a most ready and prevailing propension and inclination to assist and relieve them; insomuch that pity and kindness towards our Brethren have a long time, passed under the name of Humanity, as properties essential to and not without Violence to be separated from humane Nature.” Davies, *Self-Love the Great Cause of Bad Times* (London: Thomas Speed, 1701), 9. Later in the century fellow-feeling surfaces in discussions of species difference. Manifestations of sensibility become the sign by which another’s

humanity is to be recognized and the sign of the humanity of the feeling subject: “Those who feel lively emotions,” as Mary Wollstonecraft wrote, “wish to know . . . if they are indeed tied to their species by the strongest of all relations, fellow-feeling . . . The untutored savage and the cultivated sage are found to be men of like passions with ourselves.” Wollstonecraft, review of Samuel Stanhope Smith, *Essay on the Causes of the Complexion and Figure in the Human Species*, in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler, 7 vols. (London: Pickering, 1989), 7:50. The notion that fellow-feeling helps class the human persists to this day. Thus although Richard Rorty claims that a foundational account of the nature of the human is not needed to ground discourses of human rights as long as the consequences of these discourses are progressive, he nevertheless postulates that humans share two traits: suffering and sympathy. If the former is unequivocally shared with animals, the latter differentiates humans from animals: “we can feel *for each other* to a much greater extent than they can” (Rorty, 122), a caveat presumably introduced to explain why the sphere of rights needn’t be enlarged to embrace animals.

25. William Clagett, *Of the Humanity and Charity of Christians*, 1686, qtd. in R. S. Crane, “Suggestions toward a Genealogy of the ‘Man of Feeling,’” *ELH* 1, no. 3 (1934): 212. See also Norman S. Fiering, “Irresistible Compassion: An Aspect of Eighteenth-Century Sympathy and Humanitarianism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 37, no. 2 (1976): 195–218. Part of what distinguishes Christian models of piety from later humanitarian sensibility is the emphasis in the former on the otherworldly. Meditation on suffering in an earlier tradition is bent on Christ, not on humans more generally conceived. “Humanity, in its first and general acceptation,” wrote Hill in *The Prompter* in 1735, “is call’d by Holy Writers, *Good Will towards Men*; by Heathens, *Philanthropy*, or *Love of our Fellow-Creatures* . . . When strongly *impress’d* on the *Mind*, it assumes a *higher* and nobler Character, and is not satisfy’d with *good-natured* Actions alone, but *feels the Misery* of others with *inward Pain*. It is then deservedly named *Sensibility*.” *Prompter* 63, June 17, 1735; qtd. Crane, “Suggestions toward a Genealogy,” 219–20.

26. James Beattie, *Elements of Moral Sense*, 2 vols. (London, 1790–93), 1:180.

27. William Wilberforce, *The Speech of William Wilberforce, Esq., Representative for the County of York, on Wednesday the 13th of May, 1789* (London: J. Walter, C. Stalker, and W. Richardson, 1789), 21–22.

28. James Steintrager, *Cruel Delight: Enlightenment Culture and the Inhuman* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 43, 45. See also Karen Halttunen’s influential discussion of the pornography of pain as the Janus face of the sentimental interdiction against it: pain became “obscenely titillating precisely because humanitarian sensibility deemed it unacceptable, taboo.” Halttunen, “Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture,” *American Historical Review* 100, no. 2 (1995): 304.

29. *The Universal Spectator: By Henry Stonecastle*, 4 vols. (London: A. Ward, J. Clarke, D. Browne et al., 1747), 2:186

30. Ramsay, *An Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies* (London: James Phillips, 1784), 104–5.

31. Slaughter, “Humanitarian Reading,” in *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy*, ed. Wilson and Brown, 94, 102–3, 103.

32. Ian Baucom, *Specters of The Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), 201.

33. Othello, *Strictures on the Slave Trade, and their Manner of Treatment in the West-India Islands* (London: W. Richardson, 1790), 38–39.

34. *The Debate . . . on Monday and Tuesday, April 18 and 19, 1791*, 54.
35. William Fox, *An Address to the People of Great Britain, on the Propriety of Abstaining from West India Sugar and Rum* (London, 1791), 7.
36. Jeremy Bentham, *Introduction to the Principle of Morals and Legislation* (London: T. Payne, 1789), 309n. James Steintrager argues that Bentham's position in fact "breaks quite profoundly with sentimental ethics. Bentham does not ask us whether or not *we* suffer when we see an animal in pain. Rather, he asks us to calculate objectively the suffering of others" (Steintrager, 49). Although Bentham departs in this respect from sentimental ethics, the centrality of suffering to his argument marks its continuity with the version of humanity produced by sentimentalism.
37. Derrida, "The Animal that Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," 28.
38. On the love of lapdogs over humans, see Markman Ellis, "Suffering Things: Lapdogs, Slaves, and Counter-Sensibility," in *The Secret Life of Things: Animals, Objects, and It-Narratives in Eighteenth Century England*, ed. Mark Blackwell (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 2007), 92–113; see also Laura Brown, *Fables of Modernity: Literature and Culture in the English Eighteenth Century* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001), 221–65.
39. *Debate . . . 1792*, 132. See also, for example, Peter Packard, "Even supposing the Negroes to be Brutes, the benevolent spirit of religion teaches us that a truly righteous man is merciful to his beast, and that they are entitled even in this view to a treatment far different from that which they receive at our hands." Packard, *Am I not a Man? and a Brother?*, 2. Abolitionist writers circle around the failure to *grasp* an essential shared relation, and they invite the language of kinship and kind to rush in to fill that gap—trying to make kinship (in the absence of a recognized categorical relation of likeness) into the means of creating feeling (though those feelings may not be the "right" feelings) and trying to make a categorical ethical claim based on kind (in the absence of a recognized kinship). That is, they are trying to accommodate both the possibility of feeling and the possibility of its absence, both the recognition of a common humanity and the refusal of that recognition.
40. *The Debate . . . on Monday and Tuesday, April 18 and 19, 1791*, 107.
41. Rony Brauman, "Contradictions of Humanitarianism," trans. Bridget Conley and Emily Apter, *Social Insecurity*, special issue of *Alphabet City* 7, ed. Len Guenther and Cornelius Heisters (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2000), 47.
42. Blackstone's definition of the person supersedes the individual, extending to artificial persons, "bodies politic, bodies corporate, (*corpora corporata*) or corporations," including the monarch, the university, hospitals, and corporate bodies of governance such as the City of London or guilds, which "preserve entire and for ever those rights and immunities, which, if they were granted only to those individuals of which the body corporate is composed, would upon their death be utterly lost and extinct." Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England: A Facsimile of the First Edition of 1765*, 4 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 1:455.
43. Barbara Johnson, "Anthropomorphism in Law and Lyric," *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 10 (Summer 1998): 550.
44. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1963), 107.
45. Wendy Brown, "'The Most We Can Hope For . . .': Human Rights and the Politics of Fatalism," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2/3 (2004): 453, 460.
46. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, rev. ed. (New York: Harcourt, 1968), 292.
47. Susan Maslan draws attention to the proximity between Arendt's *homo* and Agamben's bare life in which to be human and only human is to be excluded from the "politically qualified

life” of the citizen. Maslan flags the fact that Agamben fails to register the importance in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of “the human body—not as a body to be fed, nor as a producer of labor, nor as an object of demographic concern—[but] as the locus of sensibility, of feeling, and consequently of sympathy” (362). That not everyone possesses a body of sensibility in eighteenth-century texts on slavery—some politically qualified citizens lack sensibility while some “mere” humans possess it—suggests the complex ways in which these discourses may be employed in constructing and mediating the threshold between bare and political life.

48. *Debate on a Motion for the Abolition . . . on Monday and Tuesday, April 18 and 19, 1791*, 42.

49. *Debate on a Motion for the Abolition . . . on Monday and Tuesday, April 18 and 19, 1791*, 37.

50. Jacques Rancière, “Who Is the Subject of the Rights of Man?,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2/3 (2004): 302.

51. Claude Lefort, “Politics and Human Rights,” in *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 257.

52. On the conversion of grief into grievance, see Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

53. Raynal, *A Philosophical and Political History of the Two Indies*, trans. J. O. Justamond, 8 vols. (London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1783), 5:307.

54. Humanitarianism potentially blocks the sort of political analysis which might prevent exploitation and violence, including war. “Charged with the task of maintaining spaces of humanity at the heart of the war,” as Rony Brauman and Philippe Petit put it, humanitarianism becomes a “clear source of legitimization for violence,” allowing governments to avoid “putting forth political arguments when faced with what is still the political object par excellence: namely war.” Brauman and Petit, “From Philanthropy to Humanitarianism,” trans. Sarah Clift, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2/3 (2004): 397, 398.

55. Michèle Duchet, *Anthropologie et histoire au siècle des lumières* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995), 18. As David Rieff among others has shown, in recent years, the close relations between donor governments, military forces, and humanitarian organizations have turned humanitarianism into the continuation of war by other means. David Rieff, *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003). That said, it is important to recognize the significant differences between then and now: state structures don’t exist in the same way in the eighteenth century, and the activities undertaken by the abolitionists do not involve the kind of institutional structures now in place.

56. “Si vous portez votre main sur moi, je me tue, disait Clarisse à Lovelace; & moi je dirais à celui qui attenterait à ma liberté, si vous approchez, je vous poignarde, & je raisonnerais mieux que Clarisse, parce que défendre ma liberté, ou ce qui est la même chose ma vie, est mon premier devoir, respecter celui d’autrui n’est que le second; & que toutes choses d’ailleurs égales; la mort d’un coupable est plus conforme à la justice que celle d’un innocent. Dira-t-on que celui qui veut me rendre esclave n’est point coupable, qu’il use de ses droits?” Abbé Raynal, *Histoire philosophique des deux Indes*, first edition, 6 vols. (Amsterdam: n.p., 1770), 4:168. See also Raynal, *A Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies*, trans J. O. Justamond, 5 vols. (London: T. Cadell, 1777), 3:457. My translation; spelling has been modernized.

57. Clarissa makes this threat explicit in Richardson’s novel. “She turned to me; ‘Stop where thou art, O vilest and most abandoned of men!—Stop where thou art!—Nor, with that determined

face, offer to touch me, if thou wouldst not that I should be a corpse at thy feet!’ To my astonishment, she held forth a penknife in her hand, the point to her own bosom, grasping resolutely the whole handle, so that there was no offering to take it from her. ‘I offer not mischief to any-body but myself. You, Sir, and ye, women, are safe from every violence of mine. The LAW shall be all my resource: The LAW.’” Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa; or, The History of a Young Lady*, 3rd ed., 8 vols. (London, 1751) 6:62–63. See the analyses of this scene by John Zomchick, *Family and the Law in Eighteenth-Century Fiction: The Public Conscience in the Private Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 91; William Warner, *Reading “Clarissa”: The Struggles of Interpretation* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979), 63–65.

58. Clarissa’s relationship to the law—and Raynal’s troping of it—has important implications in the context of Rancière’s discussion of human rights, from which my argument above draws. Human rights in Arendt’s account, Rancière notes, lead to an impasse: “either the rights of the citizen are the rights of man—but the rights of man are the rights of the unpoliticized person; they are the rights of those who have no rights” or “the rights of man are the rights of the citizen . . . [which] means that they are the rights of those who have rights, which amounts to a tautology” (302). Rancière proposes a third possibility that creates a certain elasticity or mobility between the categories of man and citizen: by defining the Rights of Man as “the rights of those who have not the rights that they have and have the rights that they have not,” Rancière creates a political subject that tests the borders of inclusion and exclusion. Human rights become the means by which those excluded from the political order convert themselves from a “non-part” to a part (302). Thus Rancière shows how Olympe de Gouges uses human rights to redescribe the line between man and citizen, between bare life and political life, in her claim that the execution of women on the scaffold indicates that their ostensibly nonpolitical life *is* always already political, and that women are therefore also entitled to a place in the assembly. Following this logic, one might say that Clarissa lets herself go—or rather takes herself—to the scaffold but refuses a place in the assembly, while Raynal’s slave refuses to go to the scaffold and claims a place in the assembly. The conferring of rights in both cases is not a question of possession—of something one has or does not have—but is instead the *mise-en-scène* for what Rancière calls a dissensus: “putting two worlds”—the political life of *bios* and the “bare life” of *zoe*—“in one and the same world” (304). Even Raynal’s reclamation of the slave’s rights entails exclusions, however; in comparing Clarissa to a slave, he notably occludes the place of the slave woman whose body could be raped in the same way as Clarissa’s. He thereby forestalls the formation of a broader category of “woman” that might traverse the lines of racial and national difference.

59. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), 26.