

## Interview with Monique Allewaert: Thoughts on Para-humanity

November 25, 2014

C. Vandenboom: [0:01] Your book is obviously about a lot of different ideas in eco-criticism and personhood, and things of that nature and how place and environment affect the ideas of personhood. For our project, my group and I had to choose a topic based on a class that we are taking that's called "Slaves, Pirates, and Revolutionaries in the Mid-Atlantic 18<sup>th</sup> Century World" and when we had to pick our topic, what we thought was really interesting was the whole idea of personhood in the context of slavery and how personhood was defined during that time. And as you already know, slave trading was a huge, fundamental part of the Atlantic world and throughout writing, and records, and history, it's pretty clear that African slaves were often seen as savages, as animals, and objects during that time. And as slaves, they weren't considered human in the eyes of Europeans and Anglo-Americans. They weren't considered human but they weren't considered strictly inhuman either... So that's what we found fascinating when we were doing our research. So the gray area is kind of where you come in, and when I was reading through your book, I found that term "para-humanity" and so I thought it would be really interesting to get your perspective because I did read through that chapter of your book and that was really the one part of your book that really fit in with what we were researching. That's what we wanted to talk to you about.

So, the term "para-human" is really complex in its application and in the context of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century is also really complex. And when you look up the term "para-human," at least when we were researching, the definitions you get are more scientific than they are analytical.

M. Allewaert: [1:38] Interesting.

C. Vandenboom: [1:40] It's about human-animal hybrids, and about how they put things into genes and technology to create these human-animal hybrids. But your book is completely different in how you use that word. So, my first question is can you start by explaining what specifically you mean by that term?

M. Allewaert: [1:58] Yeah. So, I mean something that is beside the human, as opposed to not being human or being animal. It's kind of what you're saying, the sort-of gray area—not being the equivalent to other kinds of property (slaves aren't equivalent to other kinds of property), yet at the same time they are not entirely inscribed within the term human on the part of the dominant power structure of the time. I'm trying to take seriously that space between and a lot of work that happened to the state really wants to rehabilitate Afro-Americans to position of 'human-hood' and we can understand why. It's obviously really horrible what happened in the Middle Passage and slavery but I was really interested in thinking about the kinds of knowledges

and communities that are forms in that experience of being in-between and I was thinking that that itself was interesting.

[2:49] In terms of the scientific stuff, I wasn't thinking about that. I was definitely thinking about the term post-human and I was choosing a term that to me was not the post-human and I understand a lot of those kinds of sort of hybrids, changing genetic codes, to really be linked to the term post-humanism and the information age. First of all, I'm talking about a moment that's historically earlier, before our current moment in modernity, and how the kinds of genetic technologies that are possible now are possible. So, I don't want to conflate the post-human and what's happening in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

[3:26] And I was also not necessarily interested in hybridizing so much as what it sounds like you're talking about though I was trying to be responsible by not saying, "Oh yeah, you can understand all of what's happening in Afro-American communities in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in terms of the post-human." That just didn't seem right to me for a bunch of reasons. It seemed to be playing too fast and loose with history, and also making something comparable to the 20<sup>th</sup> century context that I don't think are exactly the same thing, even though I think we can gain information and knowledge from taking seriously this moment in-between. That's a long answer, but that's what I was thinking.

C. Vandenboom: [4:06] That answers my question though.

M. Allewaert: [4:07] Okay.

C. Vandenboom: [4:08] When we were researching it, we definitely know that "para" means "beside" so we knew you weren't trying to do it through a scientific format. So that makes sense a whole lot more sense though.

[4:16] When I was reading your chapter, I saw that you were talking about the hierarchy of slaves and Europeans and animals versus the horizontal relation. Can you explain that a little bit for us, what you mean by that?

M. Allewaert: [4:33] Sure. So, I was interested in the way that a lot of 18<sup>th</sup> century natural histories building sorts of taxonomies that have human beings for example high up and you have certain kinds of animals below them, chimps and so forth, and then below that you'll have other animals like dogs, and below that you kind of go down the scale of being. So, there's both the idea of the Great Chain of Being sort of precedes a lot of natural history that's taking off in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and then you have 18<sup>th</sup> century natural history—and both of them tend to rank different kinds of life forms—hierarchically. You know, in the Chain of Being, God is the top for example,

then angels, then you have human beings underneath that. There's a way in which the idea hierarchy is pretty important to almost all politics at that time including the U.S.'s politics, so I was interested in instead of having this sort of vertical line, this hierarchical line that ranks different kinds of life to think about different kinds of life being in relation to each other on a horizontal plane. That's what I was mostly simply trying to do.

[5:54] I was trying to chart things being in relation on the same plane, basically by putting them on a horizontal plane. In that sort of move from a vertical kind of hierarchy to a more horizontal way of thinking of relation, certainly I was thinking of more democratic modes of relation in a democracy that would include even non-human life forms as things we consider. Maybe we don't bring them into politics (maybe we do), but I was influenced by a lot of sorts of theorists who are really specifically thinking about distributed agencies and horizontal kinds of modes of sociality, people like Bruno Latour. When I was writing the book I was thinking about their work.

[6:36] As I look back, I think one of the challenges is how do you reconstruct or reimagine a hierarchy or structure? Because you can't stay on a horizontal plane, a perfectly horizontal plane forever, but I thought it was an interesting and important experiment influenced by a post-human thinker I guess to some degree, like Bruno Latour, even though I also think there is a need to move away from that, which is a thing I'm thinking about in my book I'm working on now.

C. Vandenboom: [7:10] Yeah, we definitely thought it was interesting though because I think you're right in terms of people even now, we tend to still put things in a hierarchies. The para-human it really does put into perspective that they are literally human but they weren't necessarily seen as humans either.

[7:26] On page 83 of your book, you had a quote and I'm going to read it to you but it is on page 83. It says, "The para-human is distinguishable from other bodies produced in emerging bio-political regimes because her body was broken into parts." Throughout the entire chapter particularly this part, you talk a lot about the mutilation of slaves' bodies and in other parts of the chapter you are talking about how bodies of slaves themselves is kind of what made them "para-human." I think it's interesting how you talked about the bodies because that's one thing we did not consider (the bodies of slaves) versus people as people. Can you explain that a little bit more about how the body of a slave itself during this time is what in part makes them para-human?

M. Allewaert: [8:15] Why this partialization is linked to para-humanity?

C. Vandenboom: [8:18] Yes.

M. Allewaert: [8:19] Yeah. So, I think I began by thinking about the experience of Afro-Americans in plantation regimes where you have these kinds of modes of punishment that allow the partialization of bodies. I was just interested in that. There's so many different cultural artifacts in the 18<sup>th</sup> century where you'll just see a limb coming off. I was just reading a poem called Sugarcane by James Granger, I don't know if you read it for your class, but it's about sugar production and just casually you see African laborers' limbs pulled into the sugar so this is a kind of scene that is repeated all the time. So, I was really struck by this as a repeated kind of motif that you see in Anglo-European art forms and their natural history, and also that you see in Afro-American story. And then I made a claim that the human body is one that's imagined as organic, that's closed, that's whole—as a closed entire body that has all of its parts. And then the para-human body could be fragmented or broken into parts. And there were several different kinds of evidence I tried to use in terms of the para-human. I was interested in the 3/5 clause in the Constitution, and the ways that that's referring Africans obviously, and it's also quite literally rendering them partial persons. I decided to push that even further and to link it to these legal codes that allow bodies to be broken into parts.

[9:59] So, you have the human's body that's enclosed and the integral and I was interested in the ways that the integral, enclosed human bodies is important to the foundation of Anglo-laws. And then the ways that the para-human's body is broken up, so that's the key kind of distinction for me. One thing that happens when your body is broken into parts or when you're missing things is you're forced into a different relation to the outside or it seems to me there's a mythology about the inside of your body being in relation to the outside. So, that's what I was interested in in particular because you don't have that containment or closure from what surrounds you. I was interested in thinking about what model of personhood might come from that relation of being vulnerable, of being so constitutively linked to that which is outside and how it's different from this closed body of the human being that I see in certain kinds of human rights discourses. So I'm taking a really negative experience—the body being broken into parts or being valued as partial, legally—and trying to think about again what kinds of knowledges are gained from that really brutal history in both legal history and history of practices on plantations.

C. Vandenboom: [11:29] How is that different though? You're talking about how humans are broken up in their bodies and it kind of creates a “beside the human” effect, in a way, but what about if it were just an animal? How does that make it different from an animal? Is it the intent of breaking up a slave's body that makes it “beside the human” versus an animal where they know it's just an animal and they may be cutting it up for a completely different reason?

M. Allewaert: [11:58] I think that the key difference is that it codified in law. If I were to go back and rewrite the book I would spend a lot more time thinking about legal codes in the colonies because you don't have codes about a part of the legal structure of a colony that say, “Oh here's

how you cut up the animal to punish it.” This is a kind of punishment, and I talk about the Code Noir which is French code that’s imitated by a lot of English colonies. It’s a legal code—how you cut up body. So, what’s different to me is it’s put into law. And that’s one of the reasons I point out in the chapter that the slave is not an animal body because you don’t make laws about how to punish animals that are legally a different status. So I’m interested in legal status—that’s the key difference; so:

A) it’s different from the partitioning of an animal body because of the way it’s codified in law and

B) the second thing is that I’m looking at cultural mythologies or the mythologies about the breaking of that body into parts.

[13:09] I’m not necessarily particularly interested in separating out human beings from other kinds of animal life but I was interested in kinds of mythologies, kinds of stories that are circulating (African American oral stories, for example) so that is another kind of product that I would associate not so much with other kinds of animals. I wasn’t trying to make equivalent animal bodies and para-human bodies. I don’t know if that makes sense or not.

C. Vandenboom: [13:39] No, no. So, you’re saying that the fact there is a legal code for how to break up the body is what makes the difference, right?

M. Allewaert: [13:46] Yes! Yes, and even that there’s so much anxiety about it and I think I mentioned this at some point in the book in passing, and there’s a lot of other critics that talked about it. A lot of British consumers and white American consumers are really nervous about eating sugar from the colonies because they know very well that the limbs of black laborers are pulled into that product. Part of it is a racial revulsion on their part—they don’t want to eat black bodies, they’re racist. But part of it is also linked to this partitioning of a kind of human bodies. I think that whether you’re looking at the fact that there’s legal codes for how to do this, there are not equivalent legal codes for animals, it’s actually much later that you’re going to have animal rights in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It’s a later cultural moment. Second of all, that this is a kind of mythology that’s produced by communities of persons that are not inside the position of the human. And third of all, because of the kind of guilts and anxieties you see about the partitioning of the black body; what you don’t see about the partitioning of the animal bodies. I see them as not comparable.

C. Vandenboom: [15:04] Why do you think oral stories were such a powerful source in terms of defining para-humanity during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries?

M. Allewaert: [15:11] I was trying to think about one of the cultures of Afro-American life outside of that which we recovered or documented really well. We have a pretty good handle on what literate Afro-Americans were doing and what they're saying, like Phyllis Wheatley, or a lot of Equiano, or Frederick Douglass, etc., and there's actually really important black-reading public, so I don't want to eliminate that kind of work because I think it's important to think about it. It was just a question of getting at what we don't see as much, what we don't talk about as much but we know exists; it's just hard to find it because it's lost to history but there have to be ways of recovering it so that's what I was trying to do.

[15:56] I think the written record (the literate African Americans) and the oral record will tell us different kinds of things. Often if it's an Afro-American slave, it's rarer to have access to print or free to have access to print cultures. When that's the case, you're going to be already within a sort of more dominant and normative culture, and you're going to be in it on terms that not going to be advantageous to you because you're thought to be, like Wheatley, more primitive or maybe not capable of writing these kinds of poetry so you have to prove, you have to extra-prove you're capable of doing this.

[16:35] So, as I pointed out, there are ways in which Wheatley's poetry now to us in the 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> century can be disappointing because she's not really being super radical. She is saying slavery's bad, for sure, but people can be sort of disappointed but if you're disappointed, you're not thinking about the really determined terms in which she's writing. She can't write whatever she wants, she has to prove that she's capable of working within existing genres, right? I read basically all black writing in English that I knew of when I was preparing for the project and what I noticed was that they didn't talk about oral stories or about fetishes which I also recognized which I also read about and I thought, "Huh, that's really interesting." So, you have all of these white natural historians, or slave owners, or plantation owners who are talking a lot about these things and you have Afro-American writers who say nothing about these things. Part of it is no doubt that the plantation owners have a vested interest in presenting Africans as primitive but that isn't enough because we have some sense of these artifacts having existed, right? So I was really thinking about that problem and the answer I gave it was that Afro-Americans in print are really trying to prove Afro-American enlightenment and they're really being on par with Anglo-Europeans. So for me, the category on top of that, the idea of para-humanity is not a black category because there's an awful lot of early black writers who are really strongly writing for within the position of the human, right? But basically what made it powerful to me is that it was something that was almost impossible for black writers to articulate in print that nonetheless existed.

C. Vandenboom: [18:22] How do you think that para-humanity has left its legacy today in modern society? And you kind of talked about this a little bit but just in a modern context.

M. Allewaert: [18:31] Yeah, I think that you could certainly argue that Afro-Americans are in a certain position that is not entirely within the human that's kind of what makes certain kinds of disproportional suffering for African Americans thinkable to people or why does it seem problematic. I certainly think that that's the case. For me, the idea of para-humanity would most interestingly be realized in modes of communities that are not that of the dominant U.S. nation-state. I think it's often pretty disappointing. I'm not against it entirely, but I'm interested in putting pressure on dominant kinds of narratives. And I think everybody is implicit. I absolutely don't believe in like African American victims and white persons as aggressors. I think it's a very complicated story with many different kinds of races but I do think that certain kinds of persons, often African Americans, are in a position that's structurally not equivalent to more privileged kinds of Americans. If you look at prison rates for example, it's pretty clearly the case for earnings and so on. I think that you could perhaps extend the term in that way and also think about the ways that persons that are in these disenfranchised positions will opt out or opt for something else.

C. Vandenoorn: [20:00] Thanks so much for taking the time to talk to me. I really appreciate it!

M. Allewaert: [20:03] You're welcome. Happy Thanksgiving.