

# Human vs. Nonhuman: How Marginalized Communities Are Considered “Things”

Madison Vaillant

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Robert Wilkie, English Department

## ABSTRACT

Within the field of critical theory, the discourse on the human vs. nonhuman is varied and extensive. This topic cannot only be applied to the relationship between humans and objects or nature, but also to the link between marginalized communities and systems of power. Using the works of Jane Bennett, Rosi Braidotti, Karl Marx, and Frank B. Wilderson III and the editors of *Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction*, I will illuminate how the human vs. nonhuman binary functions within humans themselves, specifically in the lives of Black people. By dissecting the theories of each author, comparing them, and applying them to this topic, the intricacies of power and social relations in today’s society are revealed, and offer us a new lens through which to analyze the human vs. nonhuman in real life.

## INTRODUCTION

The human vs. nonhuman debate often centers on humans and animals, or humans and nature, or humans and inanimate objects. It is also important to consider the relationship between humans themselves and analyze how we treat certain communities. Due to systems of power that have been in place since the conception of the United States, a hierarchical rank thrives in every facet of society, placing white men on the top of the pecking order, and marginalized communities on the bottom. In today’s world, discussions in social justice circles have honed in on the argument that the Black community in particular continues to be treated as nonhuman under modern systems of power, despite the illusion of liberation and equality. The theories of Marx, Braidotti, Bennett, Wilderson, and the editors of *Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction* determine why the human vs. nonhuman conjunction with marginalized communities thrive under the same systems of power. Each theorist has a different take on this binary. Firstly, Marx views the human vs. nonhuman subject in the context of production.

## SUMMARY OF THEORIES

In Marx’s works, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* and the chapter on commodities from *Capital*, he compares humans and human labor as commodities to serve the market. He argues that capitalism emphasizes the importance of exchange-value rather than use-value. When the exchange of a good for profit is more important than the utility of that good, which is produced to meet human need, the person producing that good is devalued. They are a commodity, and subsequently alienated from the good itself; as Marx explains, “the object which labour produces—labour’s product—confronts it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer...Labour’s realization is its objectification” (657). For Marx, this alienation leads to the relationship between production and the laborer, as, “the worker becomes a slave of his object, first, in that he receives an *object of labour*, i.e., in that he receives *work*; and secondly, in that he receives *means of subsistence*. Therefore, it enables him to exist, first, as a *worker*; and, second, as a *physical subject*” (658). Here, we see the dehumanization of the laborer, whose primary purpose for living is to work, and how the exploitation of labor generates what Marx calls “surplus-value.” When we are reduced to commodities, we are considered less than human. We become objects, resources to be taken advantage of, and therefore nonhuman. The concept of nonhumans being used as resources is what Bennett calls “standing reserve,” which she discusses as part of “Thing-Power” within the human vs. nonhuman topic. Her take is literal and deals with humans and objects or nature, rather than a system, like Marx.

Bennett’s work *Vibrant Matter* focuses on her concepts of “Thing-Power.” It argues that things, or nonhumans, are entities that exist outside the perceptions and utility of humans, and they play a major role in the world (Bennett 2438). It is Bennett’s view, and other New Materialists’ view, that everything, quite literally every *thing*, is connected, and has equal value to each other. She speaks on American materialism and how “the sheer volume of commodities, and the hyper consumptive necessity of junking them to make room for new ones, conceals the vitality of matter” (2438). This aligns with Marx’s commentary on the influence of exchange-value on the alienation of objects and laborers, though Bennett focuses on the object. It is in this sense that Bennett deviates from Marx,

because she views materialism in America as an issue with a lack of value placed on the object (object in the literal sense of the word), whereas Marx is concerned with the value of the producer. Her solution is “to *experience* the relationship between persons and other materialities more horizontally” (2442) rather than vertically, which results in hierarchies of value. Thinking horizontally means “the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated,” which in turn, would ideally protect those who don’t fit into the standards of the Ideal Man, and who suffer for it (2444). Just as Bennett believes raising the value of objects to that of humans will help close the ranks of oppression and superiority, Braidotti addresses similar topics of posthumanism and the issues of the “Ideal Man.”

Braidotti takes humanism to task in her work *The Posthuman*, where she primarily discusses the narrow-minded standards for the ideal human, which ranks cultures and types of people. She identifies the Enlightenment as a pivotal point in the creation of the “Ideal Man,” stating that “some of us are not even considered fully human now, let alone at previous moments of Western social, political and scientific history” (Braidotti 2329). The Ideal Man is reasonable, a citizen, has rights, and owns property. However, these traits originate from a time where only a select group of people qualified, and even then, this standard of perfection was impossible to obtain. In current times, however, we are facing the post-human, where we must alter our frame of reference for the “face” of our species. She describes the Ideal Man as “the measure of all things,” which supports a “specific view of what is ‘human’ about humanity” (2331). Europe is seen as the representation of the concept, and subsequently, equated with Humanism. This is then embedded in the roots of institutional practices today. This relationship feeds off of the human vs. other binary. Otherness is defined in relation and contrast to subjectivity, and Braidotti describes the other as “the sexualized, racialized, and naturalized others, who are reduced to the less than human status of disposable bodies” (2332). She takes an antihumanism approach that doesn’t rely on the dialectical which inevitably transformed the “other” into meaning “less than.” This is because Humanism finds its roots in the Enlightenment, which is the origin of the binary as well. Ultimately, she turns towards taking the human out of the universal perspective, and subsequently decentering it, which is in direct opposition to Marx, who focuses his discussion of this topic on mankind. While Braidotti defines the “other,” but also discusses related topics in great length, Wilderson takes the “other” even further in his explanation of the social death as it functions within the human vs. nonhuman binary and is experienced within communities.

In *Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction*, the human and nonhuman relationship is equated to the relation between Black and Non-Black people. The editors explain, “it is Blackness that is the dark matter surrounding and holding together the categories of non-Black” (Introduction 9). That is to say, Blackness is the determining factor for the definition of other groups. This relationship can be expanded to the discussion of the human and nonhuman when they describe the concept of “social death.” In the context of slavery, the enslaved are considered objects, and therefore, socially dead. This means they are subjected to gratuitous violence, alienated from their origins, and disgraced without reason (8). This social death, the editors argue, is an integral part of Blackness, and it continues to maintain systems of power. Slave catchers became police officers, and the system that created social death kept thriving. The editors explain how the distinction of human as social acknowledgement, valued life, volition, and subjecthood puts Black people in the category of nonhuman, as their existence is negated by all existing social structures. Afro-Pessimism’s focus on human vs. nonhuman relations within people themselves highlights his underlying assumptions, which exist in each theorist’s take on the topic.

## Underlying Assumptions of Theories

Foundational Afro-Pessimism theorist Frank B. Wilderson III’s argument on the human vs. nonhuman issue is that social death is a state of being that is intrinsically bound to Blackness, meaning his interpretation of this relationship exists within humans themselves. This is seen in his assertion that under the current system of humanism there is Black and there is Non-Black. Non-Blacks, who he says are whites and immigrants of color, uphold anti-Blackness that perpetuates social death. His explanation for the distinction between immigrants of color and Black people is, “colored immigrants exist in an intra-human status of degradation in relation to white people. They are degraded as humans, but they still exist paradigmatically in that position of the human” (Wilderson 21). Therefore, other POC and marginalized communities may be less valued as humans, but they are not nonhuman because of social death. This is particularly relevant when analyzing how Blackness specifically is equated to the nonhuman, and why that has roots in every aspect of society. While Wilderson discusses the intricacies of this binary, Braidotti questions its necessity at all.

Braidotti expands the concept of nonhuman to include all those who are not the Eurocentric Ideal Man. As stated before, the “other,” or nonhuman, are the “sexualized, naturalized, and naturalized others” (Braidotti 2332). Her solution is to decenter the human as a whole. Subsequently her underlying assumption is that decentering the human is possible without merely causing a shift in perspective. That is to say, a shift in the Ideal Man. Eliminating the image of mankind is less realistic than the prospect of updating that image. Meaning, eradicating something as

universal and fundamental to the existence of humans—attaching traits to the concept of mankind—is unlikely in comparison to making changes in those traits, like how discourse on intersectionality can slowly shift the general image of mankind from white and male to include those of other races and genders. Within the context of systems of oppression, this is seen with the way perceptions of marginalized communities change. Fighting for reforms and dismantling harmful stereotypes may feel like getting at the root of the issue, but the problem is that systems are the roots, and policies are the fruit it bears. The discrimination is baked in and cannot be extracted by surface level changes. An example of this is the way that schools in poor and working class neighborhoods, which tend to be overrepresented by people of color, receive significantly less funding and thus often result in lower educational outcomes. This originates from Jim Crow laws that strictly controlled where Black families could and could not buy housing. Even after these laws were repealed, redlining continues to influence where marginalized communities live and where they go to school, which subsequently affects school budgets (Rothstein). Perhaps Braidotti’s solution of decentering the human as a whole is something to strive for, though keeping a clear assessment of the limitations of this theory requires the analysis of other theorists. Similar to Bennett, Braidotti’s solution hinges on reducing or erasing the value differences between humans and nonhumans, which is contrasted by Wilderson and Marx, who focus their interpretations of the human vs. nonhuman on the relationships of humans and production or humans and other humans. Narrowing in again on the logistics of the human vs. nonhuman binary, Marx makes distinctions between types of coerced labor that are contradicted by the existence of slavery.

Marx’s discussion about coerced labor is the root of his underlying assumption. He spoke about serfdom in the context of compulsory labor and argued that the serf, in comparison to a laborer in a capitalist society, is not under any illusion of a worker/production power relationship (Marx 672). When alienation is a major component of commodification, it can be assumed that this awareness and objectification cannot coexist. However, slavery is a clear example of how they can. Slavery is a literal manifestation of the commodification of humans. It checks every box that Marx describes, chiefly the alienation, their labor being bought and sold, and their production being equated to their value. Where slavery-coerced labor deviates from Marx’s conclusions of serfdom-coerced labor is in the awareness of social relations. In a manifestation of Hegel’s “Lord-Bondsman” dialectic, the “I” (the human) overcomes the “other” (the nonhuman). It is in this relationship, this binary, that the slave has awareness of their thinghood. They understand the power and social dynamics that exist with the master and with those around them (Hegel 552). Not only does this dialectic apply literally to slavery, it also is another example of one thing defining itself with and by another. Furthermore, slavery is a context in which commodification and awareness of the system that caused that can go hand in hand. In modern times, this operates in the same way, due to the preservation of the Blackness as thinghood relationship that is imposed on their community by the human. Bennett’s focus is on eliminating such a hierarchy between human and nonhuman by equating the two, though using it as a fix for each issue wrapped up in it is debated.

Bennett’s argument involves both humans and objects, but her underlying assumption is that valuing objects as much as humans will cause a positive correlation in valuing different communities. While she acknowledges that it’s not an instant fix, she claims that it can “inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin” (Bennett 2444). To those like Braidotti and Wilderson, the problem runs much deeper than that, and this would not be a long-term solution. For example, caring about the environment, or a type of nonhuman, doesn’t require equal treatment towards POC, or women, or the LGBTQ community. Such a moral code is more intricate than the idea that caring about nonhumans means caring about every human. Plenty of people possess the cognitive dissonance to advocate for nature or animals (ex. vegans), yet they neglect their next-door neighbor who perhaps has been a victim of a hate crime. The two sentiments do not necessarily have a positive correlation. Each theorist provides a different angle to view the manifestation of human vs. nonhuman in the ranking of the nonhuman with marginalized communities, and Black people in particular. Marx’s explanation of the commodification of humans and their labor can be shown in the context of slavery, which feeds into the racism that exists today.

## APPLICATION TO MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES

Marx’s relationship between humans and production manifests itself, albeit with a few modifications, in the example of enslaved people. He says the value of exchange and the value of people are linked, which leads to the objectification of humans. Humans are then viewed based on what they can produce; “whenever, by an exchange, we equate as values our different products, by that very act, we also equate, as human labour, the different kinds of labour expended upon them” (Marx 670). This is similar to the way slaves were reduced to commodities rather than people, just as in the worker first, human second hierarchy that Marx mentions. While Marx’s theory functions as a broader inclusion of people and laborers, applying it to the situation of slavery gives it a more literal meaning. Enslaved people were commodities, and as such, they had exchange value. This is seen obviously, in the way enslaved peoples were bought and sold on markets. Marx compares commodities to pearls and diamonds, which

have value. Value is attached to objects, and riches to men (675). Enslaved people could only be seen as valuable, not as being rich, reinforcing their status as commodities to be used for labor. This is still relevant in today's society, and Wilderson's concept of social death demonstrates how this objecthood exists in the modern day among humans.

Afro-Pessimism maintains that slavery did not end, it instead transformed. The slave "became the radicalized Black 'subject'...but the same formative relation of structural violence that maintained slavery remained- upheld explicitly by the police (former slave catchers) and white supremacy generally- hence preserving the equation that Black equals socially dead" (Introduction 8-9). Afro-Pessimism makes the connection that the countless Black deaths and brutality at the hands of the police is an example of the gratuitous violence that social death entails. The violence is enacted in response to their mere existence. Their status as nonhuman shows in the way the binary defines other groups based on Blackness, like queer people, those of other races, social class, and most importantly, the "human" (9). Here, we see the human and nonhuman defining and contrasting each other. Afro-Pessimism's response to this is to essentially uproot the whole system and do away with perceptions of the self and identity, because of the way all movements and structures in place are defined by their non-Blackness, and as a result, their preservation of anti-Blackness. Granted, according to their theorization, the concept of the socially dead would always exist, because the existence of the human hinges on the nonhuman. Again, this is where Afro-Pessimists like Wilderson depart from Bennett's view that viewing humans and nonhumans horizontally rather than vertically in a value hierarchy will close the gaps of oppression. It is a main difference that separates the theories of Marx and Wilderson, and Braidotti and Bennett, due to the fact that two view this dichotomy as humans vs. objects/nature, and the other two take a less literal interpretation.

Despite Bennett's ineffective solution to the existing human vs. nonhuman dynamic between Blacks and non-Blacks, on a surface level her views on humans and nonhumans apply to this situation. This is important to recognize because Bennett's work focuses on nonhumans such as the environment and inanimate objects, not the relationships between humans themselves, so it is not a direct parallel. However, her views on utility can be discussed not only on the topic of slavery, but also its modern-day effects. The Black community has historically been exploited, which is an issue Bennett takes seriously with the treatment of those considered nonhumans. In times of slavery they were considered resources whose only purpose was to be used, in the most literal sense of the word. After slavery, discriminatory policies and the economic destitution of being robbed the chance of accumulating their own wealth led to a vicious and oppressive cycle. Many Black people struggled to accumulate wealth and were refused all jobs except those for the lowest paid. These jobs were usually excluded from policies that allowed wealthier citizens to hop social classes. And finally, just as Marx mentioned, we attach moral value to different types of labor, and the types of occupations many marginalized peoples were and are trapped in are at the bottom of the ladder (Castro, Maxwell, Solomon). The labor is not the same, but it has been transformed to perpetuate the same relationship that exploits the utility of marginalized people. Furthermore, Bennett may not be discussing the exact same relationship, but the works of other theorists and the circumstances of human vs. nonhuman dynamics in modern society creates a situation that one can analyze with her theories. Despite Braidotti's different interpretation of this relationship, her solution to the value imbalance aligns more with Wilderson on the response to inequality.

Inequality among humans, for Braidotti, is a result of the Enlightenment, Humanism, and by extension, the Ideal Man. Rather than tackle individual relationships, perceptions, and issues within this binary, her solution is to decenter the human and move away from Humanism. For her, Humanism cannot be redeemed in any way, because of its systematically oppressive roots. Any positive trait that it "celebrates" or represents can be weaponized and swung to an extreme, ultimately making its positive and negative characteristics inseparable (Braidotti 2339). This agrees with Wilderson's argument that the only way to stop treating Black people as nonhumans and exploiting them for our advantage is to uproot the whole system. Braidotti identifies our perception of the self as a result of Humanism and turns to complete dismissal of "the human" as we know it to completely escape the reach of Eurocentric institutionalized practices. In the context of modern-day human vs. nonhuman relationships, it would be concluded that the self, or the human is entwined with the definition of the other, or nonhuman. Merely shifting the binary does nothing to address the root of anti-Black racism, because ultimately, every system and identity is built around the existence and absence of Blackness. It is in this way that the influence of Humanism can be seen as another facet of white supremacy. This is just one lens to analyze the issue of human vs. nonhuman dynamics within marginalized communities, along with three others.

## CONCLUSION

Human vs. nonhuman relationships as they apply to specifically the Black community and systems of power today have ties to several theories on this broad subject. Using the works of Marx, Bennett, Wilderson, and Braidotti lead to not only an expansion on their theories, but also a greater understanding of the application of human vs.

nonhuman dynamics between various groups of people. Each theorist brings relevant insight to the existence of the human vs. nonhuman binary as it applies to marginalized communities, and specifically Blackness. Taking these pieces and creating a lens through which to view it allows for the discussion of the devastating effects of perpetuating this relationship. The treatment and understanding of the relation between the human and the nonhuman becomes much more than an abstract theoretical discussion or a dinner table conversation when we can acknowledge that it is why some pay dearly for merely existing every day of their lives.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to thank Dr. Wilkie for his guidance through this process. His insight gave me the ability to expand upon these theories in a way that honed my writing and analysis skills. His critiques also gave me the ability to produce a thought-provoking discussion of a subject I am passionate about.

## REFERENCES

- Bennett, Jane. "Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, by Vincent B. Leitch et al., 3rd ed., W.W. Norton & Company, 2018, pp. 2434–2450.
- Braidotti, Rosi. "The Posthuman." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, by Vincent B. Leitch et al., 3rd ed., W.W. Norton & Company, 2018, pp. 2329–2352.
- Editors. Introduction. *Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction*. Racked & Dispatched, 2017, pp. 7–23.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. "Phenomenology of Spirit." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, by Vincent B. Leitch et al., 3rd ed., W.W. Norton & Company, 2018, pp. 549–554.
- Marx, Karl. "Commodities." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, by Vincent B. Leitch et al., 3rd ed., W.W. Norton & Company, 2018.
- Marx, Karl. "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, by Vincent B. Leitch et al., 3rd ed., W.W. Norton & Company, 2018, pp. 655–659.
- Rothstein, Richard. "The Racial Achievement Gap, Segregated Schools, and Segregated Neighborhoods – A Constitutional Insult." *Economic Policy Institute*, 12 Nov. 2014, [www.epi.org/publication/the-racial-achievement-gap-segregated-schools-and-segregated-neighborhoods-a-constitutional-insult/](http://www.epi.org/publication/the-racial-achievement-gap-segregated-schools-and-segregated-neighborhoods-a-constitutional-insult/).
- Solomon, Danyelle, et al. "Systematic Inequality and Economic Opportunity." *Center for American Progress*, 7 Aug. 2019, [www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/reports/2019/08/07/472910/systematic-inequality-economic-opportunity/](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/reports/2019/08/07/472910/systematic-inequality-economic-opportunity/).
- Wilderson, Frank B., III. "Blacks and the Master/Slave Relation." *Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction*. Racked & Dispatched, 2017, pp. 13-30.