

# AFRO- PESSIMISM

*An Introduction*



**“SLAVERY IS THE THRESHOLD  
OF THE POLITICAL WORLD,  
ABOLITION THE INTERMINABLE  
RADICALIZATION OF EVERY  
RADICAL MOVEMENT.”**



**AFRO-  
PESSIMISM**  
AN INTRODUCTION

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## INTRODUCTION

This reader is intended to be an introduction to the theory called Afro-pessimism. Collected in this volume are articles spanning three decades of thought, with topics ranging from police violence, the labor of Black women, and the slave's transformation following emancipation, to the struggles of the Black Liberation Army and elements of anti-Blackness in Indigenous struggles for sovereignty. Although the authors use differing methods of analysis, they all approach them with a shared theoretical understanding of slavery, race, and the totality of anti-Blackness; it is this shared understanding that has been called Afro-pessimism. Importantly though, rather than a fixed ideology, Afro-pessimism is better thought of as a theoretical lens for situating relations of power, at the level of the political and the libidinal.<sup>1</sup> Afro-pessimism, in many ways, picks up the critiques started by Black revolutionaries in the 1960s and 70s, elaborating their short-comings and addressing their failures. While we don't intend to explicate at great length the theory of Afro-pessimism here—this will be done by the articles—it may be helpful to start with a brief overview to give those readers without a context some footing with which to go forward.



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1. *Libidinal economy* – the economy, or distribution and arrangement, of desire and identification, of energies, concerns, points of attention, anxieties, pleasures, appetites, revulsions, and phobias—the whole structure of psychic and emotional life—that are unconscious and invisible but that have a visible effect on the world, including the money economy. See Wilderson, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* and Chico, *cosmic hoboes* in “Further Reading.” [All further references here will be listed in “Further Reading” unless otherwise noted.]



One of the central tenets of Afro-pessimism, which expands upon the erudite work of Orlando Patterson,<sup>2</sup> is a reoriented understanding of the composition of slavery: instead of being defined as a relation of (forced) labor, it is more accurately thought of as a relation of property. The slave is objectified in such a way that they are legally made an object (a commodity) to be used and exchanged. It is not just their labor-power that is commodified—as with the worker—but their very *being*. As such, they are not recognized as a social subject and are thus precluded from the category of “human”—inclusion in humanity being predicated on social recognition, volition, subjecthood, and the valuation of life.

The slave, as an object, is socially dead, which means they are: 1) open to gratuitous violence, as opposed to violence contingent upon some transgression or crime; 2) natively alienated, their ties of birth not recognized and familial structures intentionally broken apart; and 3) generally dishonored, or disgraced before any thought or action is considered.

The social death of the slave goes to the very level of their *being*, defining their ontology. Thus, according to Afro-pessimism, the slave experiences their “slaveness” ontologically, as a “*being for the captor*,”<sup>3</sup> not as an oppressed subject, who experiences exploitation and alienation, but as an object of accumulation and fungibility (exchangeability).

After the “nonevent of emancipation,”<sup>4</sup> slavery did not simply give way to freedom. Instead, the legal disavowal of ownership reorganized domination and the former slave became the racialized Black “subject,” whose position was marked epidermally, per Frantz Fanon.<sup>5</sup> What followed was a profound entrenchment of the concept of race, both psychically and juridically. Formally, the Black subject was no longer a slave, but

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2. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*.

3. See in this volume Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.”

4. See in this volume Hartman, “The Burdened Individuality of Freedom.”

5. *Black Skin, White Masks*.

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. Just as wanton violence was a constituent element of slavery, so it is to Blackness. Given the ongoing accumulation of Black death at the hands of the police—even despite increased visibility in recent years—it becomes apparent that a Black person on the street today faces open vulnerability to violence just as the slave did on the plantation. That there has recently been such an increase in media coverage and yet little decrease in murder reveals the ease with which anti-Black violence can be ignored by white society; at the same time this reveals that when one is Black one needn't *do* anything to be targeted, as Blackness itself is criminalized.

With this understanding of slavery and Blackness, Afro-pessimism makes a critical shift in focus by moving away from the Black/white binary and reframing it as Black/non-Black, in order to deemphasize the status of whiteness and to center analysis, rather, on the anti-Black foundations of race and modern society. In other words, “it is racial blackness as a necessary condition for enslavement that matters most, rather than whiteness as a sufficient condition for freedom.”<sup>6</sup> As a result, it is Blackness, and more specifically anti-Blackness, that gives coherence to categories of non-Black—white, worker, gay, i.e., “human.” Categories of non-Black must establish their boundaries for inclusion in a group (humanity) by having a recognizable self *within*. There must also, consequently, be an outside to each group, and, as with the concept of humanity, it is Blackness that is *without*; it is Blackness that is the dark matter surrounding and holding together the categories of non-Black. Experientially, subjects, even Black ones, can obviously find themselves with any myriad identities, but ontologically Blackness is still violently excluded from even the meager scraps given when recognized.

The distinction that Afro-pessimism makes is important because it problematizes any positive affirmation of identity<sup>7</sup>—as non-

6. Sexton, “People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery.”

7. This doesn't altogether eliminate the possibilities for organizing

Black categories are defined against the Blackness they are not, this relation of race indirectly (and directly, e.g., white teens' racist snapchats) sustains anti-Blackness by producing and sustaining racialized categories. Stated otherwise, "the violence of anti-blackness produces black existence; there is no prior positive blackness that could be potentially appropriated. Black existence is simultaneously produced and negated by racial domination, both as presupposition and consequence. Affirmation of blackness proves to be impossible without simultaneously affirming the violence that structures black subjectivity itself."<sup>8</sup>

Afro-pessimism departs with this understanding and illuminates the limits and failures of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, such as their reformist ideologies concerning progress and their disastrous integration with bureaucratic machinery. If, as Afro-pessimism shows, it is not possible to affirm Blackness itself without at the same time affirming anti-Black violence, then the attempts at recognition and inclusion in society will only ever result in further social *and real* death. Individuals can of course achieve some status in society through "structural adjustment"<sup>9</sup> (i.e., a kind of "whitening" effect), as has been superficially confirmed, but Blackness as a racialized category remains the object of gratuitous, constituent violence—as demonstrated by police murders, mass incarceration, urban planning, and surveillance (from COINTELPRO to special security codes at stores to indicate when Black customers enter). As Blackness is negated by the relations and structures of society, Afro-pessimism posits that the only way out is to negate that negation.

The challenges Afro-pessimism poses to the affirmation of Blackness extend to other identities as well and problematize identity-based politics. The efforts, on the part of such a

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around identities. There are very real reasons why this is often necessary and groups are experimenting with ways of building autonomy that are also anti-essentialist and recognize the heterogeneity of supposedly static categories. One example is a negative affirmation of identity (the exclusion of cis men) in order to prevent any positive affirmation of another (a static notion of "womanhood"). See *LIES*, especially *Vol. II*.

8. R.L., "Wanderings of the Slave: Black Life and Social Death."
9. Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*.

politics, to produce a coherent subject (and movement), and the reduction of antagonisms to a representable position, is not only the total circumscription of liberatory potential, but it is an extinguishment of rage with reform—which is to stake a claim in the state and society, and thus anti-Blackness. Against this, we choose, following Afro-pessimism, to understand Black liberation as a negative dialectic, a politics of refusal, and a refusal to affirm; as an embrace of disorder and incoherence;<sup>10</sup> and as an act of political apostasy.<sup>11</sup> This is not to categorically reject every project of reform—for decreased suffering will surely make life momentarily easier—but rather to take to task any movement invested in the preservation of society. Were they not to decry every action that didn't fit within their rigid framework, then they might not fortify anti-Blackness as fully as they do. It is in the effort to garner legitimacy (an appeal to whiteness) that reformism requires a representable identity and code of actions, which excludes, and actually endangers, those who would reject such pandering. This also places undo faith in politicians and police to do something other than maintain, as they always have and will, the institutions—schools, courts, prisons, projects, voting booths, neighborhood associations—sustaining anti-Blackness.

Afro-pessimism can also be used to critique prevalent liberal discourses around community, accountability, innocence, and justice. Such notions sit upon anti-Black foundations and only go so far as to reconfigure, rather than abolish, the institutions that produce, control, and murder Black subjects.<sup>12</sup> Take for example the appeal to innocence and demand for accountability, too frequently launched when someone Black is killed by police. The

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10. See in this volume Wilderson, “The Prison Slave as Hegemony’s (Silent) Scandal.”

11. *Apostasy* – the total abandonment of one’s belief in a religion, party, or cause; Warren, “Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope.”

12. Needless to say, these institutions are also, in general, meant to create productive, governable subjects and, therefore, all those deemed non-normative are either assimilated—via their identity being formally recognized and incorporated into culture and society—or they are met with a similar murderous violence. This violence, however, is contingent upon a refusal, transgression, or crime, which is to say it *results* from some action or identity, rather than a constituent element as it is with Blackness.

discourse of innocence operates within a binary of innocent/guilty, which is founded on the belief that there is an ultimate fairness to the system and presumes the state to be the protector of all. This fails to understand the state's fundamental investment in self-preservation, which is indivisible from white supremacy and the interests of capital. The discourse goes that if someone innocent is killed, an *individual* (the villainous cop) must be held accountable as a solution to this so-called injustice. The *structural* reality of anti-Black violence is completely obfuscated and justice is mistook as a concept independent from anti-Blackness. Discrimination is indeed tragic, but systematic dispossession and murder is designedly more—it *is* the justice system—and no amount of imprisoned cops, body cameras or citizen review boards will eliminate this.

Furthermore, Afro-pessimist analysis exposes the often unacknowledged ways that radical movements perpetuate anti-Black racism. One such way is in the rhetoric repeatedly used that takes an assumed (historically oppressed) subject at its center—e.g., workers or women.<sup>13</sup> This conflates experience with existence and fails to acknowledge the incommensurate ontologies between, for instance, white women and Black women. To speak in generalities, of simply workers or women, is to speak from a position of anti-Blackness, for the non-racialized subject is the white, or at least non-Black, subject. For this reason, movements against capitalism, patriarchy, or gender mean unfortunately little if they don't elucidate ontological disparities within a given site of oppression; and if they don't unqualifiedly seek to abolish the totality of race and anti-Blackness. This is not to privilege anti-Black racism on a hierarchy of oppression, but to assert—against the disparaging lack of analysis—the unlivability of life for Blacks over centuries of social death and physical murder, perpetuated (at varying times) by *all* non-Black subjects in society.

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13. While not strictly in the purview of Afro-pessimism, it's important to note the ways that subject-oriented movements have included/excluded various identities over time—e.g., both discursively and explicitly, worker's movements mostly omitted women, and women's movements mostly omitted trans people. The point is not to decry exclusion, but to encourage moving destructively through and out of all such gross limitations to being.

Finally, we should add that alongside the valuable theoretical offerings of Afro-pessimism, this reader was also motivated by a desire to contribute to the efforts of bringing these writings out of the ivory towers of the academy, the place from which all these writings originated. We wish to remove the materials from this stifling place and see them proliferate among those in the streets and prisons. The topics discussed here may have origins in a place of lofty theory, but they deal with the constant realities of millions of people. We therefore find it imperative that these theories directly inform the practices of everyone desiring a life other than this one—while not simply resorting to the empty gesture of empathy.<sup>14</sup>

We must acknowledge the fact that non-Blacks have a complicity in perpetuating anti-Blackness and face the necessity of abolishing all notions of the self and identity, practicing an anti-racism with a view toward the total abolition of the state, and developing an anti-capitalism aimed at the destitution of race. We take heed of the following statement: “If we are to be honest with ourselves, we must admit that the ‘Negro’ has been inviting whites, as well as civil society’s junior partners, to the dance of social death for hundreds of years, but few have wanted to learn the steps.”<sup>15</sup>

Consider this project an opening sashay.

– the editors

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14. “[T]he effort to counteract the commonplace callousness to black suffering requires that the white body be positioned in the place of the black body in order to make this suffering visible and intelligible. Yet if this violence can become palpable and indignation can be fully aroused only through the masochistic fantasy, then it becomes clear that empathy is double-edged, for in making the other’s suffering one’s own, this suffering is occluded by the other’s obliteration” (Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*).

15. Wilderson, “The Prison Slave as Hegemony’s (Silent) Scandal.”

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# I.

## BLACKS AND THE MASTER/ SLAVE RELATION\*

2015

Frank B. Wilderson, III  
Interviewed by C.S. Soong

C. S. Soong: *The question for today is how to properly situate Black people in today's world? What is their position in relation to other people? And what is the nature of their vulnerability to violence? Those questions can be addressed in a number of ways. Conservatives, Liberals, and radicals offer perspectives that perhaps you've heard over time. The answer offered by my guest today is singular and provocative, not least because he calls Black people, all Black people, slaves. But what does Frank Wilderson, III mean by slave? Why does he argue that the master/slave relation cannot be analogized with the capitalist/worker relation? And what does he mean when he asserts that slavery is social death? And that slaves, that is Blacks, are subject to gratuitous violence because their masters, that is all non-Blacks, need to exercise that violence in order to give their lives, their non-Black lives, integrity and coherence? Frank Wilderson is a writer, professor of African American studies and Drama at UC Irvine, and founder of what's called the Afro-Pessimism movement. His books include Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms, and Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid. Frank spent five years in South Africa as an elected official in the African National Congress during that country's transition from apartheid and he was a member of the ANC's armed wing. When Frank Wilderson joined me recently in studio I began by asking how important Marxism has been to his understanding of capitalism.*

Frank Wilderson: I think that when I began to study Marxism in college I understood that here was a theory that took a kind

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\* Interview from "Against the Grain," KPFA Radio, Berkeley, California, March 4, 2015. Transcription by the editors of this reader.



of attitude toward the world that was uncompromising. That was valuable to me because before that in junior high school and in high school I had seen the kind of performative political labor of people in the Panthers and people in the Students for a Democratic Society—part of that time was here—and I knew that these folks were on a mission that was more robust and more unflinching than the mission of certain types of Bobby Kennedy Democrats and members of the Civil Rights movement. When I actually began to study the theory I understood why their performance was so much more unflinching than other peoples' performance. So I think the study of Marxism helped me get into thinking about relations of power, which I think is more important than simply thinking about the way power performs.

*CSS: In other words, structures of power as opposed to how power tends to manifest itself in individual relations.*

FW: Yes, and I also mean that if you kind of turn your head sideways and listen to most Americans on the Left talk about politics, what you're going to hear is that the rhetorical weighting of their discourse tends to be heavily weighted on discriminatory actions, the effects of unfair relations on people. And so what we really don't do so much in this country is—and this is what I found to be very different when I started traveling the world, when I went to Italy, and various places in South America and Africa—we're not as readily able to think about power as a structure. We tend to think about power as a performance, a series of discriminatory acts. That's okay if you're a Liberal-Humanist-reformist, but if you're a revolutionary, that simply leads you down a track of increasing wages or getting more rights for women or ending racial discrimination and you're finding yourself in the same kind of cycle of performative oppression ten, twenty years later without an analysis of why the "fix" that you had years ago doesn't last and isn't working now.

*CSS: Well, the antagonism according to the Marxists is that between capitalist and worker. Would you agree that the essential antagonism in social relations and political relations is in fact between capitalist on the one side and worker on the other?*

FW: No. All of my work is an interrogation of that assumptive logic. I'm sometimes misunderstood to be saying that I have left Marxism. I'm sometimes misunderstood to be saying that the cognitive map that Marx gives us should be thrown out. That's not what I'm saying. How do you throw out a cognitive map that explains political economy so well? What I'm saying is that in *Das Kapital* vol. I, Marx has two opportunities to think the relation between the slave and everyone else and each of those opportunities presents him with a kind of paradox, a conundrum; and instead of meditating on that he bounces off of it and continues to posit that the world is out of joint because there is a dichotomy between haves and have-nots, because there's a dichotomy between those who accumulate capital and those who work for a wage. What I'm saying is that his hit on the slave and then bouncing off of that are a disavowal of the nature of the slave relation, which is symptomatic of the problems in political organizing and political thought on the Left. I'm saying that the antagonism in *Das Kapital* should be relegated to a conflict because there is an aspect of the thinking which presents itself with a coherent way out. The slave/non-slave, or the Black/human relation, presents us with a structural dynamic which cannot be reconciled and which does not have a coherent mode of redress.

CSS: *Alright, you see the master/slave relation as the essential antagonism, so what do you mean by that? A lot of people would think, okay, slavery in the U.S., so Black slavery, and then 1865, the formal end of slavery. But then of course you have slavery today and we hear about issues with people in bondage, debt bondage, and other forms of bondage, so when you say the master/slave relation, what are you specifically referring to?*

FW: There is no way I can actually answer that in a compact way, I think I have to step back a minute. So what Afro-pessimism—the conceptual lens or framework that myself and other people are working on—assumes is that you have to begin with an analysis of slavery that corrects the heretofore thinking about it. So the first thing that happens—and this is built on the work of Orlando Patterson's 1982 tome *Slavery and Social Death*—the first thing we have to do is screw our heads on backwards. In other words, stop defining slavery through the experience of slaves. What happens normally is that people think of slavery as forced labor

and people in chains. What Orlando Patterson does is shows that what slavery really is, is social death. In other words, social death defines the relation between the slave and all others. Forced labor is an example of the *experience* that slaves might have, but not all slaves were forced to work. So if you then move by saying that slavery is social death, by definition, then what is social death? Social death has three constituent elements: One is gratuitous violence, which means that the body of the slave is open to the violence of all others. Whether he or she receives that violence or not, he or she exists in a state of structural or open vulnerability. This vulnerability is not contingent upon his or her transgressing some type of law, as in going on strike with the worker. The other point is that the slave is natally alienated, which is to say that the temporality of one's life that is manifest in filial and afilial relations—the capacity to have families and the capacity to have associative relations—may exist very well in your head. You might say, “I have a father, I have a mother,” but, in point of fact, the world does not recognize or incorporate your filial relations into its understanding of family. And the reason that the world can do this goes back to point number one: because you exist in a regime of violence which is gratuitous, open, and you are openly vulnerable to everyone else, not a regime of violence that is contingent upon you being a transgressed worker or transgressing woman or someone like that. And the third point is general dishonor, which is to say, you are dishonored in your very being—and I think that this is the nature of Blackness with everyone else. You're dishonored prior to your performance of dishonored actions. So it takes a long time to build this but in a nutshell that's it. And so that's one of the moves of Afro-pessimism. If you take that move and you take out property relations—someone who's owned by someone else—you take that out of the definition of slavery and you take out forced labor, and if you replace that with social death and those three constituent elements, what you have is a continuum of slavery-subjugation that Black people exist in and 1865 is a blip on the screen. It is not a paradigmatic moment, it is an experiential moment, which is to say that the technology of enslavement simply morphs and shape shifts—it doesn't end with that.

CSS: *If Orlando Patterson, who is a sociologist at Harvard, argues that*

*forced labor is not a defining characteristic of slavery, if he says that naked violence is one of the key elements of social death, which is slavery, and if the violence directed at Blacks is not based on, as you said, this person transgressing in some way, being disobedient in some way, refusing to consent in some way to what the ruling class thinks or does, then why is violence freely directed at Blacks? What is the reason that the non-white or the master in the master/slave relation treats Blacks violently?*

FW: The short answer is that violence against the slave is integral to the production of that psychic space called social life. The repetitive nature of violence against the slave does not have the same type of utility that violence against the post-colonial subject has—in other words, in the first instance, to secure and maintain the occupation of land. It does not have the utility of violence against the working class, which would be to secure and maintain the extraction of surplus-value and the wage. We have to think more libidinally and in a more robust fashion. This is where it becomes really controversial and really troubling for a lot of people because what Patterson is arguing, and what people like myself and professor Jared Sexton and Saidiya Hartman at Columbia University have extended, is to say that what we need to do is begin to think of violence not as having essentially the kind of political or economic utility that violence in other revolutionary paradigms have. Violence against the slave sustains a kind of psychic stability for all others who are not slaves.

CSS: *When you say that—and I've read some of your writings on the subject—it seems like you're suggesting that only if some population perceives another population as inferior, or so degraded that anything can be done to them—unless they have that other in mind that somehow, psychologically and psychically—they can't have the integrity that they want. Is that correct? And why would that be the case psychologically? Why would somebody need to have some other person seen in that light in order to feel actualized, in order to feel worthy of life?*

FW: It's a very good question and we could spend several hours on it, but what I'm trying to do is give you short-hand answers that have integrity and hopefully your listeners will do some more reading and research to actually see how these mechanisms work. But let's take it for one second outside of the way in which I

and other Afro-pessimists are theorizing it. One of our claims is that Blackness cannot be dis-imbricated from slaveness—that is a very controversial claim; that claim is actually the fault line right now of African and Black Studies across the country, the claim that Blackness and slaveness cannot be dis-imbricated, cannot be pulled apart. But I can't argue against everyone who disagrees with that right now. One of the points that Patterson makes at a higher level of abstraction is that the concept of community, and the concept of freedom, and the concept of communal and interpersonal presence, actually needs a conceptual antithesis. In other words, you can't think community without being able to register non-community. His book *Slavery and Social Death* goes back thousands of years and covers slavery in China and all over the world and he says that communal coherence has a lot of positive attributes: this is my language, this is how I organize my polity, these are the anthropological accoutrements of how we work our customs—but at the end of the day what it needs to know is what it is not. So the idea of freedom and the idea of communal life and the idea of civic relations has to have a kind of point of attention which is absent of that or different from that. This is the function that slavery presents or provides to coherence so that prior to Columbus, for example, the Choctaw might have someone inside a Choctaw community who transgresses the codes of the community so fiercely that they're given a choice, and the choice at this moment of a transgression, which is beyond-the-beyond, is between real death—"We will kill you in an execution"—or social death. Nothing changes in the mind of that person tomorrow or the day after he or she chooses social death. He or she still thinks they have a cosmology, that they have intimate family relations, but the point that Patterson is making is that everything changes in the structure of that person's dynamic with the rest of the tribe. So now that that person is a slave, that person is socially dead. This is bad for that person, obviously, but what he is suggesting is that that type of action regenerates the knowledge of our existence for everyone else. Now where I and some others take Patterson further is to say that Black, Blackness, and even the thing called Africa, cannot be dis-imbricated, cannot be pulled apart from that smaller scale process that he talks about with respect to Chinese communities or the Choctaw. In other words, there is a global consensus that Africa is the location of

sentient beings who are outside of global community, who are socially dead. That global consensus begins with the Arabs in 625 and it's passed on to the Europeans in 1452. Prior to that global consensus you can't think Black. You can think Uganda, Ashanti, Ndebele, you can think many different cultural identities, but Blackness cannot be dis-imbricated from the global consensus that decides here is the place which is emblematic of that moment the Choctaw person is spun out from social life to social death. That's part of the foundation.

CSS: *This is really provocative. Are you saying then—let's just focus on the U.S.—that every African American, regardless of income or wealth or status, can and should be understood in the figure of the slave who is socially dead in relation to the master, who I presume is white?*

FW: Well, the master is everyone else, whites and their junior partners, which in my book are colored immigrants. It's just that 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. So yes, I am saying that. Now part of the reason is that one of the things that we are not doing is talking about the different ways in which different Black people live their existence as slaves. I'm willing to do that, but what's interesting to me is the kind of anxiety that this theory elicits from people other than yourself. I mean this is the calmest conversation that I've had on this subject [laughter]. You could say to someone that you are a professor at UC Berkeley and there is a person in a sweatshop on the other side of the Rio Grande. This person in the sweatshop is working sixteen hours a day, cannot go to the bathroom, dies on the job from lack of medical benefits... and you are a kind of labor aristocrat. And they could say, "Okay, well that's interesting." And you could say to that person, "But if you read the work of Antonio Negri, the Italian communist, you come to understand that even though you live your life as a proletarian differently than a sweatshop laborer, you both stand in relation to capital in this same way, at the level of structural, paradigmatic arrangement." That person would say, "Oh yeah! I get that, I get that." You say to someone that all Blacks are slaves and that we're going to change the definition of slavery because the other

things are not definitions, they are actually anecdotes, and your teacher in third grade told you that you don't use an anecdote to define something. And that person says, "Oh wait a minute, I know a person who's richer than me and also Black and they live in the Tenderloin..." and it just goes off to the races. It's a symptomatic response primarily because they understand that what Black people suffer is real and comprehensive but there is actually no prescriptive, rhetorical gesture which could actually write a sentence about how to redress that. **Most Americans, most people in the world, are not willing to engage in a paradigm of oppression that does not offer some type of way out. But that is what we live with as Black people every day.**

*CSS: Let me take us on what sounds like a bit of a detour, but I think it will help you clarify certain concepts that you're forwarding, and that's to go to Antonio Gramsci's work and think about a word that he had a very specific definition of, which is "hegemony." And of course Gramsci, coming out of the Marxist tradition, was very interested in workers and capital and the struggle between capitalists and workers, although he was also interested in a lot of other things. What did Gramsci mean by the word hegemony?*

**FW:** In 1922 Antonio Gramsci was working for the Comintern and he asked Lenin the following question: "How did you create this successful revolution and I can't get it off the ground in Italy?" Lenin said, "Well there is no trough of civil society between our working class and the command modality of capitalism, the violent manifestations of the capitalist state. We go on strike and the Cossacks come out." And Gramsci began to theorize: between working class suffering and state violence and state institutionality there's this thing called civil society which captivates the workers—in other words, induces a kind of spontaneous consent to the values of capital. Guild associations, schools—today it would be talk shows, but not this talk show of course [laughter]—and he began to theorize that what Lenin meant by hegemony, which is the domination of imperialist countries over countries that are trying to evolve into a kind of revolutionary dispensation, is different than what he needed to develop his theory of hegemony and so he came up with three constituent elements: influence, leadership, and consent. By influence, leadership, and consent he means the influence of

the ruling class—not the influence of one person or another, but the influence of a class—the leadership of its ideas—which is to say the idea of meritocracy, which was a very bad idea for a Marxist—and the consent of the working class to that influence and those ideas. What he sought to do was to find ways to break the spontaneous consent to those ideas. Once he could break the spontaneous consent to those ideas, then the working class of a Western, so-called devout country like Italy would be able to see what Marxists think of as the antagonism between them and the ruling class. Then it would move from a passive revolution to a real revolution, which would be a violent overthrow of the state. The European Gramscians actually leave out that last part, the violent overthrow of the state, but that was actually his dream.

*CSS: Okay, so then we have on the one hand force and on the other we have consent. We have the force of the ruling class and we have consent, which you're suggesting if it is withheld, if it is abrogated to such an extreme degree, there might be social and political revolution. But how does, in Antonio Gramsci's conception, hegemony normally work in terms of the relationship between force and consent in a nominally stable society?*

FW: When a state is stable in a capitalist dispensation, such as Canada, then there is an equilibrium between force and consent. In other words, one of the things you have in a “good” (for capitalists) dispensation is a smooth situation. So for the hundreds of years it took to develop capitalism, there was all this violence. Once people have been remolded from peasants and whatever else into workers, then in a capitalist dispensation, just as in a patriarchal dispensation, the violence goes into remission. That's what Gramsci means by equilibrium. Violence goes in remission and it only needs to rear its ugly head in those singular moments, which hopefully are not global for the capitalist, when the working class refuses or transgresses those symbolic codes that it has consented to.

*CSS: Such as general strikes, mass aggression against the capitalist order...*

FW: Exactly.

*CSS: So then this equilibrium between force and consent, which constitutes*



*hegemony in Gramsci's mind, how does that notion apply or not in your mind to the relationship between master and slave?*

FW: Consent is never a constituent element of the slave relation. If only Marx had picked up on this, but he says in *Capital* that he doesn't understand the slave to exist in a relation of pure force but then he moves away from that. So, why is that? Well, one of the things that Orlando Patterson points out is that any stratified society—by that he means for example a capitalist society—only comes into being through a kind of pre-history of violence—the violence that it takes to move from feudalism to capitalism. But once the state of capitalism is set up the violence goes into remission. But then he goes on to say that what's interesting about the slave estate—the slave estate is actually a phrase from the Black feminist Hortense Spillers—or the slave relation is that the violent pre-history of the slave relation carries over and becomes the concurrent dynamic of the current history of slavery. And that is really, really profound. It is so profound, that it's traumatic and painful even for Black politicians and Black writers and you see the pain of that coming through in slave narratives. In the film *Twelve Years a Slave*, there's a lot of narrative energy put into making sense of how and why Edwin Epps beats his concubine, Patsy, and why his wife wants him to beat her. So it kind of looks like ordinary sadism and jealousy on the wife's part and so it actually almost becomes a sort of sick love triangle. Alright, put the film away. Pick up the book and what you find is that the violence against the slaves in the book that became the movie actually has no utility, it has no rationale. For instance between a place like Berkley and San Jose there were about four hundred plantations—I know because my father is from one of those plantations—and you have what I would call a bacchanal of pleasure, not a kind of utilitarian need to extract work or obedience out of people, number one. Number two, what you find is that the families on these plantations all participate in the regular beating of slaves—children, wives, husbands... It sustains the psychic health of the people in the first ontological instance. In the second instance, it gets good sugar cane production out of them—and that could even be questioned.

CSS: *If you believe the plight of Black people does not mirror the plight*

of the working class because of gratuitous, as opposed to reasoned, violence against Blacks, and that there is no consent coming from Black people as there is when workers buy into the capitalist order and agree to offer their services in ways that satisfy capitalists, then what about Native Americans? What do you say to those who say the plight of Black people mirrors the treatment of Native Americans?

FW: A lot of people have been genocided so the middle 88 pages of my book, *Red, White and Black*, first begins by honoring the destruction of Native Americans and what that has meant for white Americans. However, to make it really simple, to pare it down, I do think that there is, in the main, a utility to the genocide of Native Americans that does not mirror the pre-logical “rationale” of the violence against Blacks. Indians are genocided, in the main, for the occupation of Turtle Island, which is primarily why so much Native American theorization builds upon Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* and does not build upon Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*. In other words, so much theorization under what I call the meta-commentary called Indigenism leads us back to thinking genocide as a mechanism for usurpation of cartography, of space. Violence against Black people is a mechanism for the usurpation of subjectivity, of life, of being. It’s great if you have a place to stay, but if you don’t have a sense of your own identity, that’s even worse. I think that the repetitive violence against Blacks, if we get back to social death, produces a regenerative form of being in everyone else.

CSS: In other words, settlers wanted Indian land so they killed Indians in large part to get the land, whereas what non-Blacks want from Blacks is not land but...

FW: ...but *being*. If you look at the Dred Scott decision, there’s a really interesting three or four paragraphs in this two hundred and fifty-page decision where Judge Taney says to the lower court, “We are returning Dred Scott to slavery.” One lower court had said, “Dred Scott made it to Minnesota, so he’s not a slave, he made it to a free territory.” The next court said, “No, he never got released, manumission from his master so he is a slave.” The Supreme Court returns Dred Scott to slavery and then does what is known in jurisprudential logic as a “Herculean opinion.” It says

to both courts, “We’re not siding with the court that returned him to slavery because he didn’t get freedom from his master; we are trying to correct your thinking in this. In order for Dred Scott to appear before the Bar, he had to become a jurisprudential subject and Africa is a place of non-community. As a result, we’re trying to teach you a lesson—there’s no such thing as a jurisprudential subject that can come out of Africa. We are returning him to slavery not because he didn’t get freedom from his master but because he had no standing before the Bar.” And then they go on to talk about Native Americans and they say that Native Americans actually have political community: “We recognize the arrangements of natality, affiliation, cartography. They have a degraded community in our eyes, and we’re trying to help them evolve to become a superior community, but they actually have community.” This is to say that the people on reservations are subjects worthy of jurisprudential adjudication. So in other words, return him to slavery not because he didn’t get permission to be freed, but because he is not a human being.

*CSS: Well, let’s engage in a thought experiment. I’m thinking back to your claim about the master in the master/slave relation: unless they dole out violence to Blacks, they can have no psychic or psychological integrity or security. Let’s posit that all Blacks are wiped out. There is a genocide and all Blacks are removed. In that case, in a sense, you are saying by implication that humanity would cease to exist because the conceptual coherence that it needs would be absent.*

FW: Exactly, and that will never happen. We need to bring people like David Marriott from UC Santa Cruz and Jared Sexton from UC Irvine to think more psychoanalytically about this. But in a nutshell, the reason that this will never happen is, remember, that the utility of violence against the slave is not the same as the utility of violence against the Indian, the post-colonial subject, the worker, or the woman. In Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, he’s negotiating between two dynamics: one is negrophilia—“I just love Black people, I love Black music, I want to sleep with them, I want to be around them...”—and one is negrophobia—“Yeah you can come over to my crib but don’t bring your friends.” And so, what he’s saying is that the psychic arrangement of the collective unconscious is manifest with the push/pull in the

collective unconscious between negrophilia and negrophobia. It's not important how that gets worked out. What's important is that that is a process of psychic integration which is necessary for global community. So, one day there could be negrophobia in one psyche, the next day there could be negrophilia. One community could be completely, like teenage boys in the suburbs, negrophilic. Another community, like teenage boys in the deep south, could be completely negrophobic. The point is not that this gets worked out in a decisive way one way or the other because that would make Blacks like Indians, that they have something tangible to give up, like workers. The point is that it's there that this is the push/pull of collective unconscious meditations. In that push/pull, whether it's negrophilia or negrophobia, the concept that has to be reiterated is that the Black is an implement of that negotiation. If the Black does not become an implement of that negotiation then you have not a crisis but an epistemological break, a catastrophe in the knowledge-arrangement of the world. We would find ourselves on the cusp of a new world order, but one that could not be predicted in the way that Marx does.

*CSS: Let's talk more about the Black experience of social death. I'm wondering specifically if you feel that African Americans in this country can in fact consciously acknowledge the violence, the structure of violence, in which they operate and encounter every day.*

**FW:** Well, we can articulate it, but normally when we're by ourselves. Because when we get into Progressive communities—first of all it's not even heard of, I used to work in banking for eight years and you can't even talk about this stuff—but in Progressive humanities there's a policing action that happens, which is to say: "Make your grammar of suffering, your paradigmatic arrangement, your relationship to structural violence articulate with the other oppressed people in the room." Once that happens we're trapped. I mean we're surrounded by white supremacists, militarization, the police, the military, but we're also surrounded by people-of-color-consciousness that polices our capacity to flower, to expand upon theorization that I'm doing. A short anecdote: there was a conference years ago at UC Santa Cruz. At the end of the conference, Haunani-Kay Trask, the revolutionary from Hawai'i, spoke and then we were supposed to break away

into groups. The conference organizer said, “You must go into a breakaway room based upon your color—in other words how you are policed.” And immediately—this is how the antagonism manifests itself symptomatically—the Black people were like, “Yes! Now we get to be in a place where we can talk about how we are policed as Blacks.” But the people of color stalled by saying, “There’s no such thing as yellow. We’re Koreans, we’re Japanese, we’re Chinese, we’re Taiwanese. We’re not going to let you pigeonhole us into this position when we have our ethnic identities.” The Latinos did the same thing. The Native Americans did the same thing. My wife, who is white, went to the white room and they rejected the entire arrangement. They said, “We’re just going to talk about ourselves as Armenians, as women, as Jews.” It was the Black people who were energized by the prospect of leaving culture and identity by the wayside and having a conversation about how we fit into the gaze of the police. I think it was up to the other people to be authorized by that project and stop complaining about the fact that the exercise was putting them in a box that was positional and not cultural. But until that happens, there’s no real political coalition building that’s happening. What’s happening, as Jared Sexton says, is Black people become the refugees in everyone else’s political project.

*CSS: Let me ask you a personal question, but you can of course refuse to answer. So your wife is white; given what you were telling me about the position of Blacks, what’s your sense that she could truly ever understand your consciousness, your positioning within society? And if she can’t, then what are the prospects of a relationship that could reach as deeply as, for example, two Black people or two white together could?*

FW: Well, she can’t. She tries, but what’s interesting and important is that I would never put my marriage out there as a kind of example of what people could aspire to. As a kind of short hand, I call her my wife and she calls me her husband. But the reality is that I’m her slave. And that doesn’t change because we have sentimental—as I would say, contrapuntal—emotions to the contrary. In fact, oftentimes those contrapuntal emotions are mechanisms or means of disavowing the true nature of the relation. Now, I will give her a lot of props for the past eight years that she has actually inculcated this logic. She did her best at that

Santa Cruz conference I talked about to tell the white people in that room, “We’re not here to think about how we think about ourselves, we’re here to think about our complicity as whites with policing. Not as women, not as gays, not Armenians, not as Jews, but as white.” On the other hand, if you read my book *Incognegro*, you’ll see that in the first eight years, there was nothing but resistance to that. So that resistance is as traumatizing as the second eight years are regenerative and I will say that the first eight years are what Black people should take away from that.

There’s no way in hell we should have to go through the kind of resistance that white people and non-Black people have to this particular logic because they know it’s the truth. They know their own anxieties about the question, Where is Blackness?, but they can’t approach it because what it would mean is a kind of confrontation with people who are intimate to them that they don’t know they could withstand. And so the real question is, Will these people do all they can to fall into the abyss of nonexistence?, not about how they will perform as partial allies while keeping their cultural presence.

CSS: *Why would a Black person, why would you, choose intentionally, consciously, to enter into a life relationship in which you perceive yourself as the figure of the slave?*

FW: I don’t think it’s a fair question because the question implies that, knowing what I know, I can actually change my life in an essential way. The question actually takes us away from the problem that I’ve outlined and actually puts the responsibility of correcting the situation on me when actually it should be on you.

CSS: *I hear that and I think that prompts me to ask the final thing I want to bring up with you which is regarding how we hear a lot about groups and people who are victims. There is this victimhood frame and so these people have been victimized by, let’s say, another group of people and then the critique is that, by focusing on that, by concentrating on that, you then deflect attention away from their subjectivity, from their agency, from what they can do about their circumstance. Are you concerned that the master/slave relation, which is positioning Blacks as foremost a victim, in my mind, and then focusing only or mainly on a group status as victim, tends to deny—and we’re speaking here now about Blacks—the kind of agency, I think you would admit, that they*

*have at least some semblance of? And maybe some more than others based on their position in society?*

FW: I don't agree with that and we don't have the time to actually get into this, but my book, *Red, White and Black*, is a critique of agency as a generic category. What I'm saying is that, okay, I'm not Elijah Mohammed, I don't believe that the white man is the devil and that this is all divined by god. I do believe that there is a way out. But I believe that the way out is a kind of violence so magnificent and so comprehensive that it scares the hell out of even radical revolutionaries. So, in other words, the trajectory of violence that Black slave revolts suggest, whether it be in the 21st century or the 19th century, is a violence against the generic categories of life, agency being one of them. That's what I meant by an epistemological catastrophe. Marx posits an epistemological crisis, which is to say moving from one system of human arrangements and relations to another system of human relations and arrangements. What Black people embody is the potential for a catastrophe of human arrangements writ large. I think that there have been moments—the Black Liberation Army in the 1970s and 1980s is a prime example—of how the political violence of the Black Liberation Army far outpaced the anti-capitalist and internationalist discourse that it had and that's what scares people; and as Saidiya Hartman says, “A Black revolution makes everyone freer than they actually want to be.” A Marxist revolution blows the lid off of economic relations; a feminist revolution blows the lid off patriarchal relations; a Black revolution blows the lid off the unconscious and relations writ large.

CSS: *I have to ask you, when you talk about this violence, in maybe the ideal situation of a Black revolution, what are we talking about concretely? Who or what is the violence directed against? Are we talking about literally the elimination of the master threat physically?*

FW: Well, the short answer is that's for me to know and for you to find out [laughter]. And the long answer is that as a professor I'm uniquely unqualified to actually make that answer. I rely on providing analysis and then getting those marching orders from people in the streets.

# II.

## THE BURDENED INDIVIDUALITY OF FREEDOM\*

1997

Saidiya Hartman

The limits of political emancipation appear at once in the fact that the state can liberate itself from constraint without man himself being really liberated; that a state may be a free state without man himself being a free man.

—Karl Marx, *On the Jewish Question* (1843)

The emancipation of the slaves is submitted to only in so far as chattel slavery in the old form could not be kept up. But although the freedman is no longer considered the property of the individual master, he is considered the slave of society.

—Carl Schurz, *Report on the Condition of the South* (1865)

Are we to esteem slavery for what it has wrought, or must we challenge our conception of freedom and the value we place upon it?

—Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (1982)

The entanglements of bondage and liberty shaped the liberal imagination of freedom, fueled the emergence and expansion of capitalism, and spawned proprietorial conceptions of the self. This vexed genealogy of freedom plagued the great

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\* This is a chapter excerpted from *Scenes of Subjection*



event of Emancipation, or as it was described in messianic and populist terms, Jubilee. The complicity of slavery and freedom or, at the very least, the ways in which they assumed, presupposed, and mirrored one another—freedom finding its dignity and authority in this “prime symbol of corruption” and slavery transforming and extending itself in the limits and subjection of freedom—troubled, if not elided, any absolute and definitive marker between slavery and its aftermath.<sup>1</sup> The longstanding and intimate affiliation of liberty and bondage made it impossible to envision freedom independent of constraint or personhood and autonomy separate from the sanctity of property and proprietorial notions of the self. Moreover, since the dominion and domination of slavery were fundamentally defined by black subjection, race appositely framed questions of sovereignty, right, and power.<sup>2</sup>

The traversals of freedom and subordination, sovereignty and subjection, and autonomy and compulsion are significant markers of the dilemma or double bind of freedom. Marx, describing a dimension of this paradox, referred to it with dark humor as a double freedom—being free to exchange one’s labor and free of material resources. Within the liberal “Eden of the innate rights of man,” owning easily gave way to being owned, sovereignty to fungibility, and abstract equality to subordination

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1. David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (New York: Oxford UP, 1966), and *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca: Cornell UP 1975); Orlando Patterson, *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture* (New York: Basic, 1991); Robert Miles, *Capitalism and Unfree Labour: Anomaly or Necessity* (London: Tavistock, 1987); Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1964); Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed, 1983); Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832-1938* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992); Gerald David Jaynes, *Branches without Roots: Genesis of the Black Working Class in the American South, 1862-1882* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986).

2. Mark Tushnet notes that in the law, “lines drawn on the basis of race and those drawn on the basis of condition were almost identical, [and] slave law could have been recharacterized as black law ... for the rhetorical opposition of slaves and white men, not slaves and free persons, proved nearly impossible to resist,” *The American Law of Slavery, 1800-1860* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981), 140.

and exploitation.<sup>3</sup> If sovereignty served “to efface the domination intrinsic to power” and rights “enabled and facilitated relations of domination,” as Michel Foucault argues, then what we are left to consider is the subjugation that rights instigate and the domination they efface.<sup>4</sup>

The task of the following chapters is to discern the ways in which emancipatory discourses of rights, liberty, and equality instigate, transmit, and effect forms of racial domination and liberal narratives of individuality idealize mechanisms of domination and discipline. It is not simply that rights are inseparable from the entitlements of whiteness or that blacks should be recognized as legitimate rights bearers; rather, the issue at hand is the way in which the stipulation of abstract equality produces white entitlement and black subjection in its promulgation of formal equality. The fragile “as if equal” of liberal discourse inadequately contends with the history of racial subjection and enslavement, since the texture of freedom is laden with the vestiges of slavery, and abstract equality is utterly enmeshed in the narrative of black subjection, given that slavery undergirded the rhetoric of the republic and equality defined so as to sanction subordination and segregation. Ultimately, I am trying to grapple with the changes wrought in the social fabric after the abolition of slavery and with the nonevent of emancipation insinuated by the perpetuation of the plantation system and the refiguration of subjection.

In exploring these issues and in keeping with the focus on everyday

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3. Karl Marx ironically describes the sphere of circulation or commodity exchange as an “Eden of the innate rights of man. It is the exclusive realm of Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham.” Freedom measured by the consent of exchange or the liberty of contract reveals the chasm between substantial and formal freedom and the freed as “someone who has brought his own hide to market and now has nothing else to expect but—a tanning.” Simply put, the emancipated are free to dispose of their labor and are unfettered by other possessions. *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1977), 272-280.

4. According to Foucault, “right should be viewed ... not in terms of a legitimacy to be established, but in terms of the subjugation that it instigates.” “Two Lectures,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Knowledge and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, trans. Colin Gordon, L. Marshall, J. Mepham, and K. Soper, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 95-96.

practices, I examine pedagogical handbooks designed to aid freed people in the transition from slavery to freedom, the itinerancy of the freed and other “exorbitant” practices, agricultural reports concerned with the productivity of free labor, political debate on the Reconstruction Amendments, and legal cases in order to consider the discrepant bestowal of emancipation. The narratives of slavery and freedom espoused in these disparate sources vied to produce authoritative accounts of liberty, equality, free labor, and citizenship. This generally entailed a deliberation on the origins of slavery, if not the birth of the republic, the place of slavery in the Constitution, the substance of citizenship, and the lineaments of black freedom.

By examining the metamorphosis of “chattel into man” and the strategies of individuation constitutive of the liberal individual and the rights-bearing subject, I hope to underscore the ways in which freedom and slavery presuppose one another, not only as modes of production and discipline or through contiguous forms of subjection but as founding narratives of the liberal subject revisited and revised in the context of Reconstruction and the sweeping changes wrought by the abolition of slavery. At issue are the contending articulations of freedom and the forms of subjection they beget. It is not my intention to argue that the differences between slavery and freedom were negligible; certainly such an assertion would be ridiculous. Rather, it is to examine the shifting and transformed relations of power that brought about the resubordination of the emancipated, the control and domination of the free black population, and the persistent production of blackness as abject, threatening, servile, dangerous, dependent, irrational, and infectious. In short, the advent of freedom marked the transition from the pained and minimally sensate existence of the slave to the burdened individuality of the responsible and encumbered freed person.

The nascent individualism of the freed designates a precarious autonomy since exploitation, domination, and subjection inhabit the vehicle of rights. The divisive and individuating power of discipline, operating in conjunction with the sequestering and

segregating control of black bodies as a species body, permitted under the guise of social rights and facilitated by the regulatory power of the state, resulted in the paradoxical construction of the freed both as self-determining and enormously burdened individuals and as members of a population whose productivity, procreation, and sexual practices were fiercely regulated and policed in the interests of an expanding capitalist economy and the preservation of a racial order on which the white republic was founded. Lest “the white republic” seem like an inflated or unwarranted rhetorical flourish, we must remember that the transformation of the national government and the citizenship wrought by the Reconstruction Amendments were commonly lamented as representing the loss of the “white man’s government.”<sup>5</sup>

In light of the constraints that riddled conceptions of liberty, sovereignty, and equality, the contradictory experience of emancipation cannot be adequately conveyed by handsome phrases like “the rights of the man,” “equal protection of the law,” or “the sanctity of life, liberty, and property.” Just as the peculiar and ambivalent articulation of the chattel status of the enslaved black and the assertion of his rights under the law, however limited, had created a notion of black personhood or subjectivity in which all the burdens and few of the entitlements of personhood came to characterize this humanity, so, too, the advent of freedom and the equality of rights conferred to blacks a status no less ambivalent. The advent of freedom held forth the possibility of a world antithetical to slavery and portents of transformations of power and status that were captured in carnivalesque descriptions like “bottom rail on top this time.” At the same time, extant and emergent forms of domination intensified and exacerbated the responsibilities and the afflictions of the newly emancipated. I have opted to characterize the nascent individualism of emancipation as “burdened individuality” in order to underline the double bind of freedom: being freed from

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5. As well, the import of the *Dred Scott* decision cannot be minimized. The decision held that blacks possessed no rights that whites were bound to respect and that blacks were never intended to be included as citizens by the “we the people” of the Constitution. Furthermore, the Naturalization Act of 1790 had restricted citizenship to whites.

slavery and free of resources, emancipated and subordinated, self-possessed and indebted, equal and inferior, liberated and encumbered, sovereign and dominated, citizen and subject. (The transformation of black subjectivity effected by emancipation is described as nascent individualism not simply because blacks were considered less than human and a hybrid of property and person prior to emancipation but because the abolition of slavery conferred on them the inalienable rights of man and brought them into the fold of liberal individualism. Prior to this, legal precedents like *State v. Mann* and *Dred Scott v. Sanford* made the notions of blacks' rights and black citizenship untenable, if not impossible.)

The antagonistic production of abstract equality and black subjugation rested upon contending and incompatible predications of the freed—as sovereign, indivisible, and self-possessed and as fungible and individuated subjects whose capacities could be quantified, measured, exchanged, and alienated. The civil and political rights bestowed upon the freed dissimulated the encroaching and invasive forms of social control exercised over black bodies through the veneration of custom; the regulation, production, and protection of racial and gender inequality in the guise of social rights; the repressive instrumentality of the law; and the forms of extraeconomic coercion that enabled the control of the black population and the effective harnessing of that population as a labor force. The ascribed responsibility of the liberal individual served to displace the nation's responsibility for providing and ensuring the rights and privileges conferred by the Reconstruction Amendments and shifted the burden of duty onto the freed. It was their duty to prove their worthiness for freedom rather than the nation's duty to guarantee, at minimum, the exercise of liberty and equality, if not opportunities for livelihood other than debt-peonage. Emancipation had been the catalyst for a transformed definition of citizenship and a strengthened national state. However, the national identity that emerged in its aftermath consolidated itself by casting out the emancipated from the revitalized body of the nation-state that their transient incorporation had created.<sup>6</sup> In the aftermath of

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6. See W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York:

the Civil War, national citizenship assumed greater importance as a result of the Fourteenth Amendment, which guaranteed civil rights at the national level against state violation and thus made the federal government ultimately responsible for ensuring the rights of citizens.<sup>7</sup> Yet the illusory universality of citizenship once again was consolidated by the mechanisms of racial subjection that it formally abjured.

This double bind was the determining condition of black freedom. The belated entry of the newly freed into the realm of freedom, equality, and property, as perhaps expected, revealed the boundaries of emancipation and duly complicated the meaning of freedom. Certainly manhood and whiteness were the undisclosed, but always assumed, norms of liberal equality, although the Civil Rights Act of 1866 made this explicit in defining equality as being equal to white men. The challenge of adequately conveying the dilemmas generated by this delayed entry exceeds the use of descriptions like “limited,” “truncated,” or “circumscribed” freedom; certainly these designations are accurate, but they are far from exhaustive. This first order of descriptives begs the question of how race, in general, and blackness, in particular, are produced through mechanisms of domination and subjection that have yoked, harnessed, and infiltrated the apparatus of rights. How are new forms of bonded labor engendered by the vocabulary of freedom? Is an emancipatory figuration of blackness possible? Or are we to hope that the entitlements of whiteness will be democratized? Is the entrenchment of black subordination best understood in the context of the relations of production and class conflict? Is race best considered an effect of the operation of power on bodies and populations exercised through relations of exploitation, domination, and subjection? Is blackness the product of this combined and uneven articulation

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Atheneum, 1935), 670-710; Barbara Fields, “Ideology and Race in American History,” in *Region, Race and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Van Woodward*, ed. J. Morgan Kousser and James McPherson (New York, 1982); and Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 101-131.

7. Herman Belz, *Emancipation and Equal Rights* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 108-140; Jacobus Ten Brock, *The Antislavery Origins of the Fourteenth Amendment* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1951).

of various modalities of power? If slave status was the primary determinant of racial identity in the antebellum period, with “free” being equivalent to “white” and slave status defining blackness, how does the production and valuation of race change in the context of freedom and equality?<sup>8</sup>

The task of describing the status of the emancipated involves attending to the articulation of various modes of power, without simply resorting to additive models of domination or interlocking oppressions that analytically maintain the distinctiveness and separateness of these modes and their effects, as if they were isolated elements that could be easily enumerated—race, class, gender, and sexuality—or as if they were the ingredients of a recipe for the social whereby the mere listing of elements enables an adequate rendering. Certainly venturing to answer these questions is an enormously difficult task because of the chameleon capacities of racism, the various registers of domination, exploitation and subjection traversed by racism, the plasticity of race as an instrument of power, and the divergent and sundry complex of meanings condensed through the vehicle of race, as well as the risks entailed in generating a description of racism that does not reinforce the fixity of race or neglect the differences constitutive of race. As well, it is important to remember that there is not a monolithic or continuous production of race. [...]

If race formerly determined who was “man” and who was chattel, whose property rights were protected or recognized and who was property, which consequently had the effect of making race itself a kind of property, with blackness as the mark of object status and whiteness licensing the proprietorship of self, then how did emancipation affect the status of race? The proximity of black *and* free necessarily incited fundamental changes in the

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8. Legal liberalism, as well as critical race theory, has examined issues of race, racism, and equality by focusing on the exclusion and marginalization of those subjects and bodies marked as different and/or inferior. The disadvantage of this approach is that the proposed remedies and correctives to the problem—inclusion, protection, and greater access of opportunity—do not ultimately challenge the economy of racial production or its truth claims or interrogate the exclusions constitutive of the norm but instead seek to gain equality, liberation, and redress within its confines.

national fabric. The question persists as to whether it is possible to unleash freedom from the history of property that secured it, for the security of property that undergirded the abstract equality of rights bearers was achieved, in large measure, through black bondage. As a consequence of emancipation, blacks were incorporated into the narrative of the rights of man and citizen; by virtue of the gift of freedom and wage labor, the formerly enslaved were granted entry into the hallowed halls of humanity, and, at the same time, the unyielding and implacable fabrication of blackness as subordination continued under the aegis of formal equality. This is not to deny the achievements made possible by the formal stipulation of equality but simply to highlight the fractures and limits of emancipation and the necessity of thinking about these limits in terms that do not simply traffic in the obviousness of common sense—the denial of basic rights, privileges, and entitlements to the formerly enslaved—and yet leave the framework of liberalism unexamined. In short, the matter to be considered is how the formerly enslaved navigated between a travestied emancipation and an illusory freedom.<sup>9</sup>

When we examine the history of racial formation in the United States, it is evident that liberty, property, and whiteness were inextricably enmeshed. Racism was central to the expansion of capitalist relations of production, the organization, division, and management of the laboring classes, and the regulation of the population through licensed forms of sexual association and conjugal unions and through the creation of an internal danger to the purity of the body public. Whiteness was a valuable and exclusive property essential to the integrity of the citizen-subject and the exemplary self-possession of the liberal individual. Although emancipation resulted in a decisive shift in the relation of race and status, black subordination continued under the aegis of contract. In this regard, the efforts of Southern states to codify blackness in constitutions written in the wake of abolition and install new measures in the law that would secure the subordination of freed black people demonstrate the prevailing disparities of emancipation. The discrepant production of blackness, the articulation of race across diverse registers of subjection, and

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9. I am indebted to Irene Wei for this question.



the protean capacities of racism illuminate the tenuousness of equality in a social order founded on chattel slavery. Certainly the freed came into “possession” of themselves and basic civil rights consequent to the abolition of slavery. However, despite the symbolic bestowal of humanity that accompanied the acquisition of rights, the legacy of freedom was an ambivalent one. If the nascent mantle of sovereign individuality conferred rights and entitlements, it also served to obscure the coercion of “free labor,” the transmutation of bonded labor, the invasive forms of discipline that fashioned individuality, and the regulatory production of blackness.

Notwithstanding the dissociation of the seemingly inviolable imperial body of property resulting from the abolition of slavery and the uncoupling of the master-and-slave dyad, the breadth of freedom and the shape of the emergent order were the sites of intense struggle in everyday life. The absolute dominion of the master, predicated on the annexation of the captive body and its standing as the “sign and surrogate” of the master’s body, yielded to an economy of bodies, yoked and harnessed, through the exercise of autonomy, self-interest, and consent. The use, regulation, and management of the body no longer necessitated its literal ownership since self-possession effectively yielded modern forms of bonded labor. However, as Marx observed with notable irony, the pageantry of liberty, equality, and consent enacted within this veritable Eden of rights underwent a radical transformation after the exchange was made, the bargain was struck, and the contract was signed. The transactional agent appeared less as the self-possessed and willful agent than as “someone who has brought his own hide to market and now has nothing to expect—but a tanning.”<sup>10</sup> Although no longer the extension and instrument of the master’s absolute right or dominion, the laboring black body remained a medium of others’ power and representation.<sup>11</sup> If the control of blacks was

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10. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 280.

11. Ann Norton, examining the role of property in American liberalism, argues that property became “the body’s sign and surrogate, the first medium of representation. Property stands for the body. . . . Property thus served to protect men’s freedom and expand their dominion, to protect

formerly effected by absolute rights of property in the black body, dishonor, and the quotidian routine of violence, these techniques were supplanted by the liberty of contract that spawned debt-peonage, the bestowal of right that engendered indebtedness and obligation and licensed naked forms of domination and coercion, and the cultivation of a work ethic that promoted self-discipline and induced internal forms of policing. Spectacular displays of white terror and violence supplemented these techniques.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, the glimpse of freedom enabled by the transformation from chattel to man fueled the resistance to domination, discipline, and subjugation, for the equality and personal liberty conferred by the dispensation of rights occasioned a sense of group entitlement intent on collective redress as these newly acquired rights also obfuscated and licensed forms of social domination, racial subjection, and exploitation. Despite the inability of the newly emancipated to actualize or enjoy the full equality or freedom stipulated by the law and the ways in which these newly acquired rights masked the modes of domination attendant to the transition from slavery to freedom, the possession of rights was nonetheless significant.

The failures of Reconstruction are perhaps best understood by examining the cross-hatchings of slavery and freedom as modes of domination, subjection, and accumulation.<sup>13</sup> Just as “the veiled slavery of wage labourers in Europe needed the unqualified slavery of the New World as its pedestal,” so, too, did slavery provide the pedestal upon which the equality of rights appeared resplendent and veil the relations of domination and exploitation

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their bodies and enhance their pleasure. As property became a legal and cultural surrogate for the self, it also became the medium for the self-made man: a means for the materialization of individual power, taste and authority.” “Engendering Another American Identity,” in *Rhetorical Republic: Governing Representations in American Politics*, ed. Frederic M. Dolan and Thomas L. Dumm (Amherst: U of Massachusetts, 1993).

12. For accounts of the kinds of violence to which the freed were subjected, see Carl Schurz, *Report on the Condition of the South* (1865; reprint, New York: Arno, 1969); and U.S. Congress, *Report of the Joint Committee on Reconstruction* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1866).

13. I have opted to use the term “accumulation” because slavery is not a relation of exploitation in the classic Marxian sense.

harbored in the language of rights. If the violation of liberty and rights exacted by slavery's presence disfigured the revolutionary legacy of 1776—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—then no less portentous was the legitimation and sanctioning of race as a natural ordering principle of the social during the transformation of national identity and citizenship. The legacy of slavery was evidenced by the intransigence of racism, specifically the persistent commitment to discriminatory racial classifications despite the prohibition of explicit declarations of inequality or violations of life, liberty, and property based on prior condition of servitude or race. On one hand, the constraints of race were formally negated by the stipulation of sovereign individuality and abstract equality, and on the other, racial discriminations and predilections were cherished and protected as beyond the scope of law. Even more unsettling was the instrumental role of equality in constructing a measure of man or descending scale of humanity that legitimated and naturalized subordination. The role of equality in the furtherance of whiteness as the norm of humanity and the scale and measure of man was not unlike the surprisingly adverse effects wrought by the judicial assessment of the Thirteenth Amendment, which resulted in progressively restricted notions of enslavement and its incidents that, in turn, severely narrowed the purview of freedom.

The advent of freedom was characterized by forms of constraint that, resembling those experienced under slavery, relied primarily on force, compulsion, and terror and others that fettered, restricted, and confined the subject precisely through the stipulation of will, reason, and consent. Moreover, the revolution of sentiment consequent to emancipation supplanted paternalist affections with racial antipathy and reciprocity with revulsion. This discrepant or discordant bestowal of emancipation can be gleaned in a variety of everyday sites and practices. To this end, I employ instructive handbooks for the freed, the Reconstruction Amendments, technical handbooks of plantation management, labor contracts, and everyday practices as templates for reading these contending articulations of freedom and the forms of subjection they engendered. As stated earlier, the term “burdened individuality” attempts to convey the antagonistic production of the liberal individual, rights bearer, and raced subject as equal

yet inferior, independent yet servile, freed yet bound by duty, reckless yet responsible, blithe yet brokenhearted. “Burdened individuality” designates the double bind of emancipation—the onerous responsibilities of freedom with the enjoyment of few of its entitlements, the collusion of the disembodied equality of liberal individuality with the dominated, regulated, and disciplined embodiment of blackness, the entanglements of sovereignty and subjection, and the transformation of involuntary servitude effected under the aegis of free labor. This is not to suggest simply that blacks were unable to achieve the democratic individuality of white citizens but rather that the discourse on black freedom emphasized hardship, travails, and a burdened and encumbered existence. Therefore, burdened individuality is both a descriptive and a conceptual device utilized to explicate the particular modes and techniques of power of which the individual is the object and instrument. The power generative of this condition of burdened individuality encompassed repression, domination, techniques of discipline, strategies of self-improvement, and the regulatory interventions of the state.

The mantle of individuality effectively conscripted the freed as indebted and dutiful worker and incited forms of coercion, discipline, and regulation that profoundly complicated the meaning of freedom. If it appears paradoxical that the nomination “free individual” illuminates the fractures of freedom and begets methods of bondage quite suited to a free labor economy, it is only because the mechanisms through which right, exchange, and equality bolster and advance domination, subjection, and exploitation have not been interrogated. Liberal discourses of freedom enable forms of subjection seemingly quite at odds with its declared principles, since they readily accommodate autonomy and domination, sovereignty and submission, and subordination and abstract equality. This can be attributed to the Lockean heritage of U.S. constitutionalism, which propounded an ideal of liberty founded in the sanctity of property, and the vision of liberty forwarded in the originary narrative of the Constitution, which wed slavery and freedom in the founding of the nation and the engendering of “we the people.”<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, the question

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14. For a critique of the inequality sanctioned by property rights, see

remains as to how the effort to sever the disavowed and repressed coupling of liberty and bondage that inaugurated the republic effected new forms of domination.<sup>15</sup> How did emancipatory figurations of a rights-bearing individual aimed at abolishing the badges of slavery result in burdened individuality?

Restrictive and narrow conceptions of liberty derived from bourgeois constructions of the market, the atomizing and individualizing character of rights, and an equality grounded in sameness enabled and dissimulated the domination and exploitation of the postbellum order. Prized designations like “independence,” “autonomy,” and “free will” are the lures of liberalism, yet the tantalizing suggestion of the individual as potentate and sovereign is drastically undermined by the forms of repression and terror that accompanied the advent of freedom, the techniques of discipline that bind the individual through conscience, self-knowledge, responsibility, and duty, and the management of racialized bodies and populations effected through the racism of the state and civil society.<sup>16</sup> Liberalism, in general, and rights discourse, in particular, assure entitlements and privileges as they enable and efface elemental forms of domination primarily because of the atomistic portrayal of social relations, the inability to address collective interests and needs, and the sanctioning of subordination and the free reign of prejudice in the construction of the social or the private. Moreover, the universality or unencumbered individuality of liberalism relies on tacit exclusions and norms that preclude substantive equality; all do not equally partake of the resplendent,

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Jennifer Nedelsky, *Private Property and the Limits of American Constitutionalism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990); and “Bounded Selves,” *Law and the Order of Culture*, ed. Robert Post (Berkeley: U of California P, 1991).

15. I describe this coupling as disavowed since the word “slavery” was nowhere mentioned in the Constitution.

16. See Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in *Michael Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982); and Paul Smith, *Discerning the Subject* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988), xxiv-xxxv. For a critique of notions of autonomy, free will, and independence, see Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, and Nancy Fraser, eds., *Feminist Contentions* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

plenipotent, indivisible, and steely singularity that it proffers. Abstract universality presumes particular forms of embodiment and excludes or marginalizes others.<sup>17</sup> Rather, the excluded, marginalized, and devalued subjects that it engenders, variously contained, trapped, and imprisoned by nature's whimsical apportionments, in fact, enable the production of universality, for the denigrated and deprecated, those castigated and saddled by varied corporeal maledictions, are the fleshy substance that enable the universal to achieve its ethereal splendor.

Nevertheless, the abstract universality of the rights of man and citizen also potentially enable these rights to be enjoyed by all, at least theoretically. Thus universality can conceivably exceed its stipulated and constitutive constraints to the degree that these claims can be taken up and articulated by those subjects not traditionally entitled to the privileges of disembodied and unencumbered universality. The abstractness and instability of rights make possible their resignification. Nonetheless, when those formerly excluded are belatedly conferred with rights and guarantees of equal protection, they have traditionally had difficulty exercising these rights, as long as they are seen as lesser, derivative, or subordinate embodiments of the norm. Plainly speaking, this is the gap between the formal stipulation of rights and the legitimate exercise of them.<sup>18</sup> In this regard, it is necessary to consider whether the effort of the dominated to "take up" the universal does not remedy one set of injuries only to inflict injuries of another order. It is worth examining whether universalism merely dissimulates the stigmatic injuries constitutive of blackness with abstract assertions of equality, sovereignty, and individuality. Indeed, if this is the case, can the dominated be liberated by universalist assertions?<sup>19</sup>

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17. Étienne Balibar, "Racism as Universalism," in *Masses, Clashes, Ideas*, trans. James Swenson (New York: Routledge, 1994), 191-204; David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993); Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford UP, 1976).

18. I am indebted to the participants of the 1995 seminar "Feminism and Discourses of Power" at the University of California Humanities Research Institute, Irvine, for this line of thought.

19. See *Brown v. Board of Education* on stigmatic injury. "For in the very

As citizens and rights bearers, were the newly emancipated merely enacting a role they could never legitimately or authentically occupy? Were they fated to be hapless aspirants, who in their effort to exercise newly conferred rights only revealed the distance between the norm and themselves? As Mrs. Freeman, a character from Helen E. Brown's *John Freeman and His Family*, a fictional account of emancipation, declared: "I want we should be just as near like white folks as ever we can ketch it."<sup>20</sup> Certainly this remark highlights the chasm between the mimetic and the legitimate. It is not simply fortuitous that Mrs. Freeman expresses this sentiment, for she, even more than her husband, is ill-suited for the privileges and responsibilities attendant to citizenship. The discourse of citizenship presupposed a masculinist subject on which to drape the attendant rights and privileges of liberty and equality, thus explaining why the transition from slavery to freedom was usually and quite aptly narrated as the journey from chattel to man. Alas, the joke is on Mrs. Freeman, as expressed by the convoluted phrasing and orthographic nonsense that articulate her insuperable distance from the norm and intimate the unspoken exclusions of the universal rights of man and citizen.

Chattel becomes man through the ascension to the hallowed realm of the self-possessed. The individual thus fabricated is "free from dependence on the will of others, enters relations with others voluntarily with a view of his own interest, is the proprietor of his own person and capacities, and free to alienate his labor."<sup>21</sup> Although assertions of free will, singularity, autonomy, and consent necessarily obscure relations of power and domination,

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same gesture with which [rights] draw a circle around the individual, in the very same act with which they grant sovereign selfhood, they turn back upon the individual all responsibility for her failures, her condition, her poverty, her madness—they privatize her situation and mystify the powers that construct, position and buffet her." *States of Injury* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 128.

20. Helen E. Brown, *John Freeman and His Family* (Boston: American Tract Society, 1864), 30.

21. C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (New York: Oxford UP, 1962), 263-264. In this vision, "human society consists of a series of market relations."

the genealogy of freedom, to the contrary, discloses the intimacy of liberty, domination, and subjection. This intimacy is discerned in the inequality enshrined in property rights, the conquest and captivity that established “we the people,” and the identity of race as property, whether evidenced in the corporeal inscriptions of slavery and its badges or in the bounded bodily integrity of whiteness secured by the abjection of others.<sup>22</sup> The individual, denuded in the harsh light of scrutiny, reveals a subject tethered by various orders of constraint and obscured by the figure of the self-possessed, for lurking behind the disembodied and self-possessed individual is the fleshy substance of the embodied and the encumbered—that is, the castigated particularity of the universal.<sup>23</sup> In this light, the transubstantiation of the captive into volitional subject, chattel into proprietor, and the circumscribed body of blackness into the disembodied and abstract universal seems improbable, if not impossible.

In light of these remarks, the transition from slavery to freedom cannot adequately be represented as the triumph of liberty over domination, free will over coercion, or consent over compulsion. The valued precepts of liberalism provide an insufficient guide to understanding the event of emancipation. The ease with which sovereignty and submission and self-possession and servility are yoked is quite noteworthy. In fact, it leads us to wonder whether the insistent, disavowed, and sequestered production of subordination, the inequality enshrined by the sanctity of property, and the castigating universality of liberalism are all that emancipation proffers. Is not the free will of the individual measured precisely through the exercise of constraint and autonomy determined by the capacity to participate in relations of exchange that only fetter and bind the subject? Does the esteemed

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22. On liberty as a racial value, see Goldberg, *Racist Culture*, 36-40.

23. Discernible in the very fabric of subjectivity are the limitations of freedom. Tracing the affiliation of freedom and constraint in regard to subjectivity, Etienne Balibar asks: “Why is it that the very *name* which allows modern philosophy to think and designate the *originary freedom* of the human being—the name subject—is precisely the name which *historically* meant suppression of freedom, or at least an intrinsic limitation of freedom, i.e., *subjection*?” “Subjection and Subjectivation,” in *Supposing the Subject*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1994), 9. See also Williams, *Keywords*.



will replace the barbaric whip or only act as its supplement? In light of these questions, the identity of the emancipated as rights bearer, free laborer, and calculable man must be considered in regard to processes of domination, exploitation, and subjection rather than in the benighted terms that desperately strive to establish slavery as the “prehistory” of man.

# III.

## THE AVANT-GARDE OF WHITE SUPREMACY

2002

Steve Martinot & Jared Sexton

If punishment could be provoked merely by the arbitrary actions of those who violate the law, then the law would be in their control: they would be able to touch it and make it appear at will; they would be masters of its shadow and light. That is why transgression endeavors to overstep prohibition in an attempt to attract the law to itself—all it ends up doing is reinforcing the law in its weakness. The law is the shadow toward which every gesture necessarily advances; it is itself the shadow of the advancing gesture.

—Michel Foucault (1989)

### THE PROBLEM OF WHITE SUPREMACY (EXOTIC THEORIZATION)

In 1998, *Critical Resistance: Beyond the Prison Industrial Complex*, a national conference and strategy-session, re-posed the question of the relations between white supremacy and state violence. Fascism was the concept often used to link these two terms and the prison industrial complex was considered to be its quintessential practice. The political-intellectual discourse generated at and around Critical Resistance shattered the narrow definitions of racism that characterize many conventional (even leftist) accounts and produced instead a space for rethinking radical alternatives.

This sort of shift in the political landscape has been imperative for a long time now. The police murder of Amadou Diallo comes to mind as an event requiring such re-conceptualization. The Diallo killing was really plural since it involved other police murders as imminent in the same event. Diallo's killing was plural beyond his own many deaths in those few seconds, a killing that took place in the eyes of his friends and family from as far away as Guinea. In the immediate wake of his killers' acquittals, the NYPD murdered Malcolm Ferguson, a community organizer who had been active in attempting to get justice for Diallo. (The police harassed the Ferguson's within the next year and arrested his brother on trumped up charges.) Two weeks after Ferguson's murder, the police killed Patrick Dorismund because he refused to buy drugs from an undercover cop, because he fought back when the cop attacked. The police then harassed and attacked Dorismund's funeral procession in Brooklyn a week later, hospitalizing several in attendance. (The police took the vendetta all the way to the grave.) Tyisha Miller was murdered in her car in Riverside, California by four cops who knocked on the window of her car and found that she simply didn't respond. Angela Davis tells the story of "Tanya Haggerty in Chicago, whose cell phone was the potential weapon that allowed police to justify her killing," just as Daillo's wallet was the "gun" at which four cops fired in unison. To the police, a wallet in the hand of black man is a gun whereas that same wallet in the hand of a white man is just a wallet. A cell phone in the hands of a black woman is a gun; that same phone in a white woman's hand is a cell phone.

There were local movements in each of these cities to protest acts of police murder and in each case the respective city governments were solicited to take appropriate action. Under conventional definitions of the government, we seem to be restricted to calling upon it for protection from its own agents. But what are we doing when we demonstrate against police brutality, and find ourselves tacitly calling upon the government to help us do so? These notions of the state as the arbiter of justice and the police as the unaccountable arbiters of lethal violence are two sides of the same coin. Narrow understandings of mere racism are proving themselves impoverished because they cannot see this

fundamental relationship. What is needed is the development of a radical critique of the structure of the coin.

There are two possibilities: first, police violence is a deviation from the rules governing police procedures in general. Second, these various forms of violence (e.g., racial profiling, street murders, terrorism) are the rule itself as standard operation procedure. For instance, when the protest movements made public statements they expressed an understanding of police violence as the rule of the day and not as a shocking exception. However, when it came time to formulate practical proposals to change the fundamental nature of policing, all they could come up with concretely were more oversight committees, litigation, and civilian review boards (“with teeth”), none of which lived up to the collective intuition about what the police were actually doing. The protest movements’ readings of these events didn’t seem able to bridge the gap to the programmatic. The language in which we articulate our analyses doesn’t seem to allow for alternatives in practice. Even those who take seriously the second possibility (violence as a rule) find that the language of alternatives and the terms of relevance are constantly dragged into the political discourse they seek to oppose, namely, that the system works and is capable of reform.

After the exposure of the LAPD’s videotaped beating of Rodney King, after the rebellions of 1992, police violence only became more rampant and more brazen across the country. After the “Justice for Diallo” movement in NYC, the police murders multiplied, and police arrogance increased. It was as if the anti-racist campaigns (or uprisings) against police violence were co-opted by the police to augment their violence, rather than effectively closing it down as they had explicitly intended. In the wake of countless exposés, the prison industrial complex has only expanded; the reportage on the racist operations of capital punishment and the legal system more generally have become absorbed in the acceleration of execution rates. Why do things get worse after each hard fought revelation? Where do we locate the genius of the system? Something is left out of the account; it runs through our fingers, escaping our grasp.

If the spectacle of police violence does, in fact, operate according to a rule of its own (as the anti-violence movements argue), what does this suggest about the social institutions that generate it and which it represents despite persistent official disavowals? First, the relationship between police violence and the social institution of policing is structural, rather than incidental or contingent (i.e., an unfortunate but minor part of the job). Second, the cultural content of the actual policing that we face is *to be a law unto itself*, not the socially responsible institution it claims to be in its disavowals. Third, a question: is this paradigm of policing a methodology for a form of social organization? If so, of what are the police the *avant-garde*?

They prowl, categorizing and profiling, often turning those profiles into murderous violence without (serious) fear of being called to account, all the while claiming impunity. What jars the imagination is not the fact of impunity itself, but the realization that they are simply people working a job, a job they secured by making an application at the personnel office. In events such as the shooting of Amadou Diallo, the true excessiveness is not in the massiveness of the shooting, but in the fact that these cops were there on the street looking for this event in the first place, as a matter of routine business. This spectacular evil is encased in a more inarticulate evil of banality, namely, that the state assigns certain individuals to (well-paying) jobs as hunters of human beings, a furtive protocol for which this shooting is simply the effect.

But they do more than prowl. They make problematic the whole notion of social responsibility such that we no longer know if the police are responsible to the judiciary and local administration or if the city is actually responsible to them, duty bound by impunity itself. To the extent to which the police are a law unto themselves, the latter would have to be the case. This unaccountable vector of inverted social responsibility would resonate in the operating procedures in upper levels of civil administration as well. That is, civil governmental structures would act in accordance with the paradigm of policing—wanton violence legitimized by strict conformity to procedural regulations.

For instance, consider the recent case of a 12 year-old African-American boy sentenced to prison for life without parole for having killed a 6 year-old African-American girl while acting out the moves he had seen in professional wrestling matches on TV. In demanding this sentence, the prosecutor argued that the boy was a permanent menace to society, and had killed the girl out of extreme malice and consciousness of what he was doing. A 12 year-old child, yet Lionel Tate was given life without parole. In the name of social sanctity, the judicial system successfully terrorized yet another human being, his friends, and relatives by carrying its proceduralism to the limit. The corporate media did the rest; several “commentators” ridiculed Tate’s claim to have imitated wrestling moves, rewriting his statement as a disreputable excuse: “pro wrestling made me do it” (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 3/25/01). Thus, they transformed his naïve awareness of bodies into intentional weaponry and cunning. One could surmise, with greater justification than surmising the malice of the child, that the prosecutor made a significant career step by getting this high-profile conviction. Beyond the promotion he would secure for a job well done, beyond the mechanical performance of official outrage and the cynicism exhibited in playing the role, what animus drove the prosecutor to demand such a sentence?

In the face of the prosecution’s sanctimonious excess, those who bear witness to Tate’s suffering have only inarticulate outrage to offer as consolation. With recourse only to the usual rhetorical expletives about racism, the procedural ritualism of this white supremacist operation has confronted them with the absence of a real means of discerning the judiciary’s dissimulated machinations. The prosecutor was the banal functionary of a civil structure, a paradigmatic exercise of wanton violence that parades as moral rectitude but whose source is the paradigm of policing. All attempts to explain the malicious standard operating procedure of US white supremacy find themselves hamstrung by conceptual inadequacy; it remains describable, but not comprehensible. The story can be told, as the 41 bullets fired to slaughter Diallo can be counted, but the ethical meaning remains beyond the discursive resources of civil society, outside the framework for thinkable thought.

It is, of course, possible to speak out against such white supremacist violence as immoral, as illegal, even unconstitutional. But the impossibility of thinking through to the ethical dimension has a hidden structural effect. For those who are not racially profiled or tortured when arrested, who are not tried and sentenced with the presumption of guilt, who are not shot reaching for their identification, all of this is imminently ignorable. Between the inability to see and the refusal to acknowledge, a mode of social organization is being cultivated for which the paradigm of policing is the cutting edge. We shall have to look beyond racialized police violence to see its logic.

The impunity of racist police violence is the first implication of its ignorability to white civil society. The ignorability of police impunity is what renders it inarticulable outside of that hegemonic formation. If ethics is possible for white civil society within its social discourses, it is rendered irrelevant to the systematic violence deployed against the outside precisely because it is ignorable. Indeed, that ignorability becomes the condition of possibility for the ethical coherence of the inside. The dichotomy between a white ethical dimension and its irrelevance to the violence of police profiling is the very structure of racialization today. It is a twin structure, a regime of violence that operates in two registers, terror and the seduction into the fraudulent ethics of social order; a double economy of terror, structured by a ritual of incessant performance. And into the gap between them, common sense, which cannot account for the double register or twin structure of this ritual, disappears into incomprehensibility. The language of common sense, through which we bespeak our social world in the most common way, leaves us speechless before the enormity of the usual, of the business of civil procedures.

### **THE PROBLEM WITH THE PROBLEM (SPECTACLE & BANALITY)**

**T**he dichotomy between white ethics and its irrelevance to the violence of police profiling is not dialectical; the two are incommensurable. Whenever one attempts to speak about the paradigm of policing, one is forced back into a discussion of particular events—high-profile police homicides and their

related courtroom battles, for instance. The spectacular event camouflages the operation of police law as contempt, as terror, its occupation of neighborhoods; the secret of police law is the fact that there is no recourse to the disruption of people's lives by these activities. In fact, to focus on the spectacular event of police violence is to deploy (and thereby reaffirm) the logic of police profiling itself. Yet, we can't avoid this logic once we submit to the demand to provide examples or images of the paradigm. As a result, the attempt to articulate the paradigm of policing renders itself non-paradigmatic, reaffirms the logic of police profiling, and thereby reduces itself to the fraudulent ethics by which white civil society rationalizes its existence.

Examples cannot represent the spectrum of contemporary white supremacy from the subtle (e.g., the inability to get a taxi) to the extreme (e.g., the de facto martial law occupation of many black and brown neighborhoods), all of which has become structural and everyday. As in the case of spectacular police violence, producing examples of more subtle (if obvious) forms of "institutional racism" (e.g., continuing discriminatory trends in housing, education, employment, etc.) has the same effect of reducing the paradigm to the non-paradigmatic. The logic of this journalistic approach generates nonchalance in contemporary race talk such that sensational reportage about the supposedly hidden residues of a persistent racism disables analysis. Both the spectacular and the subtle, against which people can unite in their desire for justice, remain the masks behind which the daily operations of white supremacist terror proceed.

Most theories of white supremacy seek to plumb the depths of its excessiveness, beyond the ordinary; they miss the fact that racism is a mundane affair. The fundamental excess of the paradigm of policing which infuses this culture is wholly banal. Those theories overlook that fact in favor of extant extravagance, spectacle, or the 'deep psychology' of rogue elements and become complicit in perpetuating white supremacy. The reality is an invidious ethos of excess that, instead, constitutes the surface of everything in this society. For some time now, the intellectual quest for racism's supposedly hidden meaning has afforded a refuge from confrontations with this banality, even



its possible acknowledgement. The most egregious aspect of this banality is our tacit acquiescence to the rules of race and power, to the legitimacy white supremacy says it has, regardless of their total violation of reason and comprehensibility. Our “tacit acquiescence” is the real silent source of white supremacist tenacity and power. As William C. Harris, II wrote in the aftermath of Tyisha Miller’s murder by the police:

It is heartbreaking to be an American citizen and have to say this, but I do have to say this. We have almost, and I stress almost, become accustomed to police shooting innocent, unarmed, young, black males. That in itself is bad enough, and one was at one time inclined to think it couldn’t get any worse, but it gets worse ... Now we have police killing our young black females. It can’t get any worse than that.  
(*Neighbourhood Voice*, 1999)

Harris is right; yet he also sells himself out because he acquiesces in the process of decrying acquiescence. He does not draw the line between respect for persons and impunity. He continues: “Even if she grabbed a gun, was it necessary to shoot at her twenty-seven times? I know it’s less than 41, but *that’s still too many times to shoot* at a sleeping female—black, brown, yellow or white” (emphasis added).

Why isn’t one bullet too many times to shoot anybody? It is the job of the spectacular (and sensational reports about the subtle) to draw attention away from the banality of police murder as standard operating procedure.

Spectacle is a form of camouflage. It does not conceal anything; it simply renders it unrecognizable. One looks at it and does not see it. It appears in disguise. Harris, for example, looks at acquiescence and cannot see it. Camouflage is a relationship between the one dissimulating their appearance and the one who is fooled, who looks and cannot see. Like racialization as a system of meanings assigned to the body, police spectacle is itself the form of appearance of this banality. Their endless assault reflects the idea that race is a social envelope, a system of social

categorization dropped over the heads of people like clothes. Police impunity serves to distinguish between the racial uniform itself and the elsewhere that mandates it. They constitute the distinction between those whose human being is put permanently in question and those for whom it goes without saying. Police spectacle is not the effect of the racial uniform; rather, it is the police uniform that is producing re-racialization.

Nothing better exemplifies this distinction than the structure of derogatory language. Derogatory terms do not mean; they assault. Their intention is not to communicate but to harm. Thus they are not discursive signs or linguistic statements but modes of aggression. They express a structure of power and domination, a hierarchy that contextualizes them and gives them their force. As gestures of assault they reflect their users status as a member of the dominant group. The derogatory term does more than speak; it silences. That ability to silence derives from the fact that, in turning its hegemonic position to account, it turns the racialized other into a language for whiteness itself. Those situated lower on the hierarchy have no viable means of defending themselves. This, in effect, renders the derogation unanswerable in its own terms. The derogatory term obtrudes with a small daily violence whose form is gratuitous, without motivation in the situation in which it is used, and whose content is to render that situation dominated by white supremacy. If it sits at the heart of the language of racism it is because it is banal and everyday even while symbolizing racism's utmost violence, the verbal form of its genocidal trajectory. Those who use derogatory terms repeatedly are putting themselves in a continual state of aggression; turning their objective complicity with a structured relation of white supremacist dominance into an active investment or affirmation. Such modes of assault demonstrate a specific obsession with those denigrated that characterizes the socius of white supremacy, its demands for allegiance, its conditions of membership, its residence in viciousness.

Because it is gratuitous and unanswerable, the derogatory term grants itself impunity, reiterates the excess at the core of each racist event without calling its ethics into question. The prevalence of derogatory terms in US conversation goes unnoticed, seen simply

on the margin of common sense, as opposed to an index of white supremacy. It is a small matter, when set against such things as, for instance, the legal codes of Jim Crow or the government's assassination of Fred Hampton. Yet derogation comes in many different forms—as stories, aphorisms, discourses, legal statutes, political practices, etc. The repetition of derogation becomes the performance of white supremacist identity, over and over again. The derogatory term occupies the very center of the structure of white supremacy.

The gratuitousness of its repetition bestows upon white supremacy an inherent discontinuity. It stops and starts self-referentially, at whim. To theorize some political, economic, or psychological necessity for its repetition, its unending return to violence, its need to kill is to lose a grasp on that gratuitousness by thinking its performance is representable. And therein it hides. If the hegemony of white supremacy is already (and only) excessive, its acts of repetition are its access to unrepresentability; they dissolve its excessiveness into invisibility as simply daily occurrence. We can, for example, name the fact of Albert Woodfox's nearly 30-year solitary confinement in Angola Prison, but it exceeds the capacity of representation. (The ideological and cultural structure that conceives of and enables doing that to a person in the first place is inarticulable.) The inner dynamic of our attempts to understand its supposedly underlying meaning or purpose masks its ethic of impunity from us. White supremacy is nothing more than what we perceive of it; there is nothing beyond it to give it legitimacy, nothing beneath it nor outside of it to give it justification. The structure of its banality is the surface on which it operates. Whatever mythic content it pretends to claim is a priori empty. Its secret is that it has no depth. There is no dark corner that, once brought to the light of reason, will unravel its system. In each instance of repetition, "what is repeated is the emptiness of repetition," an articulation that "does not speak and yet has always been said" (Foucault 54). In other words, its truth lies in the rituals that sustain its circuitous contentless logic; it is, in fact, nothing but its very practices.

In the prosecutor's insistence on life imprisonment without parole for a 14 year-old, nothing is accomplished by such indulgence.

It is only excess itself that is served. That its emptiness of meaning is itself its meaning blares out from the prosecutor's rhetorical reversal in suggesting a possible commutation of the sentence. What was at stake, more than justice or humanity or the enforcement of law, was the power to impose a living death (or not). It is that which must be defended by being endlessly reconstructed, and reconstructed by being endlessly defended. The significance of the case is silently shifted from Tate's transgression (in imitation of imitation sports violence) to the political structure's impunity. In this sense, Tate becomes the fictional channel by which impunity is made real. Ultimately, that is what happened to Tayisha Miller as well. She became a similar fictional channel, a medium for the realization of police impunity.

Indeed, the state has even invented a structural grammar to organize these transformations. Take the legal concept of "vicarious liability." A man drives away from a traffic stop and a cop fires into the car to stop it (already an arrogation of impunity). He kills the passenger in the car. The driver is charged with murder instead of the cop; not only does impunity means the cop cannot do wrong, but the driver is actually made responsible for bullets that had his name on it. The police become a machine for killing and incarcerating while the personhood of those they stop or notice or profile is conscripted into the role of perpetrator, the finger on the trigger of that machine. Vicarious liability is the inversion of responsibility by the police. When the police break up a peaceful demonstration, those who have been beaten bloody with their nightsticks are arrested and charged with assaulting an officer. In its stridency, the impunity machine claims that those people killed by the cops were only committing suicide. The existence of a victim of police abuse is transformed into the cause for the abuse, a victim of self-abuse through the machinery of the police.... There is no way to say that this makes sense.

What keeps getting repeated here? It is not just the repetition of derogation or acts of police impunity. While the police wreak havoc on the lives of those they assault, exercising a license implicit in and extending racial profiling, they engage in a vital cultural labor. On the one hand, racial profiling enables those unprofiled (the average white man and white women who are linked to

one) to ignore the experience of social dislocation that profiling produces. They may recognize the fact of profiling itself, but they are free from the feeling of dread. Indeed, profiling creates insouciance in an atmosphere of organized violence. Official discourse seeks to accustom us to thinking about state violence as a warranted part of the social order. For them the security of belonging accompanies the re-racialization of whiteness as the intensification of anti-blackness. The police elaborate the grounds for the extension of a renewed and reconfigured white supremacist political economic order. On the other hand, there is terror and the police are its vanguard. The law, clothed in the ethic of impunity, is simply contingent on the repetition of its violence. One cannot master it, regardless of the intimacy or longevity of one's experience with it. One can only sense its frightening closeness as a probability, as serial states of brutality or derogation. The dread and suffering of those in the way of these repeated spasms of violence is always here and always on the horizon. In the face of racial profiling by the police, however prepared those profiled may be for that aggression, it always appears unexpectedly.

This confluence of repetition and transformation, participation and subjection gets conjugated inversely so that the target becomes the aggressor and the uniformed aggressors become a priesthood, engineering a political culture whose construction is the practice of whiteness. What are wholly and essentially immanent are the structures of racist reason that produce practices without motive. "Police procedures" become pure form because they are at once both self-defined and subordinated to the implicit prerogatives of this political culture. They empty the law of any content that could be called justice, substituting murderousness and impunity. The "social procedures" that burgeon in the wake of this engineering also become pure form, emptying social exchange as the condition of white social cohesion. It flattens all ideals of political life to a Manichean structure that it depicts as whiteness versus evil. It is a double economy. On the one hand, there is an economy of clearly identifiable injustices, spectacular flash points of terror, expressing the excesses of the state-sanctioned system of racial categorization. On the other, there is the structure of inarticulability itself and its imposed unintelligibility, an economy

of the loss of meaning, a hyper-economy. It is this hyper-economy that appears in its excess as banal; a hyper-injustice that is reduced and dissolved in the quotidian as an aura, while it is refracted in the images of the spectacular economy itself. Between the spectacular as the rule and the banal as excess, in each of the moment of its reconstruction, the law of white supremacist attack signifies that there is no law.

This hyper-economy, with its hyper-injustice, is the problem we confront. The intractability of racism lies in its hidden and unspeakable terror, an implicate ethic of impunity. A repetition of violence as standard operating (police) procedure, an insidious common sense, renders any real notion of justice or democracy on the map of white supremacy wholly alien and inarticulable.

#### **MAPPING THE SURFACE (REPETITION)**

There are oppositional political movements of course; some are progressive, fewer are radical. But each encounters a certain internal limitation. For instance, there are movements seeking to make the police more accountable to legal and communal standards of conduct; but their role then becomes one of making the state work better and more efficiently. They work, perhaps unwittingly, at reconstructing and not dismantling the white state. What they fail to understand or accept is that the police are already accountable, but to something out of reach of the principles of justice or democracy. There is a (largely symbolic) multiracial or mixed race movement that understands itself to be the very transcendence of race but, in mixing and matching races supposed to really exist, it subsumes the products of racism in ways that recall many dimensions of white supremacist thinking. The ethic of retribution that legitimates the expanding prison-industrial complex in the US and beyond is one of these products. Even political opposition to that ethic outside the prison wall falls prey to certain acceptance of criminal law; in other words, it assumes that the prison is essential to social order. This acceptance is unacceptable from the point of view of the violence and violation engendered by the prison regime. Political (or politicized) prisoners demand an epistemology of a different

order, one that challenges the internal limits of opposition in a radical way—the dream of prison abolition.

How can one critically discuss policing and imprisonment without interrogating the very notions of freedom, citizenship, and democracy? How is one to think seriously about (the ends of) race without rethinking gender, sexuality, and the body? How can any economic questions be raised in this country—where movements for reparations and against sweatshops and prisons are becoming paramount on the left—without confronting the specter of slavery? How can we think political economy without also disturbing even radical critique and its historicist narratives of development, progress, and the primacy of production?

Leftist approaches that come as close to radical critique as any already fall short. The liberal ethos looks at racism as ignorance, something characteristic of the individual that can be solved at a social level through education and democratic procedure. For Marxist thought, racism is a divide-and-conquer strategy for class rule and super-exploitation. However, the idea that it is a strategy assumes that it can be counter-strategized at some kind of local or individual level rather than existing as something fundamental to class relations themselves. For anti-colonialist thinking, racism is a social ideology that can be refuted, a structure of privilege to be given up, again at the local or individual level. Where liberalism subordinates the issue of racism to the presumed potentialities of individual development, Marxism subordinates the issue of race to class relations of struggle, and anti-colonial radicalism pretends its mere existence as a “movement” is the first step toward eradicating racism. But liberalism’s social democracy pretends that state oligarchy is really interested in justice. And the more radical critiques subsume the issue of racism in promises of future transformations of the power relations to which de-racialization is deferred.

This stumbling back and forth between the individual and the social is even reflected in the social scientific literature on race and racism. Most theorizing proceeds by either psychologizing intricate political and historical processes, or by socializing questions of subjectivity and agency. The psychologizing

approach primarily attributes the project of white supremacy to the lurid preoccupations of (white) individual or collective psychic or biological pathologies. The socializing approach reduces white supremacy to 'mere' racism, a subsidiary strategy for the maintenance of social, political, and economic power by the (white) ruling class. Whereas the former locates the genesis of racism in (projected) fear and anxiety, insecurity or (repressed) desire, the latter claims that the specific pronouncements and practices of white supremacy are ideological subterfuge, rationalizations for or tactics of the political economy. For the first, remedies can always be found *within* liberal capitalism: from psychological counseling, moral and scientific education, legal prohibition, or even gene therapy to the self-righteous championing of human rights in nations as far away as possible. For the second, it is assumed that if racism can made not useful to the relations of production or the security of territorial boundaries, it will fade from the social landscape like the proverbial withering away of the state. In either case, what needs to be wrenched from the grasp of white supremacy is left entirely out of the account in the name of the epiphenomenal or the overdetermining.

In both arenas a hidden depth, a secret drive, an unfathomed animus is postulated and a procedure derived that will plumb that depth, excavate the problem, dredge out the muck that causes these aberrant behaviors that we call racism. And in both approaches an issue is skirted. It is as if there were something at the center of white supremacy that is too adamant, off of which the utmost of western analytic thought slides helplessly toward the simplistic, the personal or the institutional. The supposed secrets of white supremacy get sleuthed in its spectacular displays, in pathology and instrumentality, or pawned off on the figure of the "rogue cop." Each approach to race subordinates it to something that is not race, as if to continue the noble epistemological endeavor of getting to know it better. But what each ends up talking about is that other thing. In the face of this, the left's anti-racism becomes its passion. But its passion gives it away. It signifies the passive acceptance of the idea that race, considered to be either a real property of a person or an imaginary projection, is not essential to the social structure, a system of social meanings and categorizations. It is the same passive apparatus of whiteness that



in its mainstream guise actively forgets that it owes its existence to the killing and terrorizing of those it racializes for the purpose, expelling them from the human fold in the same gesture of forgetting. It is the passivity of bad faith that tacitly accepts as “what goes without saying” the postulates of white supremacy. And it must do so passionately since “what goes without saying” is empty and can be held as a “truth” only through an obsessiveness. The truth is that the truth is on the surface, flat and repetitive, just as the law is made by the uniform.

Like going to the state to protect us from the police, these critiques approach a variety of white ideologies and disciplines as a means of gaining insight into white supremacy. It is a project dedicated to only looking so far at race, racism, or white supremacy so as to avoid the risk of seeing oneself there, implicated as either perpetrator or victim. In effect, all of these theories remain disguises for the role of race and racism as social categorization. Once one recognizes that the power relations that categorize as such are genocidal, as Joy James has demonstrated, then the very discriminatory hierarchy that structures them must already subsume as strategies for itself the class struggles, privileges, educational facilities and juridical operations to which the left goes. The task of the critique of white supremacy is to avoid these general theoretical pitfalls and to produce new analyses, modes of apprehension, and levels of abstraction.

## CONCLUSION

The foundations of US white supremacy are far from stable. Owing to the instability of white supremacy, the social structures of whiteness must ever be re-secured in an obsessive fashion. The process of re-inventing whiteness and white supremacy has always involved the state, and the state has always involved the utmost paranoia. Vast political cataclysms such as the civil rights movements that sought to shatter this invention have confronted the state as harbingers of sanity. Yet the state’s absorption and co-optation of that opposition for the reconstruction of the white social order has been reoccurring before our very eyes. White supremacy is not reconstructed simply for its own sake, but for the sake of the social paranoia,

the ethic of impunity, and the violent spectacles of racialization that it calls the “maintenance of order” all of which constitute its essential dimensions. The cold, gray institutions of this society—courts, schools, prisons, police, army, law, religion, the two-party system—become the arenas of this brutality, its excess and spectacle, which they then normalize throughout the social field.

It is not simply by understanding the forms of state violence that the structures of hyper-injustice and their excess of hegemony will be addressed. If they foster policing as their paradigm—including imprisonment, police occupations, commodified governmental operations, a renewed Jim Crow, and a re-criminalization of race as their version of social order—then to merely catalogue these institutional forms marks the moment at which understanding stops. To pretend to understand at that point would be to affirm what denies understanding. Instead, we have to understand the state and its order as a mode of anti-production that seeks precisely to cancel understanding through its own common sense. For common sense, the opposite of injustice is justice; however, the opposite of hyper-injustice is not justice. The existence of hyper-injustice implies that neither a consciousness of injustice nor the possibility of justice any longer applies. Justice as such is incommensurable with and wholly exterior to the relation between ordinary social existence and the ethic of impunity including the modes of gratuitous violence that it fosters.

The pervasiveness of state-sanctioned terror, police brutality, mass incarceration, and the endless ambushes of white populism is where we must begin our theorizing. Though state practices create and reproduce the subjects, discourses, and places that are inseparable from them, we can no longer presuppose the subjects and subject positions nor the ideologies and empiricisms of political and class forces. Rather, the analysis of a contingent yet comprehensive state terror becomes primary. This is not to debate the traditional concerns of radical leftist politics that presuppose (and close off) the question of structure, its tenacity, its systematic and inexplicable gratuitousness. The problem here is how to dwell on the structures of pervasiveness, terror, and gratuitousness themselves rather than simply the state as an apparatus. It is to ask how the state exists as a formation or confluence of processes

with de-centered agency, how the subjects of state authority—its agents, citizens, and captives—are produced in the crucible of its ritualistic violence.

What is at stake is how to mark the outlines of white supremacist excess within its banality, to map out the dimensions of its landscape as pervasive and ordinary. The following essays<sup>1</sup> are offered as only preliminary articulations in this lethal milieu. In order to engage this problematic, we construct a collective enunciation, a theoretical assemblage of diverse investigations. The four arenas addressed here—the militarization of police, the proliferating prison-industrial complex, New World slavery, and the history of anti-miscegenation—do not subsume the situation in which we find ourselves. This project strives toward neither completeness, nor a definitive articulation. What unites these essays is an attention to the shadows and living legacies of racial despotism, the direct relations of force that are often occluded in analyses of hegemony and its quotidian institutions. We seek to displace without dispensing with the institutional rationalizations of US white supremacy in order to see its own vigorous reconstitution. This will ultimately mean addressing every social motif (a task we only begin here) as entailing a paradoxical or even incomprehensible scandal, something beyond the rules of society yet pawned off on us as proper and legitimate.

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1. Editors' note: This refers to essays in the journal where this article was originally published.

# IV.

## THE PRISON SLAVE AS HEGEMONY'S (SILENT) SCANDAL

2003

Frank B. Wilderson, III

The Black experience in this country has been a phenomenon without analog.

—Eugene Genovese (*Boston Review*, October/  
November 1993)

There is something organic to black positionality that makes it essential to the destruction of civil society. There is nothing willful or speculative in this statement, for one could just as well state the claim the other way around: there is something organic to civil society that makes *it* essential to the destruction of the black body. Blackness is a positionality of “absolute dereliction” (Fanon), abandonment, in the face of civil society, and therefore cannot establish itself, or be established, through hegemonic interventions. Blackness cannot become one of civil society’s many junior partners: Black citizenship, or Black civic obligation, are oxymorons.

In light of this, coalitions and social movements, even radical social movements like the Prison Abolition Movement, bound up in the solicitation of hegemony, so as to fortify and extend the interlocutory life of civil society, ultimately accommodate only the satiable demands and finite antagonisms of civil society’s junior partners (i.e., immigrants, white women, and the working class), but foreclose upon the insatiable demands and endless

antagonisms of the prison slave and the prison-slave-in-waiting. In short, whereas such coalitions and social movements cannot be called the outright handmaidens of white supremacy, their rhetorical structures and political desire are underwritten by a supplemental anti-Blackness.

In her autobiography, Assata Shakur's comments vacillate between being interesting and insightful to painfully programmatic and "responsible." The expository method of conveyance accounts for this air of responsibility. However, toward the end of the book, she accounts for coalition work by way of extended narrative as opposed to exposition. We accompany her on one of Zayd Shakur's many Panther projects with outside groups, work "dealing with white support groups who were involved in raising bail for the Panther 21 members in jail" (Shakur, 1987: 224). With no more than three words, her recollection becomes matter of fact and unfiltered. She writes, "i hated it."

At the time, i felt that anything below 110th street was another country. All my activities were centered in Harlem and i almost never left it. Doing defense committee work was definitely not up my alley.... i hated standing around while all these white people asked me to explain myself, my existence, i became a master of the one-liner. (Shakur, 1987: 224)

Her hatred of this work is bound up in her anticipation, fully realized, of all the zonal violations to come when a white woman asks her if Zayd is her "panther...you know, is he your black cat?" and then runs her fingers through Assata's hair to cop a kinky feel. Her narrative anticipates these violations-to-come at the level of the street, as well as at the level of the body.

Here is the moment in her life as a prison-slave-in-waiting, which is to say, a moment as an ordinary Black person, when she finds herself among "friends"—abolitionists, at least partners in purpose, and yet she feels it necessary to adopt the same muscular constriction, the same coiled anticipation, the same combative "one-liners" that she will need to adopt just one year later to steel herself against the encroachment of prison guards. The

verisimilitude between Assata's well-known police encounters, and her experiences in civil society's most nurturing nook, the radical coalition, raises disturbing questions about political desire, Black positionality, and hegemony as a modality of struggle.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon makes two moves with respect to civil society. First, he locates its genuine manifestation in Europe—the motherland. Then, with respect to the colony, he locates it only in the zone of the settler. This second move is vital for our understanding of Black positionality in America and for understanding the, at best, limitations of radical social movements in America. For if we are to follow Fanon's analysis, and the gestures toward this understanding in some of the work of imprisoned intellectuals, then we have to come to grips with the fact that, for Black people, civil society *itself*—rather than its abuses or shortcomings—is a state of emergency.

For Fanon, civil society is predicated on the Manichaeism of divided zones, opposed to each other “but not in service of a higher unity” (Fanon, 1968: 38-39). This is the basis of his later assertion that the two zones produce two different “species,” between which “no conciliation is possible” (*Ibid.*). The phrase “not in service of a higher unity” dismisses any kind of dialectical optimism for a future synthesis.

In “The Avant-Garde of White Supremacy,” Martinot and Sexton assert the primacy of Fanon's Manichean zones (without the promise of higher unity), even in the face of American integration facticity. Fanon's specific colonial context does not share Martinot and Sexton's historical or national context. Common to both texts, however, is the settler/native dynamic, the differential zoning, and the gratuity (as opposed to the contingency) of violence that accrues to the blackened position.

The dichotomy between white ethics [the discourse of civil society] and its irrelevance to the violence of police profiling is not dialectical; the two are incommensurable whenever one attempts to *speak* about the paradigm of policing, one is forced back into a discussion of particular events—high-profile

homicides and their related courtroom battles, for instance. (Martinot and Sexton, 2002: 6; emphasis added)

It makes no difference that in the U.S. the “casbah” and the “European” zone are laid one on top of the other. What is being asserted here is an isomorphic schematic relation—the schematic interchangeability—between Fanon’s settler society and Martinot and Sexton’s policing paradigm. For Fanon, it is the policeman and soldier (not the discursive, or hegemonic, agents) of colonialism that make one town white and the other Black. For Martinot and Sexton, this Manichean delirium manifests itself by way of the U.S. paradigm of policing that (re)produces, repetitively, the inside/outside, the civil society/Black world, by virtue of the difference between those bodies that do not magnetize bullets and those that do. “Police impunity serves to distinguish between the racial itself and the elsewhere that mandates it...the distinction between those whose human being is put permanently in question and those for whom it goes without saying” (*Ibid.*: 8). In such a paradigm, white people are, ipso facto, deputized in the face of Black people, whether they know it (consciously) or not. Whiteness, then, and by extension civil society, cannot be solely “represented” as some monumentalized coherence of phallic signifiers, but must first be understood as a social formation of contemporaries who do not magnetize bullets. This is the essence of their construction through an *asignifying* absence; their signifying presence is manifested by the fact that they are, if only by default, deputized against those who do magnetize bullets. In short, white people are not simply “protected” by the police, they *are—in their very corporeality*—the police.

This ipso facto deputization of white people in the face of Black people accounts for Fanon’s materiality, and Martinot and Sexton’s Manichean delirium in America. What remains to be addressed, however, is the way in which the political contestation between civil society’s junior partners (i.e., workers, white women, and immigrants), on the one hand, and white supremacist institutionality, on the other hand, is produced by, and reproductive of, a supplemental anti-Blackness. Put another way: How is the production and accumulation of junior partner social

capital dependent upon on an anti-Black rhetorical structure and a decomposed Black body?

Any serious musing on the question of antagonistic identity formation—a formation, the mass mobilization of which can precipitate a crisis in the institutions and assumptive logic that undergird the United States of America—must come to grips with the contradictions between the political demands of radical social movements, such as the large prison abolition movement, which seeks to abolish the prison-industrial complex, and the ideological structure that underwrites its political desire. I contend that the positionality of Black subjectivity is at the heart of those contradictions and that this unspoken desire is bound up with the political limitations of several naturalized and uncritically accepted categories that have their genesis mainly in the works of Antonio Gramsci, namely, work or labor, the wage, exploitation, hegemony, and civil society. I wish to theorize the symptoms of rage and resignation I hear in the words of George Jackson, when he boils reform down to a single word, “fascism,” or in Assata’s brief declaration, “i hated it,” as well as in the Manichean delirium of Fanon, Martinot, and Sexton. Today, the failure of radical social movements to embrace symptoms of all three gestures is tantamount to the reproduction of an anti-Black politics that nonetheless represents itself as being in the service of the emancipation of the Black prison slave.

By examining the strategy and structure of the Black subject’s absence in, and incommensurability with, the key categories of Gramscian theory, we come face to face with three unsettling consequences:

(1) The Black American subject imposes a radical incoherence upon the assumptive logic of Gramscian discourse and on today’s coalition politics. In other words, s/he implies a scandal.

(2) The Black subject reveals the inability of social movements grounded in Gramscian discourse to think of white supremacy (rather than capitalism) as the base and thereby calls into question their claim to elaborate a comprehensive and decisive antagonism. Stated another way, Gramscian discourse and coalition politics



are indeed able to imagine the subject that transforms itself into a mass of antagonistic identity formations, formations that can precipitate a crisis in wage slavery, exploitation, and hegemony, but they are asleep at the wheel when asked to provide enabling antagonisms toward unwaged slavery, despotism, and terror.

(3) We begin to see how Marxism suffers from a kind of conceptual anxiety. There is a desire for socialism on the other side of crisis, a society that does away not with the category of worker, but with the imposition workers suffer under the approach of variable capital. In other words, the mark of its conceptual anxiety is in its desire to democratize work and thus help to keep in place and insure the coherence of Reformation and Enlightenment foundational values of productivity and progress. This scenario crowds out other postrevolutionary possibilities, i.e., idleness.

The scandal, with which the Black subject position “threatens” Gramscian and coalition discourse, is manifest in the Black subject’s incommensurability with, or disarticulation of, Gramscian categories: work, progress, production, exploitation, hegemony, and historical self-awareness. Through what strategies does the Black subject destabilize—emerge as the unthought, and thus the scandal of—historical materialism? How does the Black subject function within the “American desiring machine” differently than the quintessential Gramscian subaltern, the worker?

Capital was kick-started by the rape of the African continent, a phenomenon that is central to neither Gramsci nor Marx. According to Barrett (2002), something about the Black body in and of itself made it the repository of the violence that was the slave trade. It would have been far easier and far more profitable to take the white underclass from along the riverbanks of England and Western Europe than to travel all the way to Africa for slaves.

The theoretical importance of emphasizing this in the early 21st century is twofold. First, capital was kick-started by approaching a particular body (a black body) with direct relations of force, not by approaching a white body with variable capital. Thus, one could say that slavery is closer to capital’s primal desire than is

exploitation. It is a relation of terror as opposed to a relation of hegemony. Second, today, late capital is imposing a renaissance of this original desire, the direct relation of force, the despotism of the unwaged relation. This renaissance of slavery, i.e., the reconfiguration of the prison-industrial complex has, once again, as its structuring metaphor and primary target the Black body.

The value of reintroducing the unthought category of the slave, by way of noting the absence of the Black subject, lies in the Black subject's potential for extending the demand placed on state/capital formations because its reintroduction into the discourse expands the intensity of the antagonism. In other words, the positionality of the slave makes a demand that is in excess of the demand made by the positionality of the worker. The worker demands that productivity be fair and democratic (Gramsci's new hegemony, Lenin's dictatorship of the proletariat, in a word, socialism). In contrast, the slave demands that production stop, without recourse to its ultimate democratization. Work is not an organic principle for the slave. The absence of Black subjectivity from the crux of radical discourse is symptomatic of the text's inability to cope with the possibility that the generative subject of capitalism, the Black body of the 15th and 16th centuries, and the generative subject that resolves late capital's over-accumulation crisis, the Black (incarcerated) body of the 20th and 21st centuries, do not reify the basic categories that structure conflict within civil society: the categories of work and exploitation.

Thus, the Black subject position in America represents an antagonism or demand that cannot be satisfied through a transfer of ownership/organization of existing rubrics. In contrast, the Gramscian subject, the worker, represents a demand that can indeed be satisfied by way of a successful war of position, which brings about the end of exploitation. The worker calls into question the legitimacy of productive practices, while the slave calls into question the legitimacy of productivity itself. Thus, the insatiability of the slave demand upon existing structures means that it cannot find its articulation within the modality of hegemony (influence, leadership, consent). The Black body cannot give its consent because "generalized trust," the precondition for the solicitation of consent, "equals racialized whiteness" (Barrett,

2002). Furthermore, as Orlando Patterson (1982) points out, slavery is natal alienation by way of social death, which is to say, a slave has no symbolic currency or material labor power to exchange. A slave does not enter into a transaction of value (however asymmetrical), but is subsumed by direct relations of force. As such, a slave is an articulation of a despotic irrationality, whereas the worker is an articulation of a symbolic rationality.

A metaphor comes into being through a violence that kills the thing such that the concept might live. Gramscian discourse and coalition politics come to grips with America's structuring rationality—what it calls capitalism, or political economy—but not with its structuring irrationality, the anti-production of late capital, and the hyper-discursive violence that first kills the Black subject, so that the concept may be born. In other words, from the incoherence of Black death, America generates the coherence of white life. This is important when thinking the Gramscian paradigm and their spiritual progenitors in the world of organizing in the U.S. today, with their overvaluation of hegemony and civil society. Struggles over hegemony are seldom, if ever, asignifying. At some point, they require coherence and categories for the record, meaning they contain the seeds of anti-Blackness.

What does it mean to be positioned not as a positive term in the struggle for anti-capitalist hegemony, i.e., a worker, but to be positioned in excess of hegemony, to be a catalyst that disarticulates the rubric of hegemony, to be a scandal to its assumptive, foundational logic, to threaten civil society's discursive integrity? In *White Writing*, J.M. Coetzee (1988) examines the literature of Europeans who encountered the South African Khoisan in the Cape between the 16th and 18th centuries. The Europeans were faced with an "anthropological scandal": a being without (recognizable) customs, religion, medicine, dietary patterns, culinary habits, sexual mores, means of agriculture, and most significantly, without character (because, according to the literature, they did not work). Other Africans, like the Xhosa who were agriculturalists, provided European discourse with enough categories for the record, so that, through various strategies of articulation, they could be known by textual

projects that accompanied the colonial project. But the Khoisan did not produce the necessary categories for the record, the play of signifiers that would allow for a sustainable semiotics.

According to Coetzee, the coherence of European discourse depends upon two structuring axes. A "Historical Axis" consists of codes distributed along the axis of temporality and events, while the "Anthropological Axis" is an axis of cultural codes. It mattered very little which codes on either axis a particular indigenous community was perceived to possess, with possession the operative word, for these codes act as a kind of mutually agreed-upon currency. What matters is that the community has some play of difference along both axes, sufficient in number to construct taxonomies that can be investigated, identified, and named by the discourse. Without this, the discourse cannot go on. It is reinvigorated when an unknown entity presents itself, but its anxiety reaches crisis proportions when the entity remains unknown. Something unspeakable occurs. Not to possess a particular code along the Anthropological or Historical Axis is akin to lacking a gene for brown hair or green eyes on an X or Y chromosome. Lacking a Historical or Anthropological Axis is akin to the absence of the chromosome itself. The first predicament raises the notion: What kind of human? The second predicament brings into crisis the notion of the human itself.

Without the textual categories of dress, diet, medicine, crafts, physical appearance, and most important, work, the Khoisan stood in refusal of the invitation to become Anthropological Man. S/he was the void in discourse that could only be designated as idleness. Thus, the Khoisan's status within discourse was not that of an opponent or an interlocutor, but rather of an unspeakable scandal. His/her position within the discourse was one of disarticulation, for he/she did little or nothing to fortify and extend the interlocutory life of the discourse. Just as the Khoisan presented the discourse of the Cape with an anthropological scandal, so the Black subject in the Western Hemisphere, the slave, presents Marxism and American textual practice with a historical scandal.

How is our incoherence in the face of the Historical Axis germane

to our experience of being “a phenomenon without analog”? A sample list of codes mapped out by an American subject’s historical axis might include *rights or entitlements*; here even Native Americans provide categories for the record when one thinks of how the Iroquois constitution, for example, becomes the U.S. constitution. *Sovereignty* is also included, whether a state is one the subject left behind, or as in the case of American Indians, one taken by force and dint of broken treaties. White supremacy has made good use of the Indian subject’s positionality, one that fortifies and extends the interlocutory life of America as a coherent (albeit imperial) idea because treaties are forms of articulation—discussions brokered between two groups are presumed to possess the same category of historical currency, sovereignty. The code of sovereignty can have a past and future history, if you will excuse the oxymoron, when one considers that 150 Native American tribes have applied to the Bureau of Indian Affairs for sovereign recognition so that they might qualify for funds harvested from land stolen from them.<sup>1</sup> *Immigration* is another code that maps the subject onto the American Historical Axis, with narratives of arrival based on collective volition and premeditated desire. Chicano subject positions can fortify and extend the interlocutory life of America as an idea because racial conflict can be articulated across the various contestations over the legitimacy of arrival, immigration. Both whites and Latinos generate data for this category.

Slavery is the great leveler of the Black subject’s positionality. The Black American subject does not generate historical categories

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1. White supremacy transmogrifies codes internal to Native American culture for its own purposes. However, unlike immigrants and white women, the Native American has no purchase as a junior partner in civil society. Space does not permit us to fully discuss this here. Ward Churchill and others do explain how—unlike civil society’s junior partners—genocide of the Indian, like the enslavement of Blacks, is a precondition for the idea of America. It is a condition of possibility upon which the idea of immigration can be narrativized. No web of analogy can be spun between, on the one hand, the phenomenon of genocide and slavery and, on the other hand, the phenomenon of access to institutionality and immigration. Thus, although white supremacy appropriates Native American codes of sovereignty, it cannot solve the contradiction that, unlike civil society’s junior partners, those codes are not imbricated with immigration and access.

of entitlement, sovereignty, and immigration for the record. We are “off the map” with respect to the cartography that charts civil society’s semiotics; we have a past, but not a heritage. To the data-generating demands of the Historical Axis, we present a virtual blank, much like that which the Khoisan presented to the Anthropological Axis. This places us in a structurally impossible position, one that is outside the articulations of hegemony. However, it also places hegemony in a structurally impossible position because—and this is key—our presence works back upon the grammar of hegemony and threatens it with incoherence. If every subject—even the most massacred among them, Indians—is required to have analogs within the nation’s structuring narrative, and the experience of one subject, upon whom the nation’s order of wealth was built, is without analog, then that subject’s presence destabilizes all other analogs.

Fanon (1968: 37) writes, “decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a program of complete disorder.” If we take him at his word, then we must accept that no other body functions in the Imaginary, the Symbolic, or the Real so completely as a repository of complete disorder as the Black body. Blackness is the site of absolute dereliction at the level of the Real, for in its magnetizing of bullets the Black body functions as the map of gratuitous violence through which civil society is possible: namely, those bodies for which violence is, or can be, contingent. Blackness is the site of absolute dereliction at the level of the Symbolic, for Blackness in America generates no categories for the chromosome of history, and no data for the categories of immigration or sovereignty. It is an experience without analog—a past without a heritage. Blackness is the site of absolute dereliction at the level of the Imaginary, for “whoever says ‘rape’ says Black” (Fanon), whoever says “prison” says Black, and whoever says “AIDS” says Black (Sexton)—the “Negro is a phobogenic object” (Fanon).

Indeed, it means all those things: a phobogenic object, a past without a heritage, the map of gratuitous violence, and a program of complete disorder. Whereas this realization is, and should be, cause for alarm, it should not be cause for lament, or worse, disavowal—not at least, for a true revolutionary, or for

a truly revolutionary movement such as prison abolition. If a social movement is to be neither social democratic nor Marxist, in terms of structure of political desire, then it should grasp the invitation to assume the positionality of subjects of social death. If we are to be honest with ourselves, we must admit that the “Negro” has been inviting whites, as well as civil society’s junior partners, to the dance of social death for hundreds of years, but few have wanted to learn the steps. They have been, and remain today—even in the most anti-racist movements, like the prison abolition movement—invested elsewhere. This is not to say that all oppositional political desire today is pro-white, but it is usually anti-Black, meaning it will not dance with death.

Black liberation, as a prospect, makes radicalism more dangerous to the U.S. This is not because it raises the specter of an alternative polity (such as socialism, or community control of existing resources), but because its condition of possibility and gesture of resistance function as a negative dialectic: a politics of refusal and a refusal to affirm, a “program of complete disorder.” One must embrace its disorder, its incoherence, and allow oneself to be elaborated by it, if indeed one’s politics are to be underwritten by a desire to take down this country. If this is not the desire that underwrites one’s politics, then through what strategy of legitimation is the word “prison” being linked to the word “abolition”? What are this movement’s lines of political accountability?

There is nothing foreign, frightening, or even unpracticed about the embrace of disorder and incoherence. The desire to be embraced, and elaborated, by disorder and incoherence is not anathema in and of itself. No one, for example, has ever been known to say “gee-whiz, if only my orgasms would end a little sooner, or maybe not come at all.” Yet few so-called radicals desire to be embraced, and elaborated, by the disorder and incoherence of Blackness—and the state of political movements in the U.S. today is marked by this very Negrophobogenesis: “gee-whiz, if only Black rage could be more coherent, or maybe not come at all.” Perhaps there is something more terrifying about the joy of Black than there is in the joy of sex (unless one is talking sex with a Negro). Perhaps coalitions today prefer to remain in-

orgasmic in the face of civil society—with hegemony as a handy prophylactic, just in case. If, through this stasis or paralysis they try to do the work of prison abolition, that work will fail, for it is always work *from* a position of coherence (i.e., the worker) on *behalf* of a position of incoherence of the Black subject, or prison slave. In this way, social formations on the Left remain blind to the contradictions of coalitions between workers and slaves. They remain coalitions operating within the logic of civil society and function less as revolutionary promises than as crowding out scenarios of Black antagonisms, simply feeding our frustration.

Whereas the positionality of the worker (whether a factory worker demanding a monetary wage, an immigrant, or a white woman demanding a social wage) gestures toward the reconfiguration of civil society, the positionality of the Black subject (whether a prison-slave or a prison-slave-in-waiting) gestures toward the disconfiguration of civil society. From the coherence of civil society, the Black subject beckons with the incoherence of civil war, a war that reclaims Blackness not as a positive value, but as a politically enabling site, to quote Fanon, of “absolute dereliction.” It is a “scandal” that rends civil society asunder. Civil war, then, becomes the unthought, but never forgotten, understudy of hegemony. It is a Black specter waiting in the wings, an endless antagonism that cannot be satisfied (via reform or reparation), but must nonetheless be pursued to the death.



V.

THE BELLY OF THE WORLD:  
A NOTE ON BLACK  
WOMEN'S LABORS

2016

Saidiya Hartman

*The slave ship is a womb/abyss.* The plantation is the belly of the world. *Partus sequitur ventrem*—the child follows the belly. The master dreams of future increase. The modern world follows the belly. Gestational language has been key to describing the world-making and world-breaking capacities of racial slavery. What it created and what it destroyed has been explicated by way of gendered figures of conception, birth, parturition, and severed or negated maternity. To be a slave is to be “excluded from the prerogatives of birth.” The mother’s only claim—to transfer her dispossession to the child. The material relations of sexuality and reproduction defined black women’s historical experiences as laborers and shaped the character of their refusal of and resistance to slavery.<sup>1</sup> The theft, regulation and destruction of black women’s sexual and reproductive capacities would also define the afterlife of slavery.

Most often when the productive labor of the slave comes into view, it is as a category absent gender and sexual differentiation. In two of the greatest works of the black radical tradition, W.E.B. Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction* and C.L.R. James’s *Black Jacobins*,

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1. See Eduoard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1997), 6, 75; Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1982); Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2004). *Laboring Women* was one of the first historical monographs devoted to examining enslaved women’s sexuality and reproductive lives and the centrality of reproduction to the social and legal machinery of colonial slavery.

the agency of the enslaved becomes legible as politics, rather than crime or destruction, at the moment slaves are transformed into black workers and revolutionary masses fashioned along the lines of the insurgent proletariat. However, representing the slave through the figure of the worker (albeit unwaged and unfree), obscures as much as it reveals, making it difficult to distinguish the constitutive elements of slavery as a mode of power, violence, dispossession and accumulation or to attend to the forms of gendered and sexual violence that enable these processes. In *Black Reconstruction*, women's sexual and reproductive labor is critical in accounting for the violence and degradation of slavery, yet this labor falls outside of the heroic account of the black worker and the general strike.

Black women, too, refused the conditions of work on the plantation, and Du Bois notes their presence among the "army of fugitives" rushing away from the fields. Yet, in the shift from the fugitive to the striking worker, the female slave becomes a minor figure. Neither "the potentialities for the future" represented by the fugitive nor the text engendered by flight and refusal and furnished for abolition idealists embraced her labors.<sup>2</sup> Marriage and protection rather than sexual freedom and reproductive justice were the only ways conceived to redress her wrongs, or remedy the "wound dealt to [her] reputation as a human being." The sexual violence and reproduction characteristic of enslaved women's experience fails to produce a radical politics of liberation or a philosophy of freedom.

Black women's labors have not been easy to reckon with conceptually. Feminist thinkers, following the path cleared by Angela Davis's groundbreaking essay "Reflections of the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," have considered the significance of gender, sexuality and reproduction in defining the constitutive relations of slavery and the modes of its violence.<sup>3</sup> It

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2. W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880* (1935; reprint. New York: The Free Press, 1992), 13, 44, 39, 67.

3. Angela Davis, "Reflections on Black Women's Role in the Community of Slaves," *The Black Scholar* 13 no. 4 (1971): 2-15; Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," *Signs* 14 no. 4 (1989): 912-20; Darlene Clark Hine, "Female Slave

has proven difficult, if not impossible, to assimilate black women's domestic labors and reproductive capacities within narratives of the black worker, slave rebellion, maroonage, or black radicalism, even as this labor was critical to the creation of value, the realization of profit and the accumulation of capital. It has been no less complicated to imagine the future produced by such labors as anything other than monstrous. Certainly we know that enslaved women fled the plantation, albeit not in as great numbers as men; poisoned slaveholders; plotted resistance; dreamed of destroying the master and his house; utilized abortifacients rather than reproduce slaves; practiced infanticide rather than sentence their children to social death, the auction block, and the master's bed; exercised autonomy in suicidal acts; gave birth to children as testament to an abiding knowledge of freedom contrary to every empirical index of the plantation; and yearned for radically different ways of being in the world. So where exactly does the sex drudge, recalcitrant domestic, broken mother, or sullen wet-nurse fit into the scheme of the general strike? If the general strike is a placeholder for political aspirations that Du Bois struggles to name, how does the character of the slave female's refusal augment the text of black radicalism? Is it at all possible to imagine her as the paradigmatic slave or as the representative black worker?

Reproductive labor, as the scholars Hortense Spillers, Jennifer Morgan, Dorothy Roberts, Alyss Weinbaum, and Neferti Tadiar note, is central to thinking about the gendered afterlife of slavery and global capitalism.<sup>4</sup> Yet attending to the status of black women's labors has confounded our conceptual categories and thrown our critical lexicon into crisis. On the slave ship, captive

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Resistance: The Economics of Sex," *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 3 no. 2 (1979): 123-27.

4. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in her *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: U of Chicago P), 203-29; Morgan, *Laboring Women*; Alyss Weinbaum, *Wayward Reproductions* (Durham: Duke UP, 2004); Alyss Weinbaum, "Gendering the General Strike: W. E. B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* and Black Feminism's 'Propaganda of History,'" *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112 no. 3 (2013): 437-63; Neferti Tadiar, *Things Fall Away* (Durham: Duke UP, 2008); Neferti Tadiar, "Life-Times of Disposability within Global Neoliberalism," *Social Text* 31 no. 2 (2013): 19-48.

women were accounted for as quantities of greater and lesser mass, and the language of units and complete cargo eclipsed that of the subject, the person or individual. The “anomalous intimacy of cargo,” according to Stephanie Smallwood, represented a new social formation. Those African persons in *Middle Passage*, writes Spillers, were “literally suspended in the oceanic.” They were “culturally unmade.” “Under these conditions one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into account as quantities.”<sup>5</sup> For Spillers, the categories of flesh and body are deployed to describe the mutilation, dismemberment, and exile of captivity and enslavement. Flesh provides the primary narrative rather than gendered subject positions. The flesh is produced by the violence of racial slavery and yet it brings into view a new mode of relation.

On the plantation, black women were required to toil as hard as men, and in this way “ungendered,” according to Spillers, by which she means that “female and male adhere to no symbolic integrity.” *Partus sequitur ventrem* negated kinship and denied it any “legal or social efficacy.” The condition of the mother marked her offspring and was “forever entailed on her remotest posterity.” We carry the mother’s mark and it continues to define our condition and our present.

The role of gender and sexual differentiation in the constitution of labor are especially complex in the context of slavery. On one hand, the category of labor insufficiently accounts for slavery as a mode of power, domination and production. The fungibility of the slave, the wanton uses of the black body for producing value or pleasure, and the shared vulnerabilities of the commodity, whether male or female, trouble dominant accounts of gender. Depending on the angle of vision or critical lexicon, the harnessing of the body as an instrument for social and physical

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5. Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007); Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 215. Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley describes this anomalous intimacy in terms of a queer Atlantic in “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic,” *GLQ* 14 nos. 2-3 (191-215): 191-215. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten describe the experience of the shipped as “hapticality in the hold” in *The Undercommons* (New York: Autonomedia, 2013).

reproduction unmakes the slave as gendered subject or reveals the primacy of gender and sexual differentiation in the making of the slave. Natal alienation is one of the central attributes of the social death of the slave and gendered and sexual violence are central to the processes that render the black child as by-product of the relations of production.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the lines of division between the market and the household which distinguished the public and the domestic and divided productive and reproductive labor for propertied whites does not hold when describing the enslaved and the carceral landscape of plantation. Reproduction is tethered to the making of human commodities and in service of the marketplace. For the enslaved, reproduction does not ensure any future other than that of dispossession nor guarantee anything other than the replication of racialized and disposable persons or “human increase” (expanded property-holdings) for the master. The future of the enslaved was a form of speculative value for slaveholders. Even the unborn were conscripted and condemned to slavery.

“Kinship loses meaning,” according to Spillers, “since at any moment it can be invaded at any given and arbitrary moment by property relations.” Extending and revising this line of argument, Morgan notes the importance of maternity and reproduction in the evolution of the legal codification of slavery. “Women’s bodies became the definitional sites of racial slavery.” In North America, the future of slavery depended upon black women’s reproductive capacity as it did on the slave market. The reproduction of human property and the social relations of racial slavery were predicated upon the belly. Plainly put, subjection was anchored in black women’s reproductive capacities. The captive female body, according to Spillers, “locates precisely a moment of converging political and social vectors that mark the flesh as a prime commodity of exchange.”<sup>7</sup>

Forced to labor for the “satisfaction of the immediate needs” of

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6. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*.

7. Jennifer Morgan, “Partus Sequitur Ventrem: Slave Law and the History of Women in Slavery,” A Workshop with Jennifer Morgan (Irvine: University of California, Irvine, 2014); Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 75.

their owners and overseers, however; those needs were defined, the captive female body was subjected to innumerable uses. It could be converted into cash, speculated and traded as commodity, worked to death, taken, tortured, seeded, and propagated like any other crop, or murdered. The value produced by and extracted from enslaved women included productive labor—their labors as farm workers, cotton pickers, tobacco hands, and rice cultivators—and their reproductive capacities created “future increase” for farms and plantations and human commodities for markets, yoking the prospect of racial slavery to their bodies. Even the unborn figured into the reproductive calculus of the institution. The work of sex and procreation was the chief motor for reproducing the material, social, and symbolic relations of slavery. The value accrued through reproductive labor was brutally apparent to the enslaved who protested bitterly against being bred like cattle and oxen. This reproductive labor not only guaranteed slavery as an institutional process and secured the status of the enslaved, but it inaugurated a regime of racialized sexuality that continues to place black bodies at risk for sexual exploitation and abuse, gratuitous violence, incarceration, poverty, premature death, and state-sanctioned murder.

The sexuality and reproductive capacities of enslaved women were central to understanding the expanding legal conception of slavery and its inheritability. Slavery conscripted the womb, deciding the fate of the unborn and reproducing slave property by making the mark of the mother a death sentence for her child. The negation or disfigurement of maternity, writes Christina Sharpe, “turns the womb into a factory reproducing blackness as abjection and turning the birth canal into another domestic middle passage.”<sup>8</sup> *Partus sequitur ventrem*—replicates the fate of the slave across generations. The belly is made a factory of production incommensurate with notions of the maternal, the conjugal or the domestic. In short, the slave exists out of the world and outside the house.

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8. Christina Sharpe, “In the Wake,” *The Black Scholar* 44 no. 2 (2014): 59-69.

Labor remained a category central to the fashioning of gender and sexuality in the context of slavery's aftermath. In *The Negro American Family*, Du Bois writes that the slave ship and the plantation revolutionized the black family primarily by destroying kinship and negating conjugal relations. Invariably the remedy proposed for this wounded kinship converged on the figure of the (restored) husband-father as the primary breadwinner. The problem of black women's labor made apparent the gender non-conformity of the black community, its supple and extended modes of kinship, its queer domesticity, promiscuous sociality and loose intimacy, and its serial and fluid conjugal relations.

The "lax moral relations, promiscuity, easy marriage and easy separation," which Du Bois identified as the consequences of slavery, continued in the aftermath of emancipation, extending the plantation to the city. "Plantations holdovers," to his dismay, shaped life in the emergent ghettos of northern cities. The ghetto became the third matrix of black death and dispossession, after the slave ship and the plantation, and anticipating the prison.<sup>9</sup> The urban enclosure produced another revolution of black intimate life, another rupture in the social history of the Negro.<sup>10</sup> Mothers and wives and daughters were forced into unskilled and low-paid work, with the overwhelming majority confined to labor as domestics. Black women served as the primary breadwinners in households that bore no resemblance to the patriarchal nuclear family. These black laboring women troubled gender conventions by being "outfitted like men," as was the case with their enslaved mothers and grandmothers. The independence granted by wages, even low wages, made them less willing to marry or live with men unable to provide and granted them a degree of sexual autonomy that made Du Bois shudder. He longed for a future where the "betrayed girl mothers of the Black Belt," while retaining their economic independence, would be transformed into virtuous wives and married mothers.

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9. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 73. Katherine McKittrick, "Plantation Futures," *Small Axe* 17 no. 3 (2013): 1-15.

10. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899; reprint, Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1995); W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903; reprint, New York: Penguin, 1989).

The continuities between slavery and freedom were underwritten by black women's domestic labor. Their "success or frustrations in influencing the character of domestic labor," writes Tera Hunter, "would define how meaningful freedom would be."<sup>11</sup> Slave women working as domestic laborers in white households experienced forms of violence and sexual exploitation that troubled simple distinctions between the privileges of the house and the brutalities of the field. Nowhere was the heterogeneity or discontinuity or instability of the category gender more apparent than in the plantation household. No uniform or shared category of gender included the mistress and the enslaved. The white household, as Thavolia Glymph documents in *Out of the House of Bondage*, was a space of violence and brutality for the black women forced to serve as housekeepers, caretakers, nannies, and wet-nurses. The domestic space, as much as the field, defined their experience of enslavement and the particular vulnerabilities of the captive body; and it continued to define the very narrow horizon and limited opportunities available to black women in the first decades of the 20th century.

Black women regularly complained about being forced to labor as domestics. Domestic work carried the taint of slavery. While black women's physical and affective labors were central to the reproduction and security of the white household, their own lives and families remained at risk. As free workers in the North and South, black women continued to labor as poorly paid workers in white households, tended and cared for white families, endured the exhaustion and the boredom part and parcel of caring for children, cooking, cleaning, and servicing the lives of others.

In northern cities like Philadelphia and New York, the overwhelming majority of black women were confined to domestic and service labor. Besides the arduous toil that characterized this work, black women experienced great isolation and were vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation by the men of the household. While social reformers and Progressive intellectuals encouraged domestic work as a form of moral tutelage and

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11. Tera Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997); Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2008).



training, black women knew first-hand that they were safer in the streets and the tenements of the ghetto than in white homes. Domestic work subjected them to forms of intimate violence as well as exploitation as low-wage workers.

The systematic violence needed to conscript black women's domestic labor after slavery required locking them out of all other sectors of the labor market, a condition William Patterson described as economic genocide. Race riots, the enclosure of the ghetto, the vertical order of human life, and the forms of value and debt promulgated through emergent forms of racism, what Sarah Haley terms "Jim Crow modernity," made it impossible for black women to escape the white household.

As domestic workers, black women were conscripted to a role that required them to care for and replenish the needs of the white household, and tend to the daily activities necessary for its maintenance. They were forced to perform the affective and communicative labor necessary for the sustenance of white families at the expense of their own; as surrogates, they were required to mother children who held their children in contempt; to cook, clean, and comfort white men enabling them to go out into the world as productive laborers; and submit to intimate relations with husbands and sons and brothers or be raped by them—you cannot choose what you cannot refuse. In this labor of service to the white household, the domestic worker struggled to enable the survival of her own.

Her lover, her spouse, and her kin depend on this labor for their subsistence, as does her community. As a consequence, she comes to enjoy a position that is revered and reviled, essential to the endurance of black social life and, at the same time, blamed for its destruction. The care extracted from her to tend the white household is taken at the cost of her own. She is the best nanny and the worst mother. Yet this labor remains marginal or neglected in the narratives of black insurgency, resistance, and refusal.

Where does the *impossible domestic* fit into the general strike?<sup>12</sup> What

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12. Fred Moten, "Uplift and Criminality," in *Next to the Color Line*:

is the text of her insurgency and the genre of her refusal? What visions of the future world encourage her to run, or propel her flight? Or is she, as Spillers observes, a subject still awaiting her verb? Strategies of endurance and subsistence do not yield easily to the grand narrative of revolution, nor has a space been cleared for the sex worker, welfare mother, and domestic laborer in the annals of the black radical tradition.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps understandable, even if unacceptable, when the costs of enduring are so great. Mere survival is an achievement in a context so brutal. If we intend to do more than make the recalcitrant domestic, the outcast, and insurrectionist a figure for our revolutionary longing, or impose yet another burden on black female flesh by making it “a placeholder for freedom,”<sup>14</sup> then we must never lose sight of the material conditions of her existence or how much she has been required to give for our survival.

Those of us who have been “touched by the mother” need acknowledge that her ability to provide care, food, and refuge often has placed her in great jeopardy and, above all, required her to give with no expectation of reciprocity or return. *All we have is what she holds in her outstretched hands*.<sup>15</sup> There is no getting around this. Yet, her freedom struggle remains opaque, untranslatable into the lexicon of the political. She provides so much, yet rarely does she thrive. It seems that her role has been fixed and that her role is as a provider of care, which is the very mode of her exploitation and indifferent use by the world, a world blind to her gifts, her intellect, her talents. This brilliant and formidable

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*Gender, Sexuality and W. E. B. Du Bois*, ed. Alys Weinbaum and Susan Gilman (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2007), 317-49.

13. Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage, 1998); Dorothy Roberts, *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Welfare* (New York: Basic Civitas Book, 2003); Wahneema Lubiano, “Black Ladies, Welfare Queens, and State Minstrels: Ideological War by Narrative Means,” in *Race-ing Justice, Engendering Power*, ed. Toni Morrison and Leon Higginbotham (New York: Pantheon, 1992), 323-63; Fred Moten, “The Subprime and the Beautiful,” *African Identities*, 11 no. 2 (2013): 237-45.

14. Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010), 4, 15.

15. This is a restatement with a difference of Fred Moten: “All that we have (and are) is what we hold in our outstretched hands.”

labor of care, paradoxically, has been produced through violent structures of slavery, anti-black racism, virulent sexism, and disposability.<sup>16</sup> The forms of care, intimacy, and sustenance exploited by racial capitalism, most importantly, are not reducible to or exhausted by it. These labors cannot be assimilated to the template or grid of the black worker, but instead nourish the latent text of the fugitive. They enable those “who were never meant to survive” to sometimes do just that. This care, which is coerced and freely given, is the black heart of our social poesis, of making and relation.

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16. Tadiar, *Things Fall Away*, 136.

# VI.

## MAMA'S BABY, PAPA'S MAYBE: AN AMERICAN GRAMMAR BOOK

1987

Hortense J. Spillers

Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. "Peaches" and "Brown Sugar," "Sapphire" and "Earth Mother," "Aunty," "Granny," God's "Holy Fool," a "Miss Ebony First," or "Black Woman at the Podium": I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented.

W. E. B. DuBois predicted as early as 1903 that the twentieth century would be the century of the "color line." We could add to this spatiotemporal configuration another thematic of analogously terrible weight: if the "black woman" can be seen as a particular figuration of the split subject that psychoanalytic theory posits, then this century marks the site of "its" profoundest revelation. The problem before us is deceptively simple: the terms enclosed in quotation marks in the preceding paragraph isolate overdetermined nominative properties. Embedded in bizarre axiological ground, they demonstrate a sort of telegraphic coding; they are markers so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean. In that regard, the names by which I am called in the public place render an example of signifying property *plus*. In order for me to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made an excess in time, overtime, assigned by a particular historical order, and there

await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness. The personal pronouns are offered in the service of a collective function.

In certain human societies, a child's identity is determined through the line of the Mother, but the United States, from at least one author's point of view, is not one of them: "In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so far out of line with the *rest of American society*, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well" (Moynihan 75; emphasis mine).

The notorious bastard, from Vico's banished Roman mothers of such sons, to Caliban, to Heathcliff, and Joe Christmas, has no official female equivalent. Because the traditional rites and laws of inheritance rarely pertain to the female child, bastard status signals to those who need to know which son of the Father's is the legitimate heir and which one the impostor. For that reason, property seems wholly the business of the male. A "she" cannot, therefore, qualify for bastard, or "natural son" status, and that she cannot provides further insight into the coils and recoils of patriarchal wealth and fortune. According to Daniel Patrick Moynihan's celebrated "Report" of the late sixties, the "Negro Family" has no Father to speak of—his Name, his Law, his Symbolic function mark the impressive missing agencies in the essential life of the black community, the "Report" maintains, and it is, surprisingly, the fault of the Daughter, or the female line. This stunning reversal of the castration thematic, displacing the Name and the Law of the Father to the territory of the Mother and Daughter, becomes an aspect of the African-American female's misnaming. We attempt to undo this misnaming in order to reclaim the relationship between Fathers and Daughters within this social matrix for a quite different structure of cultural fictions. For Daughters and Fathers are here made to manifest the very same *rhetorical* symptoms of absence and denial, to embody the double and contrastive agencies of a *prescribed* internecine degradation. "Sapphire" enacts her "Old Man" in drag, just as her "Old Man" becomes "Sapphire" in outrageous caricature.

In other words, in the historic outline of dominance, the respective subject-positions of “female” and “male” adhere to no symbolic integrity. At a time when current critical discourses appear to compel us more and more decidedly toward gender “undecidability,” it would appear reactionary, if not dumb, to insist on the integrity of female/male gender. But undressing these confluences of meaning, as they appear under the rule of dominance, would restore, as figurative possibility, not only Power to the Female (for Maternity), but also Power to the Male (for Paternity). We would gain, in short, the *potential* for gender differentiation as it might express itself along a range of stress points, including human biology in its intersection with the project of culture.

Though among the most readily available “whipping boys” of fairly recent public discourse concerning African-Americans and national policy, “The Moynihan Report” is by no means unprecedented in its conclusions; it belongs, rather, to a class of symbolic paradigms that 1) inscribe “ethnicity” as a scene of negation and 2) confirm the human body as a metonymic figure for an entire repertoire of human and social arrangements. In that regard, the “Report” pursues a behavioral rule of public documentary. Under the Moynihan rule, “ethnicity” itself identifies a total objectification of human and cultural motives—the “white” family, by implication, and the “Negro Family,” by outright assertion, in a constant opposition of binary meanings. Apparently spontaneous, these “actants” are *wholly* generated, with neither past nor future, as tribal currents moving out of time. Moynihan’s “Families” are pure present and always tense. “Ethnicity” in this case freezes in meaning, takes on constancy, assumes the look and the affects of the Eternal. We could say, then, that in its powerful stillness, “ethnicity,” from the point of view of the “Report,” embodies nothing more than a mode of memorial time, as Roland Barthes outlines the dynamics of myth (see “Myth Today” 109-59; esp. 122-23). As a signifier that has no movement in the field of signification, the use of “ethnicity” for the living becomes purely appreciative, although one would be unwise not to concede its dangerous and fatal effects.

“Ethnicity” perceived as mythical time enables a writer to perform a variety of conceptual moves all at once. Under its hegemony, the human body becomes a defenseless target for rape and veneration, and the body, in its material and abstract phase, a resource for metaphor. For example, Moynihan’s “tangle of pathology” provides the descriptive strategy for the work’s fourth chapter, which suggests that “underachievement” in black males of the lower classes is primarily the fault of black females, who achieve out of all proportion, both to their numbers in the community and to the paradigmatic example before the nation: “Ours is a society which presumes male leadership in private and public affairs. ... A subculture, such as that of the Negro American, in which this is not the pattern, is placed at a distinct disadvantage” (75). Between charts and diagrams, we are asked to consider the impact of qualitative measure on the black male’s performance on standardized examinations, matriculation in schools of higher and professional training, etc. Even though Moynihan sounds a critique on his own argument here, he quickly withdraws from its possibilities, suggesting that black males should reign because that is the way the majority culture carries things out: “It is clearly a disadvantage for a minority group to be operating under one principle, while the great majority of the population ... is operating on another” (75). Those persons living according to the perceived “matriarchal” pattern are, therefore, caught in a state of social “pathology.”

Even though Daughters have their own agenda with reference to this order of Fathers (imagining for the moment that Moynihan’s fiction—and others like it—does not represent an adequate one and that there *is*, once we dis-cover him, a Father here), my contention that these social and cultural subjects make doubles, unstable in their respective identities, in effect transports us to a common historical ground, the socio-political order of the New World. That order, with its human sequence written in blood, *represents* for its African and indigenous peoples a scene of *actual* mutilation, dismemberment, and exile. First of all, their New-World, diasporic plight marked a *theft of the body*—a willful and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire. Under these conditions, we lose at least *gender* difference *in the outcome*,

and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific. But this body, at least from the point of view of the captive community, focuses a private and particular space, at which point of convergence biological, sexual, social, cultural, linguistic, ritualistic, and psychological fortunes join. This profound intimacy of interlocking detail is disrupted, however, by externally imposed meanings and uses: 1) the captive body becomes the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality; 2) at the same time—in stunning contradiction—the captive body reduces to a thing, becoming *being for* the captor; 3) in this absence *from* a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of “otherness”; 4) as a category of “otherness,” the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general “powerlessness,” resonating through various centers of human and social meaning.

But I would make a distinction in this case between “body” and “flesh” and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the “body” there is the “flesh,” that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography. Even though the European hegemonies stole bodies—some of them female—out of West African communities in concert with the African “middleman,” we regard this human and social irreparability as high crimes against the *flesh*, as the person of African females and African males registered the wounding. If we think of the “flesh” as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship’s hole, fallen, or “escaped” overboard.

One of the most poignant aspects of William Goodell’s contemporaneous study of the North American slave codes gives precise expression to the tortures and instruments of captivity. Reporting an instance of Jonathan Edwards’s observations on the tortures of enslavement, Goodell narrates: “The smack of the whip is all day long in the ears of those who are on the plantation, or in the vicinity; and it is used with such dexterity



and severity as not only to lacerate the skin, but to tear out small portions of the flesh at almost every stake” (221). The anatomical specifications of rupture, of altered human tissue, take on the objective description of laboratory prose—eyes beaten out, arms, backs, skulls branded, a left jaw, a right ankle, punctured; teeth missing, as the calculated work of iron, whips, chains, knives, the canine patrol, the bullet.

These undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color. We might well ask if this phenomenon of marking and branding actually “transfers” from one generation to another, finding its various *symbolic substitutions* in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiating moments? As Elaine Scarry describes the mechanisms of torture (Scarry 27-59), these lacerations, woundings, fissures, tears, scars, openings, ruptures, lesions, rendings, punctures of the flesh create the distance between what I would designate a cultural *vestibularity* and the *culture*, whose state apparatus, including judges, attorneys, “owners,” “soul drivers,” “overseers,” and “men of God,” apparently colludes with a protocol of “search and destroy.” This body whose flesh carries the female and the male to the frontiers of survival bears in person the marks of a cultural text whose inside has been turned outside.

The flesh is the concentration of “ethnicity” that contemporary critical discourses neither acknowledge nor discourse away. It is this “flesh and blood” entity, in the vestibule (or “pre-view”) of a colonized North America, that is essentially ejected from “The Female Body in Western Culture” (see Suleiman, ed.), but it makes good theory, or commemorative “herstory” to want to “forget,” or to have failed to realize, that the African female subject, under these historic conditions, is not only the target of rape—in one sense, an interiorized violation of body and mind—but also the topic of specifically *externalized* acts of torture and prostration that we imagine as the peculiar province of *male* brutality and torture inflicted by other males. A female body strung from a tree limb, or bleeding from the breast on any given day of field work because the “overseer,” standing the length of a whip, has popped her flesh open, adds a lexical and living dimension to

the narratives of women in culture and society (Davis 9). This materialized scene of unprotected female flesh—of female flesh “ungendered”—offers a praxis and a theory, a text for living and for dying, and a method for reading both through their diverse mediations.

Among the myriad uses to which the enslaved community was put, Goodell identifies its value for medical research: “Assortments of diseased, *damaged*, and disabled Negroes, deemed incurable and otherwise worthless are *bought up*, it seems ... by medical institutions, to be experimented and operated upon, for purposes of ‘medical education’ and the interest of medical science” (86-87; Goodell’s emphasis). From the *Chadeston Mercury* for October 12, 1838, Goodell notes this advertisement:

‘To planters and others. — Wanted, fifty Negroes, any person, having sick Negroes, considered incurable by their respective physicians, and wishing to dispose of them, Dr. S. will *pay cash* for Negroes affected with scrofula, or king’s evil, confirmed hypochondriasm, apoplexy, diseases of the liver, kidneys, spleen, stomach and intestines, bladder and its appendages, diarrhea, dysentery, etc. The *highest cash price will be paid*, on application as above.’ at No. 110 Church Street, Charleston. (87; Goodell’s emphasis)

This profitable “atomizing” of the captive body provides another angle on the divided flesh: we lose any hint or suggestion of a dimension of ethics, of relatedness between human personality and its anatomical features, between one human personality and another, between human personality and cultural institutions. To that extent, the procedures adopted for the captive flesh demarcate a total objectification, as the entire captive community becomes a living laboratory.

The captive body, then, brings into focus a gathering of social realities as well as a metaphor for *value* so thoroughly interwoven in their literal and figurative emphases that distinctions between them are virtually useless. Even though the captive flesh/body has been “liberated,” and no one need pretend that even the

quotation marks do not *matter*, dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, shows movement, as the human subject is “murdered” over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise. Faulkner’s young Chick Mallison in *The Mansion* calls “it” by other names—“the ancient subterrene atavistic fear...” (227). And I would call it the Great Long National Shame. But people do not talk like that anymore—it is “embarrassing,” just as the retrieval of mutilated female bodies will likely be “backward” for some people. Neither the shameface of the embarrassed, nor the not-looking-back of the self-assured is of much interest to us, and will not help at all if rigor is our dream. We might concede, at the very least, that sticks and bricks *might* break our bones, but words will most certainly *kill* us.

The symbolic order that I wish to trace in this writing, calling it an “American grammar,” begins at the “beginning,” which is really a rupture and a radically different kind of cultural continuation. The massive demographic shifts, the violent formation of a modern African consciousness, that take place on the subsaharan Continent during the initiative strikes which open the Atlantic Slave Trade in the fifteenth century of our Christ, interrupted hundreds of years of black African culture. We write and think, then, about an outcome of aspects of African-American life in the United States under the pressure of those events. I might as well add that the familiarity of this narrative does nothing to appease the hunger of recorded memory, nor does the persistence of the repeated rob these well-known, oft-told events of their power, even now, to startle. In a very real sense, every writing as revision makes the “discovery” all over again.

## 2

**T**he narratives by African peoples and their descendants, though not as numerous from those early centuries of the “execrable trade” as the researcher would wish, suggest, in their rare occurrence, that the visual shock waves touched off when

African and European “met” reverberated on both sides of the encounter. The narrative of the “Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself,” first published in London in 1789, makes it quite clear that the first Europeans Equiano observed on what is now Nigerian soil were as unreal for him as he and others must have been for the European captors. The cruelty of “these white men with horrible looks, red faces, and long hair,” of these “spirits,” as the narrator would have it, occupies several pages of Equiano’s attention, alongside a firsthand account of Nigerian interior life (27 ff.). We are justified in regarding the outcome of Equiano’s experience in the same light as he himself might have—as a “fall,” as a veritable descent into the loss of communicative force.

If, as Todorov points out, the Mayan and Aztec peoples “lost control of communication” (61) in light of Spanish intervention, we could observe, similarly, that Vassa falls among men whose language is not only strange to him, but whose habits and practices strike him as “astonishing”:

[The sea, the slave ship] filled me with astonishment, which was soon converted into terror; when I was carried on board. I was immediately handled, and tossed up to see if I were sound, by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me. Their complexions, too, differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language they spoke (which was different from any I had ever heard), united to confirm me in this belief. (Equiano 27)

The captivating party does not only “earn” the right to dispose of the captive body as it sees fit, but gains, consequently, the right to name and “name” it: Equiano, for instance, identifies at least three different names that he is given in numerous passages between his Benin homeland and the Virginia colony, the latter and England—“Michael,” “Jacob,” “Gustavus Vassa” (35; 36).

The nicknames by which African-American women have been called, or regarded, or imagined on the New World scene—

the opening lines of this essay provide examples—demonstrate the powers of distortion that the dominant community seizes as its unlawful prerogative. Moynihan’s “Negro Family,” then, borrows its narrative energies from the grid of associations, from the semantic and iconic folds buried deep in the collective past, that come to surround and signify the captive person. Though there is no absolute point of chronological initiation, we might repeat certain familiar impression points that lend shape to the business of dehumanized naming. Expecting to find direct and amplified reference to African women during the opening years of the Trade, the observer is disappointed time and again that this cultural subject is concealed beneath the mighty debris of the itemized account, between the lines of the massive logs of commercial enterprise that overrun the sense of clarity we believed we had gained concerning this collective humiliation. Elizabeth Donnan’s enormous, four-volume documentation becomes a case in point.

Turning directly to this source, we discover what we had not expected to find—that this aspect of the search is rendered problematic and that observations of a field of manners and its related sociometries are an outgrowth of the industry of the “exterior other” (Todorov 3), called “anthropology” later on. The European males who laded and captained these galleys and who policed and corralled these human beings, in hundreds of vessels from Liverpool to Elmina, to Jamaica; from the Cayenne Islands, to the ports at Charleston and Salem, and for three centuries of human life, were not curious about this “cargo” that bled, packed like so many live sardines among the immovable objects. Such inveterate obscene blindness might be denied, point blank, as a possibility for *anyone*, except that we know it happened.

Donnan’s first volume covers three centuries of European “discovery” and “conquest,” beginning 50 years before pious Cristobal, Christum Ferens, the bearer of Christ, laid claim to what he thought was the “Indies.” From Gomes Eannes de Azurara’s “Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea, 1441-1448” (Donnan 1:18-41), we learn that the Portuguese probably gain the dubious distinction of having introduced black Africans to the European market of servitude. We are also

reminded that “Geography” is not a divine gift. Quite to the contrary, its boundaries were shifted during the European “Age of Conquest” in giddy desperation, according to the dictates of conquering armies, the edicts of prelates, the peculiar myopia of the medieval Christian mind. Looking for the “Nile River,” for example, according to the fifteenth-century Portuguese notion, is someone’s joke. For all that the pre-Columbian “explorers” knew about the sciences of navigation and geography, we are surprised that more parties of them did not end up “discovering” Europe. Perhaps, from a certain angle, that is precisely all that they found—an alternative reading of ego. The Portuguese, having little idea where the Nile ran, at least understood right away that there were men and women darker-skinned than themselves, but they were not specifically knowledgeable, or ingenious, about the various families and groupings represented by them. De Azurara records encounters with “Moors,” “Mooreesses,” “Mulattoes,” and people “black as Ethiops” (1:28), but it seems that the “Land of Guinea,” or of “Black Men,” or of “The Negroes” (1:35) was located anywhere southeast of Cape Verde, the Canaries, and the River Senegal, looking at an eighteenth-century European version of the subsaharan Continent along the West African coast (1:frontispiece).

Three genetic distinctions are available to the Portuguese eye, all along the riffs of melanin in the skin: in a field of captives, some of the observed are “white enough, fair to look upon, and well-proportioned.” Others are less “white like mulattoes,” and still others “black as Ethiops, and so ugly, both in features and in body, as almost to appear (to those who saw them) the images of a lower hemisphere” (1:28). By implication, this “third man,” standing for the most aberrant phenotype to the observing eye, embodies the linguistic community most unknown to the European. Arabic translators among the Europeans could at least “talk” to the “Moors” and instruct them to ransom themselves, or else....

Typically, there is in this grammar of description the perspective of “declension,” not of simultaneity, and its point of initiation is solipsistic—it begins with a narrative self, in an apparent unity of feeling, and unlike Equiano, who also saw “ugly” when he looked

out, this collective self uncovers the means by which to subjugate the “foreign code of conscience,” whose most easily remarkable and irremediable difference is perceived in skin color. By the time of De Azurara’s mid-fifteenth century narrative and a century and a half before Shakespeare’s “old black ram” of an Othello “tups” that “white ewe” of a Desdemona, the magic of skin color is already installed as a decisive factor in human dealings.

In De Azurara’s narrative, we observe males looking at other males, as “female” is subsumed here under the general category of estrangement. Few places in these excerpts carve out a distinct female space, though there are moments of portrayal that perceive female captives in the implications of socio-cultural function. When the field of captives (referred to above) is divided among the spoilers, no heed is paid to relations, as fathers are separated from sons, husbands from wives, brothers from sisters and brothers, mothers from children—male and female. It seems clear that the political program of European Christianity promotes this hierarchical view among *males*, although it remains puzzling to us exactly how this version of Christianity transforms the “pagan” also into the “ugly.” It appears that human beings came up with degrees of “fair” and then the “hideous,” in its overtones of bestiality, as the opposite of “fair,” all by themselves, without stage direction, even though there is the curious and blazing exception of Nietzsche’s Socrates, who was Athens’s ugliest and wisest and best citizen. The intimate choreography that the Portuguese narrator sets going between the “faithless” and the “ugly” transforms a partnership of dancers into a single figure. Once the “faithless,” indiscriminate of the three stops of Portuguese skin color, are transported to Europe, they become an *altered* human factor:

And so their lot was now quite contrary to what it had been, since before they had lived in perdition of soul and body; of their souls, in that they were yet pagans, without the clearness and the light of the Holy Faith; and of their bodies, in that they lived like beasts, without any custom of reasonable beings—for they had no knowledge of bread and wine, and they were without covering of clothes, or the lodgment

of houses; and worse than all, through the great ignorance that was in them, in that they had no understanding of good, but only knew how to live in bestial sloth. (1:30)

The altered human factor renders an alterity of European ego, an invention, or “discovery” as decisive in the full range of its social implications as the birth of a newborn. According to the semantic alignments of the excerpted passage, personhood, for this European observer, locates an immediately outward and superficial determination, gauged by quite arbitrarily opposed and *specular* categories: that these “pagans” did not have “bread” and “wine” did not mean that they were feastless, as Equiano observes about the Benin diet, c. 1745, in the province of Essaka:

Our manner of living is entirely plain; for as yet the natives are unacquainted with those refinements in cookery which debauch the taste; bullocks, goats, and poultry supply the greatest part of their food. (These constitute likewise the principal wealth of the country; and the chief articles of its commerce.) The flesh is usually stewed in a pan; to make it savory we sometimes use pepper; and other spices, and we have salt made of wood ashes. Our vegetables are mostly plaintains, eadas, yams, beans and Indian corn. The head of the family usually eats alone; his wives and slaves have also their separate tables.... (Equiano 8)

Just as fufu serves the Ghanaian diet today as a starch-and-bread-substitute, palm wine (an item by the same name in the eighteenth-century palate of the Benin community) need not be Heitz Cellars Martha's Vineyard and vice-versa in order for a guest, say, to imagine that she has enjoyed. That African housing arrangements of the fifteenth century did not resemble those familiar to De Azurara's narrator need not have meant that the African communities he encountered were without dwellings. Again, Equiano's narrative suggests that by the middle of the eighteenth century, at least, African living patterns were not only quite distinct in their sociometrical implications, but that also their architectonics accurately reflected the climate and



availability of resources in the local circumstance: “These houses never exceed one story in height; they are always built of wood, or stakes driven into the ground, crossed with wattles, and neatly plastered within and without” (9). Hierarchical impulse in *both* De Azurara’s and Equiano’s narratives translates all *perceived* difference as a fundamental degradation *or* transcendence, but at least in Equiano’s case, cultural practices are not observed in any intimate connection with skin color. For all intents and purposes, the politics of melanin, not isolated in its strange powers from the imperatives of a mercantile and competitive economics of European nation-states, will make of “transcendence” and “degradation” the basis of a historic violence that will rewrite the histories of modern Europe and black Africa. These mutually exclusive nominative elements come to rest on the same governing semantics—the ahistorical, or symptoms of the “sacred.”

By August 1518, the Spanish king, Francisco de Los Covos, under the aegis of a powerful negation, could order “4000 negro slaves both male and female, provided they be Christians” to be taken to the Caribbean, “the islands and the mainland of the ocean sea already discovered or to be discovered” (Donnan 1:42). Though the notorious “Middle Passage” appears to the investigator as a vast background without boundaries in time and space, we see it related in Donnan’s accounts to the opening up of the entire Western hemisphere for the specific purposes of enslavement and colonization. De Azurara’s narrative belongs, then, to a discourse of appropriation whose strategies will prove fatal to communities along the coastline of West Africa, stretching, according to Olaudah Equiano, “3400 miles, from Senegal to Angola, and [will include] a variety of kingdoms” (Equiano 5).

The conditions of “Middle Passage” are among the most incredible narratives available to the student, as it remains not easily imaginable. Late in the chronicles of the Atlantic Slave Trade, Britain’s Parliament entertained discussions concerning possible “regulations” for slave vessels. A Captain Perry visited the Liverpool port, and among the ships that he inspected was “The Brookes,” probably the most well-known image of the slave galley with its representative *personae* etched into the drawing like so many cartoon figures. Elizabeth Donnan’s second volume

carries the “Brookes Plan,” along with an elaborate delineation of its dimensions from the investigative reporting of Perry himself: “Let it now be supposed . . . further, that every man slave is to be allowed six feet by one foot four inches for room, every woman five feet ten by one foot four, every boy five feet by one foot two, and every girl four feet six by one foot...” (2:592, n). The owner of “The Brookes,” James Jones, had recommended that “five females be reckoned as four males, and three boys or girls as equal to two grown persons” (2:592).

These scaled inequalities complement the commanding terms of the dehumanizing, ungendering, and defacing project of African persons that De Azurara’s narrator might have recognized. It has been pointed out to me that these measurements do reveal the application of the gender rule to the material conditions of passage, but I would suggest that “gendering” takes place within the confines of the domestic, an essential metaphor that then spreads its tentacles for male and female subject over a wider ground of human and social purposes. Domesticity appears to gain its power by way of a common origin of cultural fictions that are grounded in the specificity of proper names, more exactly, a patronymic, which, in turn, situates those persons it “covers” in a particular place. Contrarily, the cargo of a ship might not be regarded as elements of the domestic, even though the vessel that carries it is sometimes romantically (ironically?) personified as “she.” The human cargo of a slave vessel—in the fundamental effacement and remission of African family and proper names—offers a counter-narrative to notions of the domestic.

Those African persons in “Middle Passage” were literally suspended in the “oceanic,” if we think of the latter in its Freudian orientation as an analogy for undifferentiated identity: removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet “American” either, these captive persons, without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also *nowhere* at all. Inasmuch as, on any given day, we might imagine, the captive personality did not know where s/he was, we could say that they were the culturally “unmade,” thrown in the midst of a figurative darkness that “exposed” their destinies to an unknown course. Often enough for the captains of these galleys,

navigational science of the day was not sufficient to guarantee the intended destination. We might say that the slave ship, its crew, and its human-as-cargo stand for a wild and unclaimed richness of *possibility* that is not interrupted, not “counted”/“accounted,” or differentiated, until its movement gains the land thousands of miles away from the point of departure. Under these conditions, one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into “account” as *quantities*. The female in “Middle Passage,” as the apparently smaller physical mass, occupies “less room” in a directly translatable money economy. But she is, nevertheless, quantifiable by the same rules of accounting as her male counterpart.

It is not only difficult for the student to find “female” in “Middle Passage,” but also, as Herbert S. Klein observes, “African women did not enter the Atlantic slave trade in anything like the numbers of African men. At all ages, men outnumbered women on the slave ships bound for America from Africa” (Klein 29). Though this observation does not change the reality of African women’s captivity and servitude in New World communities, it does provide a perspective from which to contemplate the *internal* African slave trade, which, according to Africanists, remained a predominantly *female* market. Klein nevertheless affirms that those females forced into the trade were segregated “from men for policing purposes” (“African Women” 35). He claims that both “were allotted the same space between decks . . . and both were fed the same food” (35). It is not altogether clear from Klein’s observations *for whom* the “police” kept vigil. It is certainly known from evidence presented in Donnan’s third volume (“New England and the Middle Colonies”) that insurrection was both frequent and feared in passage, and we have not yet found a great deal of evidence to support a thesis that female captives participated in insurrectionary activity (see White 63-64). Because it was the rule, however—not the exception—that the African female, in both indigenous African cultures and in what becomes her “home,” performed tasks of hard physical labor—so much so that the quintessential “slave” is *not* a male, but a female—we wonder at the seeming docility of the subject, granting her a “feminization” that enslavement kept at bay. Indeed, across the spate of discourse that I examined for this writing, the acts of

enslavement and responses to it comprise a more or less agonistic engagement of confrontational hostilities among males. The visual and historical evidence betrays the dominant discourse on the matter as incomplete, but *counter*-evidence is inadequate as well: the sexual violation of captive females and their own express rage against their oppressors did not constitute events that captains and their crews rushed to record in letters to their sponsoring companies, or sons on board in letters home to their New England mamas.

One suspects that there are several ways to snare a mockingbird, so that insurrection might have involved, from time to time, rather more subtle means than mutiny on the "Felicity," for instance. At any rate, we get very little notion in the written record of the life of women, children, and infants in "Middle Passage," and no idea of the fate of the pregnant female captive and the unborn, which startling thematic bell hooks addresses in the opening chapter of her pathfinding work (see hooks 15-49). From hooks's lead, however, we might guess that the "reproduction of mothering" in this historic instance carries few of the benefits of a *patriarchalized* female gender, which, from one point of view, is the *only* female gender there is.

The relative silence of the record on this point constitutes a portion of the disquieting lacunae that feminist investigation seeks to fill. Such silence is the nickname of distortion, of the unknown human factor that a revised public discourse would both undo *and* reveal. This cultural subject is inscribed historically as anonymity/anomie in various public documents of European-American mal(e)venture, from Portuguese De Azurara in the middle of the fifteenth century, to South Carolina's Henry Laurens in the eighteenth.

What confuses and enriches the picture is precisely the sameness of anonymous portrayal that adheres tenaciously across the division of gender. In the vertical columns of accounts and ledgers that comprise Donnan's work, the terms "Negroes" and "Slaves" denote a common status. For instance, entries in one account, from September 1700 through September 1702, are specifically descriptive of the names of ships and the private traders in

Barbados who will receive the stipulated goods, but “No. Negroes” and “Sum sold for per head” are so exactly arithmetical that it is as if these additions and multiplications belong to the other side of an equation (Donnan 2:25). One is struck by the detail and precision that characterize these accounts, as a narrative, or story, is always implied by a man or woman’s *name*: “Wm. Webster,” “John Dunn,” “Thos. Brownbill,” “Robt. Knowles.” But the “other” side of the page, as it were, equally precise, throws no *face* in view. It seems that nothing breaks the uniformity in this guise. If in no other way, the destruction of the African name, of kin, of linguistic, and ritual connections is so obvious in the vital stats sheet that we tend to overlook it. Quite naturally, the trader is not interested, in any *semantic* sense, in this “baggage” that he must deliver, but that he is not is all the more reason to search out the metaphorical implications of *naming* as one of the key sources of a bitter Americanizing for African persons.

The loss of the indigenous name/land provides a metaphor of displacement for other human and cultural features and relations, including the displacement of the genitalia, the female’s and the male’s desire that engenders future. The fact that the enslaved person’s access to the issue of his/her own body is not entirely clear in this historic period throws in crisis all aspects of the blood relations, as captors apparently felt no obligation to acknowledge them. Actually trying to understand how the confusions of consanguinity worked becomes the project, because the outcome goes far to explain the rule of gender and its application to the African female in captivity.

### 3

Even though the essays in Claire C. Robertson’s and Martin A. Klein’s *Women and Slavery in Africa* have specifically to do with aspects of the internal African slave trade, some of their observations shed light on the captivities of the Diaspora. At least these observations have the benefit of altering the kind of questions we might ask of these silent chapters. For example, Robertson’s essay, which opens the volume, discusses the term “slavery” in a wide variety of relationships. The enslaved person as *property* identifies the most familiar element of a most startling

proposition. But to overlap *kinlessness* on the requirements of property might enlarge our view of the conditions of enslavement. Looking specifically at documents from the West African societies of Songhay and Dahomey, Claude Meillassoux elaborates several features of the property/kinless constellation that are highly suggestive for our own quite different purposes.

Meillassoux argues that “slavery creates an economic and social agent whose virtue lies in being outside the kinship system” (“Female Slavery,” Robertson and Klein 50). Because the Atlantic trade involved heterogeneous social and ethnic formations in an explicit power relationship, we certainly cannot mean “kinship system” in precisely the same way that Meillassoux observes at work within the intricate calculus of descent among West African societies. However, the idea becomes useful as a point of contemplation when we try to sharpen our own sense of the African female’s reproductive uses within the diasporic enterprise of enslavement and the genetic reproduction of the enslaved. In effect, under conditions of captivity, the offspring of the female does not “belong” to the Mother, nor is s/he “related” to the “owner,” though the latter “possesses” it, and in the African-American instance, often fathered it, and, as often, without whatever benefit of patrimony. In the social outline that Meillassoux is pursuing, the offspring of the enslaved, “being unrelated both to their begetters and to their owners..., find themselves in the situation of being orphans” (50).

In the context of the United States, we could not say that the enslaved offspring was “orphaned,” but the child does become, under the press of a patronymic, patrifocal, patrilineal, and patriarchal order, the man/woman on the boundary, whose human and familial status, by the very nature of the case, had yet to be defined. I would call this enforced state of breach another instance of vestibular cultural formation where “kinship” loses meaning, *since it can be invaded at any given and arbitrary moment by the property relations*. I certainly do not mean to say that African peoples in the New World did not maintain the powerful ties of sympathy that bind blood-relations in a network of feeling, of continuity. It is precisely *that* relationship—not customarily recognized by the code of slavery—that historians have long

identified as the inviolable “Black Family” and further suggest that this structure remains one of the supreme social achievements of African-Americans under conditions of enslavement (see John Blassingame 79 ff.).

Indeed, the *revised* “Black Family” of enslavement has engendered an older tradition of historiographical and sociological writings than we usually think. Ironically enough, E. Franklin Frazier’s *Negro Family in the United States* likely provides the closest *contemporary* narrative of conceptualization for the “Moynihan Report.” Originally published in 1939, Frazier’s work underwent two redactions in 1948 and 1966. Even though Frazier’s outlook on this familial configuration remains basically sanguine, I would support Angela Davis’s skeptical reading of Frazier’s “Black Matriarchate” (Davis 14). “*Except where the master’s will was concerned,*” Frazier contends, this matriarchal figure “developed a spirit of independence and a keen sense of her personal rights” (1966: 47; emphasis mine). The “exception” in this instance tends to be overwhelming, as the African-American female’s “dominance” and “strength” come to be interpreted by later generations—both black and white, oddly enough—as a “pathology,” as an instrument of castration. Frazier’s larger point, we might suppose, is that African-Americans developed such resourcefulness under conditions of captivity that “family” must be conceded as one of their redoubtable social attainments. This line of interpretation is pursued by Blassingame and Eugene Genovese (*Roll, Jordan, Roll* 70-75), among other U.S. historians, and indeed assumes a centrality of focus in our own thinking about the impact and outcome of captivity.

It seems clear, however, that “Family,” as we practice and understand it “in the West”—the *vertical* transfer of a bloodline, of a patronymic, of titles and entitlements, of real estate and the prerogatives of “cold cash,” from *fathers* to *sons* and in the supposedly free exchange of affectional ties between a male and a female of *his* choice—becomes the mythically revered privilege of a free and freed community. In that sense, African peoples in the historic Diaspora had nothing to prove, *if* the point had been that they were not capable of “family” (read “civilization”), since it is stunningly evident, in Equiano’s narrative, for instance, that

Africans were not only capable of the concept and the practice of "family," including "slaves," but in modes of elaboration and naming that were at least as complex as those of the "nuclear family" "in the West."

Whether or not we decide that the support systems that African-Americans derived under conditions of captivity should be called "family," or something else, strikes me as supremely impertinent. The point remains that captive persons were *forced* into patterns of *dispersal*, beginning with the Trade itself, into the *horizontal* relatedness of language groups, discourse formations, bloodlines, names, and properties by the legal arrangements of enslavement. It is true that the most "well-meaning" of "masters" (and there must have been *some*) *could not, did not* alter the *ideological* and hegemonic mandates of dominance. It must be conceded that African-Americans, under the press of a hostile and compulsory patriarchal order, bound and determined to destroy them, or to preserve them only in the service and at the behest of the "master" class, exercised a degree of courage and will to survive that startles the imagination even now. Although it makes good revisionist history to read this tale *liberally*, it is probably truer than we know at this distance (and truer than contemporary social practice in the community would suggest on occasion) that the captive person developed, time and again, certain ethical and sentimental features that tied her and him, *across* the landscape to others, often sold from hand to hand, of the same and different blood in a common fabric of memory and inspiration.

We might choose to call this connectedness "family," or "support structure," but that is a rather different case from the moves of a dominant symbolic order, pledged to maintain the supremacy of race. It is that order that forces "family" to modify itself when it does not mean family of the "master," or dominant enclave. It is this rhetorical and symbolic move that declares primacy over any other human and social claim, and in that political order of things, "kin," just as gender formation, has no decisive legal or social efficacy.

We return frequently to Frederick Douglass's careful elaborations of the arrangements of captivity, and we are astonished each



reading by two dispersed, yet poignantly related, familial enactments that suggest a connection between “kinship” and “property.” Douglass tells us early in the opening chapter of the 1845 *Narrative* that he was separated in infancy from his mother: “For what this separation is [sic] done, I do not know, unless it be to hinder the development of the child’s affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child. This is the inevitable result” (22).

Perhaps one of the assertions that Meillassoux advances concerning indigenous African formations of enslavement might be turned as a question, against the perspective of Douglass’s witness: is the genetic reproduction of the slave and the recognition of the rights of the slave to his or her offspring a check on the *profitability* of slavery? And how so, if so? We see vaguely the route to framing a response, especially to the question’s second half and perhaps to the first: the enslaved must not be permitted to perceive that he or she has any human rights that matter. Certainly if “kinship” were possible, the property relations would be undermined, since the offspring would then “belong” to a mother and a father. In the system that Douglass articulates, genetic reproduction becomes, then, not an elaboration of the life-principle in its cultural overlap, but an extension of the boundaries of proliferating properties. Meillassoux goes so far as to argue that “slavery exists where the slave class is reproduced through institutional apparatus: war and market” (50). Since, in the United States, the market of slavery identified the chief institutional means for maintaining a class of enforced servile labor, it seems that the biological reproduction of the enslaved was not alone sufficient to reinforce the *estate* of slavery. If, as Meillassoux contends, “femininity loses its sacredness in slavery” (64), then so does “motherhood” as female blood-rite/right. To that extent, the captive female body locates precisely a moment of converging political and social vectors that mark the flesh as a prime commodity of exchange. While this proposition is open to further exploration, suffice it to say now that this open exchange of female bodies in the raw offers a kind of Ur-text to the dynamics of signification and representation that the gendered female would unravel.

For Douglass, the loss of his mother eventuates in alienation from

his brother and sisters, who live in the same house with him: "The early separation of us from our mother had well nigh blotted the fact of our relationship from our memories" (45). What could this mean? The *physical* proximity of the siblings survives the mother's death. They grasp their connection in the physical sense, but Douglass appears to mean a *psychological* bonding whose success mandates the *mother's* presence. Could we say, then, that the *feeling* of kinship is *not* inevitable? That it describes a relationship that appears "natural," but must be "cultivated" under actual material conditions? If the child's humanity is mirrored initially in the eyes of its mother, or the maternal function, then we might be able to guess that the social subject grasps the whole dynamic of resemblance and kinship by way of the same source.

There is an amazing thematic synonymy on this point between aspects of Douglass's *Narrative* and Malcolm El-Hajj Malik El Shabazz's *Autobiography of Malcolm X* (21 ff.). Through the loss of the mother, in the latter contemporary instance, to the institution of "insanity" and the state—a full century after Douglass's writing and under social conditions that might be designated a post-emancipation neo-enslavement—Malcolm and his siblings, robbed of their activist father in a kkk-like ambush, are not only widely dispersed across a makeshift social terrain, but also show symptoms of estrangement and "disremembering" that require many years to heal, and even then, only by way of Malcolm's prison ordeal turned, eventually, into a redemptive occurrence.

The destructive loss of the natural mother, whose biological/genetic relationship to the child remains unique and unambiguous, opens the enslaved young to social ambiguity and chaos: the ambiguity of his/her fatherhood and to a structure of other relational elements, now threatened, that would declare the young's connection to a genetic and historic future by way of their own siblings. That the father in Douglass's case was most likely the "master," not by any means special to Douglass, involves a hideous paradox. Fatherhood, at best a supreme cultural courtesy, attenuates here on the one hand into a monstrous accumulation of power on the other. One has been "made" and "bought" by disparate currencies, linking back to a common origin of exchange and domination. The denied genetic link becomes the

chief strategy of an undenied ownership, as if the interrogation into the father's identity—the blank space where his proper name will fit—were answered by the fact, *de jure* of a material possession. “And this is done,” Douglass asserts, “too obviously to administer to the [masters'] own lusts, and make a gratification of their wicked desires profitable as well as pleasurable” (23).

Whether or not the captive female and/or her sexual oppressor derived “pleasure” from their seductions and couplings is not a question we can politely ask. Whether or not “pleasure” is possible at all under conditions that I would aver as non-freedom for both or either of the parties has not been settled. Indeed, we could go so far as to entertain the very real possibility that “sexuality,” as a term of implied relationship and desire, is dubiously appropriate, manageable, or accurate to *any* of the familial arrangements under a system of enslavement, from the master's family to the captive enclave. Under these arrangements, the customary lexicon of sexuality, including “reproduction,” “motherhood,” “pleasure,” and “desire” are thrown into unrelieved crisis.

If the testimony of Linda Brent/Harriet Jacobs is to be believed, the official mistresses of slavery's “masters” constitute a privileged class of the tormented, if such contradiction can be entertained (Brent 29-35). Linda Brent/Harriet Jacobs recounts in the course of her narrative scenes from a “psychodrama,” opposing herself and “Mrs. Flint,” in what we have come to consider the classic alignment between captive woman and free. Suspecting that her husband, Dr. Flint, has sexual designs on the young Linda (and the doctor is nearly humorously incompetent at it, according to the story line), Mrs. Flint assumes the role of a perambulatory nightmare who visits the captive woman in the spirit of a veiled seduction. Mrs. Flint imitates the incubus who “rides” its victim in order to exact confession, expiation, and anything else that the immaterial power might want. (Gayle Jones's *Corregidora* [1975] weaves a contemporary fictional situation around the historic motif of entangled female sexualities.) This narrative scene from Brent's work, dictated to Lydia Maria Child, provides an instance of a repeated sequence, purportedly based on “real” life. But the scene in question appears to so commingle its signals with the fictive, with casebook narratives from psychoanalysis, that

we are certain that the narrator has her hands on an explosive moment of New-World/U.S. history that feminist investigation is beginning to unravel. The narrator recalls:

Sometimes I woke up, and found her bending over me. At other times she whispered in my ear, as though it were her husband who was speaking to me, and listened to hear what I would answer. If she startled me, on such occasion, she would glide stealthily away; and the next morning she would tell me I had been talking in my sleep, and ask who I was talking to. At last, I began to be fearful for my life.... (Brent 33)

The “jealous mistress” here (but “jealous” for whom?) forms an analogy with the “master” to the extent that male dominative modes give the male the material means to fully act out what the female might only *wish*. The mistress in the case of Brent’s narrative becomes a metaphor for *his* madness that arises in the ecstasy of unchecked power. Mrs. Flint enacts a male alibi and prosthetic motion that is mobilized *at night*, at the material place of the dream work. In both male and female instances, the subject attempts to *inculcate* his or her will into the vulnerable, supine body. Though this is barely hinted on the surface of the text, we might say that Brent, between the lines of her narrative, demarcates a sexuality that is neuter-bound, inasmuch as it represents an open vulnerability to a gigantic sexualized repertoire that may be alternately expressed as male/female. Since the gendered female *exists for* the male, we might suggest that the ungendered female—in an amazing stroke of pansexual potential—might be invaded/raided by another *woman* or man.

If *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* were a novel, and not the memoirs of an escaped female captive, then we might say that “Mrs. Flint” is also the narrator’s projection, her creation, so that for all her pious and correct umbrage toward the outrage of her captivity, some aspect of Linda Brent is released in a manifold repetition crisis that the doctor’s wife comes to stand in for. In the case of both an imagined fiction and the narrative we have from Brent/Jacobs/Child, published only four years before the official proclamations of Freedom, we could say that African-American

women's community and Anglo-American women's community, under certain shared cultural conditions, were the twin actants on a common psychic landscape, were subject to the same fabric of dread and humiliation. Neither could claim her body and its various productions—for quite different reasons, albeit—as her own, and in the case of the doctor's wife, *she* appears not to have wanted *her* body at all, but to desire to enter someone else's, specifically, Linda Brent's, in an apparently classic instance of sexual "jealousy" and appropriation. In fact, from one point of view, we cannot unravel one female's narrative from the other's, cannot decipher one without tripping over the other. In that sense, these "threads cable-strong" of an incestuous, interracial genealogy uncover slavery in the United States as one of the richest displays of the psychoanalytic dimensions of culture before the science of European psychoanalysis takes hold.

## 4

But just as we duly regard similarities between life conditions of American women—captive and free—we must observe those undeniable contrasts and differences so decisive that the African-American female's historic claim to the territory of womanhood and "femininity" still tends to rest too solidly on the subtle and shifting calibrations of a liberal ideology. Valerie Smith's reading of the tale of Linda Brent as a tale of "garreting" enables our notion that female gender for captive women's community is the tale writ between the lines and in the not-quite spaces of an American domesticity. It is this tale that we try to make clearer, or, keeping with the metaphor, "bring on line."

If the point is that the historic conditions of African-American women might be read as an unprecedented occasion in the national context, then gender and the arrangements of gender are both crucial and evasive. Holding, however, to a specialized reading of female gender as an *outcome* of a certain political, socio-cultural empowerment within the context of the United States, we would regard dispossession as the *loss* of gender, or one of the chief elements in an altered reading of gender: "Women are considered of no value, *unless* they continually increase their owner's stock. They were put on par with animals" (Brent 49;

emphasis mine). Linda Brent's witness appears to contradict the point I would make, but I am suggesting that even though the enslaved female reproduced other enslaved persons, we do not read "birth" in this instance as a reproduction of mothering precisely because the female, like the male, has been robbed of the parental right, the parental function. One treads dangerous ground in suggesting an equation between female gender and mothering; in fact, feminist inquiry/praxis and the actual day-to-day living of numberless American women—black and white—have gone far to break the enthrallment of a female subject-position to the theoretical and actual situation of maternity. Our task here would be lightened considerably if we could simply slide over the powerful "No," the significant *exception*. In the historic formation to which I point, however, motherhood and female gendering/ungendering appear so intimately aligned that they seem to speak the same language. At least it is plausible to say that motherhood, while it does not exhaust the problematics of female gender, offers one prominent line of approach to it. I would go farther: Because African-American women experienced uncertainty regarding their infants' lives in the historic situation, gendering, in its coeval reference to African-American women, *insinuates* an implicit and unresolved puzzle both within current feminist discourse *and* within those discursive communities that investigate the entire problematics of culture. Are we mistaken to suspect that history—at least in this instance—repeats itself yet again?

Every feature of social and human differentiation disappears in public discourses regarding the African-American person, as we encounter, in the juridical codes of slavery, personality reified. William Goodell's study not only demonstrates the rhetorical and moral passions of the abolitionist project, but also lends insight into the corpus of law that underwrites enslavement. If "slave" is perceived as the essence of stillness (an early version of "ethnicity"), or of an undynamic human state, fixed in time and space, then the law articulates this impossibility as its inherent feature: "Slaves shall be deemed, sold, taken, reputed and adjudged in law to be *chattels personal*, in the hands of their owners and possessors, and their executors, administrators, and assigns, to all intents, constructions, and purposes whatsoever" (23; Goodell's emphasis).

Even though we tend to parody and simplify matters to behave as if the various civil codes of the slave-holding United States were monolithically informed, unified, and executed in their application, or that the “code” itself is spontaneously generated in an undivided historic moment, we read it nevertheless as exactly this—the *peak points* the salient and characteristic features of a human and social procedure that evolves over a natural historical sequence and represents, consequently, the narrative *shorthand* of a transaction that is riddled, *in practice*, with contradictions, accident, and surprise. We could suppose that the legal encodings of enslavement stand for the statistically average case, that the legal code provides the *topics* of a project increasingly threatened and self-conscious. It is, perhaps, not by chance that the laws regarding slavery appear to crystallize in the precise moment when agitation against the arrangement becomes articulate in certain European and New-World communities. In that regard, the slave codes that Goodell describes are themselves an instance of the counter and isolated text that seeks to silence the contradictions and antitheses engendered by it. For example, aspects of Article 461 of the South Carolina Civil Code call attention to just the sort of uneasy oxymoronic character that the “peculiar institution” attempts to sustain in transforming *personality* into *property*.

(1) The “slave” is movable by nature, but “immovable by the operation of law” (Goodell 24). As I read this, law itself is compelled to a point of saturation, or a reverse zero degree, beyond which it cannot move in the behalf of the enslaved or the free. We recall, too, that the “master,” under these perversions of judicial power, is impelled to *treat* the enslaved as property, and not as person. These laws stand for the kind of social formulation that armed forces will help excise from a living context in the campaigns of civil war. They also embody the untenable human relationship that Henry David Thoreau believed occasioned acts of “civil disobedience,” the moral philosophy to which Martin Luther King, Jr. would subscribe in the latter half of the twentieth century.

(2) Slaves shall be *reputed* and *considered* real estate, “subject to be mortgaged, according to the rules prescribed by law” (Goodell 24).

I emphasize “reputed” and “considered” as predicate adjectives that invite attention because they denote a *contrivance*, not an intransitive “is,” or the transfer of nominative property from one syntactic point to another by way of a weakened copulative. The status of the “reputed” can change, as it will significantly before the nineteenth century closes. The mood here—the “shall be”—is pointedly subjunctive, or the situation devoutly to be wished. The the slave-holding class is forced, in time, to think and do something else is the narrative of violence that enslavement itself has been preparing for a couple of centuries.

Louisiana’s and South Carolina’s written codes offer a paradigm for praxis in those instances where a *written* text is missing. In that case, the “chattel principle has . . . been affirmed and maintained by the courts, and involved in legislative acts” (Goodell 25). In Maryland, a legislative enactment of 1798 shows so forceful a synonymy of motives between branches of comparable governance that a line between “judicial” and “legislative” functions is useless to draw: “In case the personal property of a ward shall consist of specific articles, such as slaves, working beasts, animals of any kind, stock, furniture, plates, books, and so forth, the Court if it shall deem it advantageous to the ward, may at any time, pass an order for the sale thereof” (56). This inanimate and corporate ownership—the voting district of a ward—is here spoken for, or might be, as a single slave-holding male in determinations concerning property.

The eye pauses, however, not so much at the provisions of this enactment as at the details of its delineation. Everywhere in the descriptive document, we are stunned by the simultaneity of disparate items in a grammatical series: “Slave” appears in the same context with beasts of burden, *all* and *any* animal(s), various livestock, and a virtually endless profusion of domestic content from the culinary item to the book. Unlike the taxonomy of Borges’s “Certain Chinese encyclopedia,” whose contemplation opens Foucault’s *Order of Things*, these items from a certain American encyclopedia do not sustain discrete and localized “powers of contagion,” nor has the ground of their concatenation been desiccated beneath them. That imposed uniformity comprises the shock, that somehow this mix of named things, live and



inanimate, collapsed by contiguity to the same text of “realism,” carries a disturbingly prominent item of misplacement. To that extent, the project of liberation for African-Americans has found urgency in two passionate motivations that are twinned—1) to break apart, to rupture violently the laws of American behavior that make such *syntax* possible; 2) to introduce a new *semantic* field/fold more appropriate to his/her own historic movement. I regard this twin compulsion as distinct, though related, moments of the very same narrative process that might appear as a concentration or a dispersal. The narratives of Linda Brent, Frederick Douglass, and Malcolm El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (aspects of which are examined in this essay) each represent both narrative ambitions as they occur under the auspices of “author.”

Relatedly, we might interpret the whole career of African-Americans, a decisive factor in national political life since the mid-seventeenth century, in light of the *intervening*, *intruding* tale, or the tale—like Brent’s “garret” space—“between the lines,” which are already inscribed, as a *metaphor* of social and cultural management. According to this reading, gender, or sex-role assignation, or the clear differentiation of sexual stuff, sustained elsewhere in the culture, does not emerge for the African-American female in this historic instance, except indirectly, except as a way to reinforce through the process of birthing, “the reproduction of the relations of production” that involves “the reproduction of the values and behavior patterns necessary to maintain the system of hierarchy in its various aspects of gender, class, and race or ethnicity” (Margaret Strobel, “Slavery and Reproductive Labor in Mombasa,” Robertson and Klein 121). Following Strobel’s lead, I would suggest that the foregoing identifies one of the three categories of reproductive labor that African-American females carry out under the regime of captivity. But this replication of ideology is never simple in the case of female subject-positions, and it appears to acquire a thickened layer of motives in the case of African-American females.

If we can account for an originary narrative and judicial principle that might have engendered a “Moynihan Report,” many years into the twentieth century, we cannot do much better than look at Goodell’s reading of the *partus sequitur ventrem*: the condition of the

slave mother is “forever entailed on all her remotest posterity.” This maxim of civil law, in Goodell’s view, the “genuine and degrading principle of slavery, inasmuch as it places the slave upon a level with brute animals, prevails universally in the slaveholding states” (Goodell 27). But what is the “condition” of the mother? Is it the “condition” of enslavement the writer means, or does he mean the “mark” and the “knowledge” of the *mother* upon the child that here translates into the culturally forbidden and impure? In an elision of terms, “mother” and “enslavement” are indistinct categories of the illegitimate inasmuch as each of these synonymous elements defines, in effect, a cultural situation that is *father-lacking*. Goodell, who does not only report this maxim of law as an aspect of his own factuality, but also regards it, as does Douglass, as a fundamental degradation, supposes descent and identity through the female line as comparable to a brute animality. Knowing already that there are human communities that align social reproductive procedure according to the line of the mother, and Goodell himself might have known it some years later, we can only conclude that the provisions of patriarchy, here exacerbated by the preponderant powers of an enslaving class, declare Mother Right, by definition, a negating feature of human community.

Even though we are not even talking about any of the matriarchal features of social production/reproduction—matrifocality, matrilinearity, matriarchy—when we speak of the enslaved person, we perceive that the dominant culture, in a fatal misunderstanding, assigns a matriarchist value where it does not belong; actually *misnames* the power of the female regarding the enslaved community. Such naming is false because the female could not, in fact, claim her child, and false, once again, because “motherhood” is not perceived in the prevailing social climate as a legitimate procedure of cultural inheritance.

The African-American male has been touched, therefore, by the *mother*, handed by her in ways that he cannot escape, and in ways that the white American male is allowed to temporize by a fatherly reprieve. This human and historic development—the text that has been inscribed on the benighted heart of the continent—takes us to the center of an inexorable difference in the depths of

American women's community: the African-American woman, the mother, the daughter, becomes historically the powerful and shadowy evocation of a cultural synthesis long evaporated—the law of the Mother—only and precisely because legal enslavement removed the African-American male not so much from sight as from *mimetic* view as a partner in the prevailing social fiction of the Father's name, the Father's law.

Therefore, the female, in this order of things, breaks in upon the imagination with a forcefulness that marks both a denial and an "illegitimacy." Because of this peculiar American denial, the black American male embodies the *only* American community of males which has had the specific occasion to learn *who* the female is within itself, the infant child who bears the life against the could-be fateful gamble, against the odds of pulverization and murder, including her own. It is the heritage of the *mother* that the African-American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood—the power of "yes" to the "female" within.

This different cultural text actually reconfigures, in historically ordained discourse, certain *representational* potentialities for African-Americans: 1) motherhood as female blood-rite is outraged, is denied, at the *very same time* that it becomes the founding term of a human and social enactment; 2) a dual fatherhood is set in motion, comprised of the African father's *banished* name and body and the captor father's mocking presence. In this play of paradox, only the female stands *in the flesh*, both mother and mother-dispossessed. This problematizing of gender places her, in my view, *out* of the traditional symbolics of female gender, and it is our task to make a place for this different social subject. In doing so, we are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the *insurgent* ground as female social subject. Actually *claiming* the monstrosity (of a female with the potential to "name"), which her culture imposes in blindness, "Sapphire" might rewrite after all a radically different text for a female empowerment.

# VII.

## THE VENGEANCE OF VERTIGO: APHASIA AND ABJECTION IN THE POLITICAL TRIALS OF BLACK INSURGENTS

2011

Frank B. Wilderson, III

And who can affirm that vertigo does not haunt the whole of existence?

—Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*<sup>1</sup>

### I. WHERE VERTIGOS MEET

The guerilla war that the Black Liberation Army waged against the United States in the late 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s was part of a multifaceted struggle to redress Black dispossession which has been waged since the first Africans landed in the “New” World.<sup>2</sup> But the political trials of BLA soldiers marked an unprecedented moment in the history of that struggle; a moment when it became *de rigueur* for revolutionaries to refuse the role of defendant and assume (while still in custody and often handcuffed) the role of prosecutor and judge—with the public gallery as jury.

This shift comprised an unparalleled inversion of jurisprudential

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1. “Colonial Wars and Mental Disorders,” 253.

2. Akinyele Umoja, “Repression Breeds Resistance: The Black Liberation Army and the Radical Legacy of the Black Panther Party.”

casting in which the court itself (and by extension the U.S. government) became defendants. Assata Shakur recalls how brothers and sisters came to her trial every day to “watch the circus.” Her narrative paints a vibrant picture of an intra-mural conversation between Black folks from all walks of life, for whom the court and the trials functioned much like backwoods churches did during slavery. A courtroom of people who joined the defendants in their refusal to rise when the judge came in; folks giving each other the Black Power salute in full view of the U.S. Marshals; Black Muslim men and women spreading their prayer rugs in the corridors of the court and praying to Allah; Black parents explaining the underlying racism of the American legal system to their children. As the judge entered the courtroom, one such well-educated child looked up and said, “Mommy, is that the fascist pig?” to the laughter and applause of the gallery (*Assata* 212).

With only small arms and crude explosives at their disposal, with little of nothing in the way of logistical support,<sup>3</sup> with no liberated zone to claim or reclaim, and with no more than a vague knowledge that there were a few hundred other insurgents scattered throughout the U.S. operating in largely uncoordinated and decentralized units,<sup>4</sup> the BLA launched 66 operations<sup>5</sup>

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3. Especially after 1975, when the Vietnam War ended and the revolutionary White Left, most notably members of the Weather Underground Organization, came out of hiding, surrendered to authorities, took the often meager sentences that courts imposed—often no more than probation—and then returned to a private and quotidian life. See Dan Berger’s, *Outlaws in America: The Weather Underground and the Politics of Solidarity*; Jeremy Varon’s *Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, The Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies*; Akinyele Umoja’s, “Repression Breeds Resistance: The Black Liberation Army and the Radical Legacy of the Black Panther Party;” Jalil Abdul Muntaqim, “On the Black Liberation Army.” *Arm the Spirit*. September 18, 1979; and my *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, 128-129.

4. In her autobiography, Assata Shakur emphasizes the decentralized, nonhierarchical structure of the BLA—whether by design or desperation. This was also told to me by Marilyn Buck, one of the few White “task force” members of the Black Liberation Army, on one of my visits to her in Dublin Prison, Dublin, CA.

5. The number of operations that BLA members acknowledge,

against the largest police state in the world. Vertigo must have seized them each time they clashed with agents of a nuclear-weapons regime with three million troops in uniform, a regime that could put 150,000 new police on the streets in any given year, and whose ordinary White citizens frequently deputize themselves in the name of law and order. Subjective vertigo, no doubt: a dizzying sense that one is moving or spinning in an otherwise stationary world, a vertigo brought on by a clash of grossly asymmetrical forces. There are suitable analogies, for this kind of vertigo must have also seized Native Americans who launched the AIM's occupation of Wounded Knee, and FALN insurgents who battled the FBI.

Subjective vertigo is vertigo of the event. But the sensation that one is not simply spinning in an otherwise stable environment, that one's environment is perpetually unhinged stems from a relationship to violence that cannot be analogized. This is called objective vertigo, a life constituted by disorientation rather than a life interrupted by disorientation. This is structural as opposed to performative violence. Black subjectivity is a crossroads where vertigoes meet, the intersection of performative and structural violence.

Elsewhere I have argued that the Black is a sentient being though not a Human being. The Black's and the Human's disparate relationship to violence is at the heart of this failure of incorporation and analogy. The Human suffers contingent violence, violence that kicks in when s/he resists (or is perceived to resist) the disciplinary discourse of capital and/or Oedipus. But Black peoples' subsumption by violence is a paradigmatic necessity, not just a performative contingency. To be constituted by *and* disciplined by violence, to be gripped simultaneously by subjective and objective vertigo, is indicative of a political ontology which is radically different from the political ontology of a sentient being who is constituted by discourse and disciplined by violence when s/he breaks with the ruling discursive codes.<sup>6</sup>

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presumably because this number is a matter of public record. See Jalil Abdul Muntaqim, "On the Black Liberation Army." *Arm the Spirit*. September 18, 1979.

6. *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, "Biko

When we begin to assess revolutionary armed struggle in this comparative context, we find that Human revolutionaries (workers, women, gays and lesbians, post-colonial subjects) suffer subjective vertigo when they meet the state's disciplinary violence with the revolutionary violence of the subaltern; but they are spared objective vertigo. This is because the most disorienting aspects of their lives are induced by the struggles that arise from intra-Human conflicts over competing conceptual frameworks and disputed cognitive maps, such as the American Indian Movement's demand for the return of Turtle Island vs. the U.S.'s desire to maintain territorial integrity, or the Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional's (FALN) demand for Puerto Rican independence vs. the U.S.'s desire to maintain Puerto Rico as a territory. But for the Black, as for the slave, there are no cognitive maps, no conceptual frameworks of suffering and dispossession which are analogic with the myriad maps and frameworks which explain the dispossession of Human subalterns.

The structural, or paradigmatic, violence that subsumes Black insurgents' cognitive maps and conceptual frameworks, subsumes my scholarly efforts as well. As a Black scholar, I am tasked with making sense of this violence without being overwhelmed and disoriented by it. In other words, the writing must somehow be indexical of that which exceeds narration, while being ever mindful of the incomprehension the writing would foster; the failure, that is, of interpretation were the indices to actually escape the narrative. The stakes of this dilemma are almost as high for the Black scholar facing his/her reader as they are for the Black insurgent facing the police and the courts. For the scholarly act of embracing members of the Black Liberation Army as beings worthy of empathic critique is terrifying. One's writing proceeds with fits and starts which have little to do with the problems of building the thesis or finding the methodology to make the case. As I write, I am more aware of the rage and anger of my reader-ideal (an angry mob as readers) than I am of my own interventions and strategies for assembling my argument. Vertigo seizes me with a rash of condemnations that emanate from within me and swirl around me. I am speaking to me but not *through*

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and the Problematic of Presence," and "Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society."

me, yet there seems to be no other way to speak. I am speaking through the voice and gaze of a mob of, let's just say it, White Americans; and my efforts to marshal a mob of Black people, to conjure the Black Liberation Army smack of compensatory gestures. It is not that the BLA doesn't come to my aid, that they don't push back, but neither I nor my insurgent allies can make the case that we are worthy of our suffering and justified in our actions and not terrorists and apologists for terror who should be locked away forever. How can we be worthy of our suffering without being worthy of ourselves? I press on, even though the vertigo that seizes me is so overwhelming that its precise nature—subjective, stemming from within me, or objective, catalyzed by my context, the raging throng—cannot be determined. I have no reference points apart from the mob that gives no quarter. If I write “freedom fighter,” from within my ear they scream “terrorist”! If I say “prisoner of war,” they chant “cop killer”! Their denunciations are sustained only by assertion, but they ring truer than my painstaking exegesis. No firewall protects me from them; no liberated psychic zone offers me sanctuary. I want to stop and turn myself in.

## II. STATIC POSITIVISM AND THE NECESSARY THING

David Gilbert and Judy Clark, two former members of the Weather Underground, stood trial with Kuwasi Balagoon, the openly bisexual<sup>7</sup> member of the Black Liberation Army in what is commonly referred to as the Brinks Trial.<sup>8</sup> They sat out much of the trial, arguing “that to participate would be to recognize the legitimacy of the court to criminalize political acts. When they did appear, it was to make statements condemning white supremacy and U.S. imperialism.” They argued that “the United States government lacked the legal basis to try them,

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7. I am working on an article which puts Balagoon's sexuality and declared anarchism in dialogue with the heteronormative and Marxist-Leninist frameworks which underwrote most BLA self-imaginings. This is not an effort to cathedralize Balagoon's framework over those of his comrades, but to explore how different Black revolutionary *identities* negotiated their common position while in the throes of armed struggle.

8. For the expropriation of funds from an armored car in Nyack, NY and the resultant deaths of police officers.



both because of the political character of their actions, and because of the government's own illegitimacy" (Berger, *Outlaws of America...* 252-53). They rejected the terms of jurisprudential engagement by refusing the hermeneutics of individual guilt or innocence. They believed the power to pose the question is the greatest power of all. In short, they sought to short circuit the court's disciplinary logic by exploiting their trial, a window of time between arraignment and incarceration, as an opportunity to shift the terms of adjudication from moral questions of guilt and innocence to ethical questions of state power and political legitimacy. If acquittal came with the counter-hegemonic gains of this Gramscian War of Position, so be it; if not, well, those were always the risks. They weren't alone in their analysis. The "Verdict of the International Tribunal on Political Prisoners and Prisoners of War in the United States," *Yale Journal of Law and Liberation* 2 (1991), declared that the U.S. should follow the same international protocol with political prisoners in the U.S. as it does with prisoners on the battlefields abroad. The Tribunal used the Geneva Convention to frame the defendants as "anti-colonial combatants."

There were examples of the effects of pedagogy and praxis less ludic than that of small children who enquired as to which species of pig a federal judge belongs to. The trials occurred within a context wherein there was a tacit consensus on the Left which espoused non-cooperation with law enforcement officials. David Gilbert explains how his Weather Underground unit's ability to elude a police dragnet in San Francisco, flee to Oregon, and establish new identities was less a result of their clandestine skills than of "the anti-state political consciousness that prevailed in youth culture, which meant that information did not flow to the state but flowed to us."<sup>9</sup>

The fruits of this counter-hegemonic context, the transformation of Gramscian "common sense" (apprehensive or inscrutable cooperation with the cops) into "good sense" (non-cooperation with the cops), can also be glimpsed by taking stock of the plethora of progressives who, when called before grand juries, began their

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9. Gilbert quoted in Berger, 158.

testimony by announcing that they would not answer any of the questions put to them. By refusing to answer questions of the grand jury, the witness was all but guaranteeing an 18-month prison sentence. But by refusing to answer all questions *prior to their being asked*, the witness performed a rejection of the grand jury's right to convene—an ethical *refusal* of the legal system itself, as opposed to a moral *objection* to legal excesses. Ironically, this ethical refusal shaved years off their prison sentences. If the witness had engaged the court in conversation, that is, listened to the questions and then either answered or rejected them, s/he could have served 18 months for each unanswered question for contempt of court. By announcing his/her refusal to participate in the process s/he could only be convicted on one count of contempt.

This is not to say, however, the political awareness and politics of refusal that resisted state violence of the late 1960s and 1970s developed along an increasingly enlightened, point for point pilgrim's progress. As we ascend from the commonplace into the rare, that is, from grand jury refusals of everyday progressives who risked receiving 18 months for contempt, to the trials of Black Liberation Army soldiers who refused the decorum and the discourse of the court though they faced life imprisonment for paramilitary activity—in other words, even for the ideologically unified segment of the movement committed to armed struggle—we find that the Black paramilitaries' orientation to the court resists singular and unified interpretation. Some scholars interpret their jurisprudential engagements as the *sine qua non* of a politics of refusal; others see them as being underwritten by rank reformism.

David Ray Papke is among the latter group. He argues that despite the Black Panther Party's commitment to the revolutionary overthrow of the state, a "pronounced sensitivity to legal concerns" was "central to [their] internal education program" (Papke 667). For Papke, the Panthers' interpellation by (rather than refusal of) bourgeois jurisprudence is exemplified in Huey P. Newton's eagerness to defend himself in court. Newton's rhetoric of contempt for the American legal system is hard to reconcile with his penchant to revel in debates on legal definitions and

his belief that the answers to these debates could be known and finalized.

[T]he greatest problem with the Panther's understanding of constitutional rights involved their static positivism. They seemed to think almost like white conservative right-to-bear arms zealots, that the meaning of constitutional amendments was unambiguously known. Their constitutional jurisprudence was oversimplified and reductively ahistorical. In addition, [they made] a certainty of something as fluid and complex as a constitutional right. (Papke 666-67)

In what rings as a repudiation of Papke's interpretation of Black paramilitary courtroom strategies, Evelyn Williams, Assata Shakur's attorney and aunt, writes:

Political prisoners scrutinize each motion their attorney files with an eye not for its legal competence or consequences but for its political ramifications in the overall unceasing need to expose the society in its true light, not to extricate themselves from its grip. And they refuse to be deterred by fear of the system's retaliatory might or by the hope that submission to its rules would benefit them. (Williams 84)

What Papke calls "static positivism" and an "oversimplified and reductively ahistorical" jurisprudence, Williams characterizes as an unflinching paradigmatic analysis. Paradigmatic because not only does it refuse to grant Papke's call for "constitutional complexity" essential status, *but also* because this refusal is buttressed with an added dimension: the desire to restore relational logic to the idea of the court—that is, the desire to consider the court as a political institution within a constellation of political institutions, as opposed to a sealed, hermitic space. Unflinching, because their refusal was not deterred by state violence. Representing Assata Shakur, Williams continues,

required constant adjustment from my long practiced academic and technical approach. Her assessment

of our differences was partially correct. According to her, I would not classify a forest as such until I had counted every tree, while she would recognize the obvious immediately: I was cerebral and legally knowledgeable, but not the political strategist that she was. So we made a pact: I would do my legal thing and she would do her necessary thing. (84)

The necessary thing ran the gamut from taking judges and officers of the court hostage, as Jonathan Jackson did in Marin, to refusing to stand when the judge entered the room, to commandeering the court as a liberation school, to refusing to testify or testifying in ways that shunned decorum and the rules of evidence. An example of the latter is Kuwasi Balagoon's poetic rendering of the statement he read right before he was sentenced to life imprisonment for the deaths of two police officers and a money courier during the Brinks armored car expropriation.

**Your Honor**

your honor  
since i've been convicted of murder  
and have taken time to digest  
just what that means  
after noting what it means to my family  
and how it affects people who read the newspapers  
and all  
i see now that i've made a terrible mistake!  
and didn't approach this trial  
in a respectful, deliberate or thoughtful manner  
didn't take advantage of the best legal advice  
and based my actions on irrelevant matters  
which i can see now in a much more sober mind  
had nothing to do with this case  
i must have been legally insane thinking about:  
the twenty five murders of children in atlanta since  
Wayne Williams' capture  
the recent murder of a man in boston by the police  
the recent murders of two in chicago by the police  
the shooting of a five-year-old little boy in suburban  
calif[ornia]

the lynching in alabama  
 the mob murder of a transit worker in brooklyn  
 the murders of fourteen women in boston  
 feeling that this is evidence of something  
 and that there must  
 be a lesson in all of this—I thought  
 murder was legal (Balagoon 95)

Balagoon's poem is an example of the "necessary thing" that Evelyn Williams noted—the kind of performative gesture the BLA political prisoners were famous for. It demonstrates how the court is systemically implicated in the ongoing Black holocaust. But as a *testimony* it is incomplete—not in terms of quantity, but in terms of quality. Its deepest insight is the conclusion that it reaches that the law is White, coupled with the inference that Balagoon was guilty prior to the Brinks expropriation. His innocence cannot be vouchsafed until all semblance of the law has been eradicated. The poem's closing line, "I thought murder was legal" locates the court at the end of a metonymic chain of hate crimes, and thus, politicizes the presumed impartiality of the pending violence—the life sentence about to be handed down. Such counter-hegemonic gestures are part of a process that Gramsci describes as the War of Position's isolation and emasculation of ruling class values. But the Gramscian model breaks down because the subjects of the poem (Black people) are not Gramscian subjects. From the poem we get a sense that Black people are being killed because they are Black people. This is different from the Gramscian subject who is killed because s/he goes on strike or lays siege to a factory. Another spanner in the Gramscian works is evident in the *way* the deaths are narrated. The body count Balagoon offers reads like a report on holocaust atrocities through which we get no sense of the people who existed before the holocaust or the impacts of this holocaust on their polity, their cosmology, their structures of feeling, or the capacity of their offspring to go on living.

Kuwasi Balagoon's testimony is incomplete because taxonomy can itemize atrocities but cannot bear witness to suffering, and a conceptual framework of redress is contingent upon a subject's capacity to bear witness. The structural violence that positions

Balagoon paradigmatically<sup>10</sup> makes the degree of psychic integration required in order to bear witness all but impossible, thereby undermining the status of his claims at the level of identity and, by extension, undermining his capacity to offer a testimony on trauma or a narrative of redress, be it juridical or political. I am humbled by the courage and tenacity it must have taken to use the space and time allotted to them for reading atrocities into the public record often at the expense of adjudicating the charges levied against them. But the reportage of atrocities is just that, reportage: laden with spectacle and light on sustained meditations on trauma. How can a sense of redress—juridical or political—emerge from a context where sustained meditations on trauma have no purchase?

### III. JURISPRUDENTIAL DREAMWORK

The synchronic homologies between the status of the slave and the status of Black subjectivity, are manifested diachronically as historical continuity. In other words, there are important continuities between the ethical dilemmas raised when a slave stood before the bar in the 19th century and when Black insurgents stood before the bar in the 1970s and early 1980s. The Dred Scott trials of 1847, 1850, 1852, and 1857 (the Supreme Court) are exemplary of this. One could argue that Dred Scott was pushing in the opposite direction than the BLA, that he wanted to *depoliticize* the court so that it would focus on a narrow (and just) interpretation of existing law. But I am not asserting historical continuity of courtroom strategies. The historical continuity of the Dred Scott case and the BLA trials isn't a continuity of performance but a continuity of position.

Chief Justice Taney's 1857 majority decision was an early rejoinder to the Black Liberation Army's demand, 124 years later, that their standing before the court be recognized as political rather than juridical. Taney returned Dred Scott to slavery by arguing in the opposite direction of the BLA, from the juridical to the political. Taney argues that Dred Scott has no standing

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10. Orlando Patterson's three constituent elements of slavery: natal alienation, general dishonor, and complete and open vulnerability to gratuitous violence.

as a juridical subject because he had no standing as a political subject. Justice Taney implies that there is a structural injunction precluding the court from hearing Scott's case because Blacks come from Africa, a place void of political community, and only members of political community can stand before the bar. "The question is simply this," Taney writes, "Can a negro whose ancestors were imported and sold as slaves, become a member of the political community...?"<sup>11</sup> Taney is compelled to compare the Black to the Indian as a necessary prerequisite to legitimating the court's decision to re-enslave Dred Scott. In so doing, he triangulates the dyad between the Human and the Black with the Indian.

The situation of [the Black] population was altogether unlike that of the Indian race. The latter, it is true, formed no part of the colonial communities and never amalgamated with them in social connections or in government. But although they were uncivilized, they were yet free and independent people, associated together in nations or tribes, and governed by their own laws. Many of the political communities were situated in territories to which the white race claimed the ultimate right of dominion. (*The Dred Scott Decision: Opinion of Chief Justice Taney* 4)

From the opening of Taney's tangential pursuit of Native Americans, it would seem that they constitute a defeated and denigrated identity within the Human race, de-valued Humanity as opposed to the embodiment of social death (Blacks). Taney's writing speaks of a being with subjective Presence, and of a community with the capacity for "perspective of consciousness" (Lewis Gordon): "[u]ncivilized ... yet free and independent ... associated together in nations or tribes, and governed by their own laws."<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Indians are not natively alienated because their claims to their offspring are recognized by and incorporated into the world. By extension their right to govern is acknowledged beyond their circle, which is to say their claims to

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11. *The Dred Scott Decision: Opinion of Chief Justice Taney*, page 4.

12. *Ibid.*

temporal presence are recognized. Just as their spatial presence is recognized and incorporated, which is to say their place-names have resistance in the eyes of the Other. “Many of the political communities were situated in territories to which the white race claimed the ultimate right of dominion.”

Taney goes on to impose imaginary and fantastic formulations on what heretofore in the ruling has been sober and realist prose buttressed by relational (albeit racist) logic:

...Indian Governments were regarded and treated as foreign Governments, *as much so as if an ocean had separated the red man from the white*; and their freedom has constantly been acknowledged, from the time of the first emigration to the English colonies to the present day, by the different Governments which succeeded each other. (4)

Through a process of condensation and displacement, or jurisprudential dreamwork, Taney maps the imagery of settlerism onto the body of Indigenism. Like the dreamer who brings his own water to the beach. Justice Taney has to *manufacture* an ocean out of dry land, lest the analogy between Whites and Indians crumbles.

Chief Justice Taney’s phantasmagorical and labyrinthine dreamwork labors to substantiate Native American humanity (genocide notwithstanding), in order to reinvigorate Black social isolation (the practice of chattel slavery) and Black ontological isolation (the paradigm of social death), and thereby stave off a crisis of coherence amongst Humans; a crisis of coherence which all three lower court decisions threatened, despite their opposing verdicts. The lower courts (one finding for Dred Scott, two finding against him) made the same mistake as Roman jurisprudence which declared the essence of slavery to be ownership of one human being by another. This fictive discourse gave Dred Scott the opening he needed to bring his case to court. Taney’s ruling, however, was predicated on the understanding that any person can be an object of a property relation (Patterson 22) because all people have proprietary claims and powers sunk into them



like talons (whether they be husbands, wives, or, in modern times, professional athletes), but not all people are slaves. To say, “I own my slave but I don’t own my wife” is spurious, merely a form of convention. But the subjective meaning of the convention is an essential aspect of the slave’s lack of honor. To try Dred Scott’s case by addressing the question of whether or not he was owned would be to *recognize and incorporate* him into political ontology and the legal framework of Human beings; and that, in effect, would rob ontology and, by extension, the law itself of meaning and coherence. The declaration that Africa is void of political community, coupled with the fantasy of immigration mobilized to situate, by contrast, the Indian within political community, was a vital intervention which reminded the lower courts that general dishonor and natal alienation are two of the three constitutive elements of slavery, not proprietary claims. Dred Scott has no juridical standing because he is not a member of political community; he is not a member of political community because he is a genealogical isolate; and his status as a genealogical isolate is an effect of structural violence, his subsumption by objective vertigo, a subsumption unique to his paradigmatic position. To hear his case on the basis of proprietary claims or, more to the point, *to hear it at all*, is to breach the divide between the living and the dead.

In its attempts to make suffering legible, Black politics appends itself to the loss of the subaltern. But Taney’s text throws into relief the failure of his appendage, marks it as compensatory labor that seeks to establish the coherence of prior plenitude, critiques the status of oppression in the moment, and offers an imaginary futurity—as when Black Liberation Army soldiers demanded they be recognized as political prisoners and that their trials to be moved to The Hague. But Black people cannot bear witness to the coherence of prior plenitude because their “loss” is overwhelming and irreparable—without a past, with only a body count in the present, and with desire for redress that must be channeled through conceptual frameworks and cognitive maps which crowd them out as subjects.

#### IV. IN LIEU OF MOURNING

Scaling downward from the court to the body we will be able to better understand the compulsion to list atrocities and the prohibition against reflecting upon them when the victims are Black. There is a disquieting resonance of form between the way BLA autobiographical narratives labor and the way transcripts that emerge from police interrogations labor. This resonance of form is found in the way BLA autobiographical narratives and police confessions narrate violent events; and it is most pronounced when Panthers-cum-BLA soldiers (i.e. Safiya Bukhari, Assata Shakur, Kuwasi Balagoon, George Jackson, and Eldridge Cleaver) narrate the violence levied against their bodies. It is as though the writer who, until that point in the narrative, has demonstrated political sophistication, complexity, and a unique capacity to muse on the socio-economic woes of Black people writ large, is suddenly struck with aphasia or reduced to the most unadorned and empirical patterns of speech when dramatizing assaults on her/his body; as though they are sure of neither the presence of their bodies nor the presence of an auditor were they to articulate their suffering. My reading in this context does not claim to do the corpus of BLA writings justice in terms of literary analysis proper; on the contrary, I am looking only at a rather select aspect of that literature, namely its penchant for appending itself to rhetorical strategies it cannot “rightfully” claim, and its attempts to restore balance to the inner ear by narrating violence in a manner which is crisp and austere.

As with the transcripts of interrogation confessions, those moments in BLA autobiographical writings that home in on the pained Black body tend to proceed by pruning duration. Duration is pruned by privileging action, summary and (less commonly) dialogue, the swiftest strategies of narration, over exposition, description, and transition, the slowest strategies of narration. As was the case with Balagoon’s courtroom testimony regarding the Black Holocaust, observation and taxonomies of facts and statistics take precedence over introspection, musing, and reflection when BLA paramilitaries reflect upon their own pained and violated bodies. From a Left perspective, the counter-hegemonic strategies operating in the autobiographical work of

Black revolutionaries is preferable to the fetish of the individual and the Aristotelian underpinnings of mainstream memoirs.

Black paramilitary writings are to be commended for their proclivity to subordinate the egoic individual to the collectivity of Black people on the move. However, I am arguing that these rhetorical strategies are less attributable to conscious selection and combination decisions than they are to the quandary of a Black unconscious trapped by the disorientation of violent events and disorientation constituted by a paradigm of violence which is too comprehensive for words. In Safiya Bukhari's *The War Before: The True Life Story of Becoming a Black Panther, Keeping the Faith in Prison & Fighting for Those Left Behind* we find an example of this.

I entered the store, went past the registers, down an aisle to the meat counter and started checking for all-beef products. I heard the door open, saw two of the brothers coming in, and did not give it a thought. I went back to what I was doing, but out of the corner of my left eye, I saw the manager's hand with a rifle pointed toward the door. I quickly got into an aisle just as the firing started. Up to this point, no words had been spoken. With the first lull in the shooting Kombozi Amistad (one of my body guards and a member of the Amistad Collective) came down the aisle toward me. He was wearing a full-length army coat. It was completely buttoned. As he approached, he told me he had been shot. I did not believe him at first, because I saw no blood and his weapon was not drawn. He insisted, so I told him to lie down on the floor and I would take care of it.

Masai [Ehehosi] (my co-defendant) apparently had made it out the door when the firing started because he reappeared at the door, trying to draw fire so we could get out. I saw him get shot in the face and stumble backward out the door. I looked for a way out and realized there was none. I elected to play it low key to try to get help for Kombozi as soon as possible. That effort was wasted. The manager of the store and

his son, Paul Green Sr. and Jr., stomped Kombozi to death in front of my eyes. (Bukhari 7-8)

A formal aspect of the passage that jumps out at the reader is the declarative quality of the sentences. "I entered the store..." "I heard the door open..." "I did not believe him at first..." "I saw him get shot in the face and stumble backward out the door." "That effort was wasted." The sentences neither command, nor question, nor proclaim. Even when they contain multiple clauses, their structure does not derail the basic purpose: to make a statement and share a fact.

This drives the passage forward at the expense of empathic identification with the subject of speech, Bukhari's persona. The sequencing of the passage proceeds by privileging Roland Barthes' proairetic and symbolic codes. "The proairetic code applies to any action that implies a further narrative action. For example, a gunslinger draws his gun on an adversary and we wonder what the resolution of this action will be. We wait to see if he kills his opponent or is wounded himself. Suspense is thus created by action rather than by a reader's or a viewer's wish to have mysteries explained."<sup>13</sup> The symbolic code organizes semantic meanings by way of antitheses or by way of mediations between antithetical terms. In Bukhari's passage, the symbolic code labors through the antitheses of guilt and innocence, thereby fortifying and extending the cultural code of the law, even before the shooting ends. The text's privileging of the proairetic and symbolic codes creates a hydraulics that crowds out codes of thematization that would otherwise work to slow the narrative down and bring the spoken subject into empathic view. This is also how a signed confession works. In other words, the formal aspects of Safiya Bukhari's recollection are allied with the police in a way that the revolutionary ideology and intent of her politics are not. The stakes of this paradox are thrown into relief by the fact that not only were the White father and

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13. Felluga, Dino. "Modules on Barthes: On the Five Codes." *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*. Last Update: Jan. 31, 2011. Purdue U. Accessed on April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2011. <<http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/narratology/modules/barthescodes.html>>. Also, see Barthes, Silverman, and Wayne.

son duo *not* tried and convicted for voluntary manslaughter, but when Bukhari attempted to press counter charges of murder against them the Commonwealth prosecutor told her that it was justifiable homicide; the FBI held a press conference at which they characterized Bukhari not as the victim of and witness to vigilante terror, but as someone who was “notorious, dangerous ... and known to law enforcement agencies nationwide”—as though adjectives and hearsay conform to the rules of evidence; and the judge set her bail at five million dollars for each of the five counts against her. After a “trial that lasted one day, [Bukhari] was sentenced to forty years for armed robbery” (8). That night, she was placed in the maximum-security building at the Virginia Correctional Center for Women.

Bukhari’s passage is emblematic of a kind of aphasia Black revolutionary autobiographical narratives are stricken with when they attempt to “draw the reader into an identificatory relationship with their pained speaking bodies” (Broeck 205). Discourse demands readers who will identify with the subjects it projects, but in Bukhari’s passage there are only two subjects worthy of such identification, Paul Green Sr. and his son Paul Green Jr. Bukhari’s narrative must proceed, therefore, by means of pornotroping Black victims. In other words, the Black subject’s suffering is paraded (as opposed to engaged and reflected upon) so as to provide “stimulans and satisfaction for a ... readerly voyeuristic gaze” (Ibid.).<sup>14</sup> In this way, narratives of Black suffering mimic not only the narrative strategies of police confessions, but the editing strategies of Hollywood cinema, as well; editing strategies in which spectators are treated to a scene of Black mutilation and death and, once the body is inert, the film cuts to a scene which suspends reflection on that mutilation and death.<sup>15</sup> Narrative strategies of pruning duration and editing strategies which fixate on spectacle at the expense of reflection are symptomatic of a bond between the murderous anti-Black projections of civil society and the emancipatory narratives of

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14. Broeck summarizes a concept, “pornotroping,” which Hortense Spillers inaugurated in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.”

15. Wilderson, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, especially the chapters on *Monster’s Ball*.

BLA soldiers, what David Marriott describes as bonding over a phobic response to the Black imago. Furthermore, they highlight the difficulty in determining where White filiation ends and state affiliation begins.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon argues that there “is no disproportion between the life of the family and the life of the nation” (*BSWM* 142); and, he adds, the male child attains selfhood by challenging his father in an Oedipal struggle that prepares him for the competitive and aggressive demands of life as an adult. But how is this aggression worked through so as not to implode the nation from within? “Collective catharsis” is Fanon’s explanation: “a channel, an outlet through which the forces accumulated in the form of aggression can be released” (*BSWM* 145). The examples he gives range from children’s games to psychodramas in group therapy to popular cinema; cultural objects produced “by white men for little white men” to facilitate rituals of collective release (*BSWM* 146).

Paul Green Sr.’s and Paul Green Jr.’s murder of a wounded Black body is one such ritual which, like lynching, allows for this collective release and vouchsafes the stability of civil society. Blacks “must die,” writes Marriott, “so that the aggressive structure of white repression and sublimation of libidinal drives can remain in place” (Marriott, “Bonding over Phobia,” 428). Here, repressed hatred of the White father (both Greens can suffer such repression) is satisfied by the real and symbolic murder of Blacks. “This allowed positive feeling for the father to remain intact, while ambivalent emotional ties to the father were allowed to appear—as a cultural and unconscious fantasy of racial intrusion—through substitute objects” (*Ibid.*). Small wonder the Commonwealth prosecutor responded to Safiya Bukhari’s desire to press counter charges as though it was a lethal assault on the family. And the reciprocal thought that Bukhari, Kombozi, and Eehosi come from and can constitute families is unthinkable for both Bukhari and the state.

This may account for the tyranny of closure which stalks Bukhari’s passage; that is, the classical sequencing of narrative which contains few distractions, very little description, and

limited transitions, and thus works as an injunction against “an identificatory relationship with their pained bodies” (Broeck 205). This injunction does not simply rear its ugly head at the end of the narrative, but has been operating throughout: Bukhari cannot mourn during the murder itself for fear the Greens might include her in their ritual; and nor could she mourn in the immediate aftermath of it, for she needed all of her energies to press counter charges on behalf of Kombozi and deal with her own trial. But later, in the moment of narration when there is a lull in the assaults, in the time and space of writing—here, injunctions against mourning still stand.

Before continuing, I must tender my confession. My status as a sentient being who is not a Human being, someone who cannot be recognized by and incorporated into the world, someone who exists to facilitate the renewal of others, has *shaped* the rhetorical strategies of my analysis just as it shaped the rhetorical strategies of BLA testimonies. I cropped Safiya Bukhari’s passage so as to omit the reasons Bukhari and the Amistad Collective were out that night. They were on their way to the countryside to practice night shooting. On their way to Mississippi they were to have stopped in Georgia where all Safiya tells us is that she was to rendezvous with persons unnamed. In short, they may have been on a mission. I thought it wise not to lead with this. Just as I omitted all but passing reference to the BLA’s spate of paramilitary operations, as when they drove by a crowd of mourners outside a San Francisco church where a police funeral was being held and lobbed a grenade. Nor did I address the question as to whether or not Bukhari was involved in the liberation of Assata Shakur from a maximum security prison and Shakur’s subsequent escape to Cuba. I could say that I did not establish their bona fides as an army of liberation for fear that might clutter my exegesis of Bukhari’s passage and make of me a shoddy scholar; that I did not reflect on how they laid hold to the violence which exceeds and anticipates them because I had my reader in mind; a reader who looks more like the Greens than anyone else.

## V. THE WAR WITHIN

Ritual murders which purge White aggressivity subtend Bukhari's impeded mourning and my dissembling scholarship, despite the fact that the filial cleansing and affilial stability proffered by the Black imago's intrusion as a phobic object does not cut both ways. The Black psyche emerges within a context of force, or structural violence, which is not analogous to the emergence of White or non-Black psyches. The upshot of this emergence is that the Black psyche is in a perpetual war with itself because it is usurped by a White gaze that hates the Black imago and wants to destroy it. The Black self is a divided self or, better, it is a juxtaposition of hatred projected toward a Black imago and love for a White ideal: hence the state of war (Marriott, "Fanon's War"). This state of being at war forecloses upon the possession of elements constitutive of psychic integration: bearing witness (to suffering), atonement, naming and recognition, representation. As such, one cannot represent oneself, even *to* oneself as a bona fide political subject, as a subject of redress. Black political ontology is foreclosed in the unconscious just as it is foreclosed in the court. "[I]t may not be too fanciful to suggest," Marriott writes, "that the black ego, far from being too immature or weak to integrate, is an absence haunted by its and others' negativity. In this respect the memory of loss is its only possible communication" (425). It is important to note that loss is an effect of temporality; it implies a syntagmatic chain that absence cannot apprehend. Marriott's psychoanalytic inquiries work through the word "loss" in order to demonstrate the paucity of its explanatory power. Again, loss indicates a prior plenitude, absence does not.

Marriott explains how we *all* work together, how we *all* bond over the Black imago as phobic object, that we might form a psychic community even though we cannot form political community. He does so by recalling that exemplary moment in *Black Skin, White Masks*, when Fanon sees himself through the eyes of a White boy who cries in terror, "Look a Negro!"

Symbolically, Fanon knows that any black man could have triggered the child's fantasy of being devoured



that attaches itself to a fear of blackness, for this fear signifies the “racial epidermal schema” of Western culture—the unconscious fear of being literally consumed by the black other. Neither the boy nor Fanon seems able to avoid this schema, moreover, for culture determines and maintains the imago associated with blackness; cultural fantasy allows Fanon and the boy to form a bond through racial antagonism. (“Bonding over Phobia” 420)

This phobia is comprised of affective responses, sensory reactions or presubjective constellations of intensities, as well as representational responses, such as the threatening imago of a fecal body which portends contamination. And this affective/representational performance is underwritten by paradigmatic violence; which is to say the fantasy secures what Marriott calls “its objective value” because it lives within violence too pervasive to describe.<sup>16</sup> “The picture of the black psyche that emerges from” this intrusion “is one that is always late, never on time, violently presented and fractured by these moments of specular intrusion” (“Bonding over Phobia” 420). The overwhelming psychic alienation that emerges from the literal fear and trembling of the White boy when Fanon appears, accompanied by “the foul language that despoils...is traumatic for” the Black psyche. One comes to learn that when one appears, one brings with one the threat of cannibalism. “What a thing,” writes Fanon, “to have eaten one’s father!” (*BSWM*). And the Black psyche retains the memory of that eternal White “fear of being eaten ... [and] turned into shit by an organic communion with the black body ... [This] is one of the most depressing and melancholic fantasies ensuing from the psychodynamics of intrusion” (“Bonding over Phobia” 421).

Again, though this is a bond between Blacks and Whites, it is produced by a violent intrusion that does not cut both ways. Whereas the phobic bond is an injunction against Black psychic integration and Black filial and affilial relations, it is the life blood

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16. Marriott, “Lynching and Photography.” In *On Black Men*.

of White psychic integration and filial (which is to say domestic) and affilial (or institutional) relations.

To add to this horror, when we scale up from the cartography of the mind to the terrain of armed struggle and the political trials, we may be faced with a situation in which the eradication of the generative mechanism of Black suffering is something that is not in *anyone's* interest. Eradication of the generative mechanisms of Black suffering explored in this article, is not in the interest of the court, as Justice Taney demonstrates as his ruling mobilizes the fantasy of immigration to situate the Native American within political community and to insure the African's standing as a genealogical isolate. Taney's majority decision suggests that juridical and political standing, like subjectivity itself, are not constituted by positive attributes but by their capacity to sidestep niggerization. Nor is the eradication of the generative mechanisms of Black suffering in the interests of the White political prisoners such as David Gilbert and Judith Clark, Kuwasi Balagoon's codefendants—their ideological opposition to the court, capitalism, and imperialism notwithstanding, because such ideological oppositions mark conflicts *within* the world rather than an antagonism *to* the world. Eradication of the generative mechanisms of Black suffering would mean the end of the world and they would find themselves peering into an abyss (or incomprehensible transition) between epistemes; between, that is, the body of ideas that determine that knowledge that is intellectually certain at any particular time. In other words, they would find themselves suspended between worlds. This trajectory is too iconoclastic for working class, postcolonial, and/or radical feminist conceptual frameworks. The Human need to be liberated *in* the world is not the same as the Black need to be liberated *from* the world; which is why even their most radical cognitive maps draw borders between the living and the dead. *Finally, if we push Marriott's findings to the wall, it becomes clear that eradication of the generative mechanisms of Black suffering is also not in the interests of Black revolutionaries.* For how can we disimbricate Black juridical and political desire from the Black psyche's desire to destroy the Black imago, a desire which constitutes the psyche? In short, bonding with Whites and non-Blacks over phobic reactions to the Black imago provides the Black psyche with the only semblance of

psychic integration it is likely to have: the need to destroy a Black imago *and* love a White ideal. “In these circumstances, having a ‘white’ unconscious may be the only way to connect with—or even contain—the overwhelming and irreparable sense of loss. The intruding fantasy offers the medium to connect with the lost internal object, the ego, but there is also no ‘outside’ to this ‘real fantasy’ and the effects of intrusion are irreparable” (“Bonding over Phobia” 426). This raises the question, who is the speaking subject of Black insurgent testimony? Who bears witness when the Black insurgent takes the stand? Black political horizons are singularly constrained, because the process through which the Black unconscious emerges and through which Black people form psychic community with Humans is the very process which bars Black people from political community.

## CONCLUSION

Many pacifist scholars and activists consider the strategies and tactics of armed revolutionaries in First World countries to be short-sighted bursts of narcissism.<sup>17</sup> What pacifist detractors forget, however, is that for Gramsci, the strategy of a War of Position is one of commandeering civic and political spaces one trench at a time in order to turn those spaces into pedagogic locales for the dispossessed; and this process is one which combines peaceful as well as violent tactics as it moves the struggle closer to an all-out violent assault on the state. The BLA and their White revolutionary co-defendants may have been better Gramscians than those who critique them through the lens of Gramsci. Their tactics (and by tactics I mean armed struggle as well as courtroom performances) were no less effective at winning hearts and minds than candle light vigils and “orderly” protests. If the end-game of Gramscian struggle is the isolation and emasculation of the ruling classes’ ensemble of questions, as a way to alter the structure of feeling of the dispossessed so that the next step, the violent overthrow of the state, doesn’t *feel* like such a monumental undertaking, then I would argue the

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17. See, for example, Jeremy Varon’s “The Excesses and Limits of Revolutionary Violence,” in *Bringing the War Home...*; and John Castelucci’s *Big Dance: The Untold Story of Weather-Man Kathy Boudin and the Terrorist Family that Committed the Brinks Robbery Murders*. New York: Dodd Mead, 1986.

pedagogic value of retaliating against police by killing one of them each time they kill a Black person, the expropriating of bank funds from armored cars in order to further finance armed struggle as well as community projects such as acupuncture clinics in the Bronx where drug addicts could get clean, and the bombing of major centers of U.S. commerce and governance, followed by trials in which the defendants used the majority of the trial to critique the government rather than plead their case, have as much if not more pedagogic value than peaceful protest. In other words, if not for the “pathological pacifism” (Churchill) which clouds political debate and scholarly analysis there would be no question that the BLA, having not even read Gramsci,<sup>18</sup> were among the best Gramscian theorists the U.S. has ever known. But though the BLA were great Gramscian theorists, they could not become Gramscian subjects. The political character of one’s actions is inextricably bound to the political status of one’s subjectivity; and while this status goes without saying for Gilbert and Clark, it is always in question for Balagoon and Bukhari.

How does one calibrate the gap between objective vertigo and the need to be productive as a Black revolutionary? What is the political significance of restoring balance to the inner ear? Is tyranny of closure the only outcome of such interventions or could restoration of the Black subject’s inner ear, while failing at the level of conceptual framework, provide something necessary, though intangible, at the level of blood and sweat political activism? These unanswered questions haunt this article. Though I have erred in this article on the side of paradigm as opposed to praxis, and cautioned against assuming that we know or can know what the harvest of their sacrifice was, I believe we are better political thinkers—if not actors—as a result of what they did with their bodies, even if we still don’t know what to do with ours.

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18. The first 500 pages of Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* were not translated into English until the 1970s, when the BLA was underground; but Gramsci strategies and sensibilities are infused in their practices and theorizing.

# VIII.

## THE *VEL* OF SLAVERY: TRACKING THE FIGURE OF THE UNSOVEREIGN

2014

Jared Sexton

The *vel* returns in the form of a *velle*. That is the end of the operation. Now for the process.

—Jacques Lacan, ‘Position of the Unconscious’

### INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2011, the Department of Equity Studies and the Centre for Feminist Research at York University in Toronto hosted a three-day international conference entitled ‘Our Legacy: Indigenous-African Relations Across the Americas’. Professor Bonita Lawrence initiated the event after publishing a pair of articles on the principal theme (Lawrence and Dua, 2005; Amadahy and Lawrence, 2009).<sup>1</sup> This and similar gatherings of late suggest that the emergent political-intellectual discourse in the North American context regarding ‘communities of color and their relationship to settler colonialism’ (Jafri, 2012) is driven more precisely by an abiding concern, or anxiety, about the

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1. See the official website: <http://www.yorku.ca/laps/des/conference/index.html>. The conference, held 29 April–1 May 2011, featured presentations and performances by over 50 participants. For a critical response to Lawrence and Dua (2005) see Sharma and Wright (2008). The latter argument makes important conceptual distinctions between and among immigrants, settlers and colonists, but does not resolve the problem pursued below.

position and function of African-derived people. It has to do with a formulation of the fundamental relations between racial slavery and settler colonialism in the development of global modernity (Dirlik, 2007). Insofar as such interests are geared toward an engagement with struggles for abolition and reconstruction, on the one hand, and decolonization and resurgence, on the other, they invariably highlight ‘the paradoxical nature of freedom in Indian Territory’ (Saunt, 2004).

I adumbrate below the intervention of indigenous scholars and their allies on the theory and practice of anti-racism in the contemporary United States and Canada. I attempt to discern several convoluted elements: 1) a folk concept of racial slavery with a truncated account of its historical formation (in which slavery is reduced to a species of coerced migration and forced labor instituted in the 17th century), 2) an elision of slaveholding and the dissemination of anti-blackness among Native peoples throughout the continent (in which Indian slavery is either ignored or marginalized and anti-blackness is conflated with colonial white supremacy), 3) a liberal political narrative of emancipation and enfranchisement immune to the history of black radicalism (in which the post-bellum achievement of black citizenship, or ‘civil rights’, is both taken for granted and mistaken for the substantive demands of ‘freedom, justice and equality’), and 4) a misidentification of black inhabitation with white and other non-black settlement under the colonial heading (in which ‘the fact of blackness’ is disavowed and the fundamental racism of colonialism is displaced by the land-based contest of nations). These elements draw from and contribute to the discourse of post-racialism by diminishing or denying the significance of race in thinking about the relative structural positions of black and non-black populations, not in order to assert the colorblind justice of American or Canadian society or to extol the respective virtues and vices of ‘model’ and ‘problem’ minorities, but rather to establish the contrasting injustice of their settler colonial relations with indigenous peoples. The convolution has been suggestive—even symptomatic—and the sustained encounter is long overdue or long underway, depending on the vantage. The argument below could be considered a symptomatic reading of the problematic of sovereignty as an element of (settler) decolonization. It is

motivated by a desire for (settler) decolonization without, and against, sovereignty. To that end, we might consider Black Studies as the field of interpretation in relation to the discourse of Native Studies at the point where the latter loses touch with itself and unconscious knowledge emerges as interference in the logic of theoretical elaboration. ‘Some critics will take it on themselves to remind us that this proposition has a converse. I say that this is false’ (Fanon, 2008: 83).<sup>2</sup>

## UNSETTLING DECOLONIZATION

Native Studies in the North American academy has attained critical mass in the last generation and commands growing attention across the interdisciplinary humanities and social sciences as scholars rethink their research and teaching protocols in response to the emergent scholarship and the collective pressure exerted by native scholars, students and communities. There are in Canada and the USA at present more than half a dozen peer-reviewed academic journals published by major university presses and nearly 30 programs of advanced study leading to graduate certificates, master’s degrees or doctorates.<sup>3</sup> Over the preceding two decades, a new generation of scholars trained within or in relation to the Native Studies programs established since the 1960s has come of age, producing a steady stream of book-length studies and edited collections. While the focus here is regional, it bears repeating that the intellectual enterprise has long been *global*, linking scholars throughout the Americas to those in Africa and Asia, the Antipodes and the Pacific Islands.

The fruition of Native Studies represents, among other things, the institutional inscription of the Fourth World in academic

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2. On the symptom, see Lacan (2006): ‘they do not see that the unconscious *only has meaning in the Other’s field*; still less do they see the consequences thereof: that it is not the effect of *meaning* that is operative in interpretation, but rather the articulation in the symptom of signifiers (*without any meaning at all*) that have gotten caught up in it’ (714, emphasis added). On symptomatic reading and the problematic, see Althusser and Balibar (1997), especially Part I.

3. For overviews of the field see Mihesuah and Wilson (2004), Kidwell and Velie (2005), and Kuokkanen (2007).

discourse.<sup>4</sup> The Fourth World, as concept and movement, indicates a critique of the limitations of the anti-colonial politics of Third Worldism and a reassertion of an internally differentiated indigenous life-world that precedes and exceeds the tripartite division of the earth.<sup>5</sup> As a matter of practical-theoretical activity in the production of knowledge, Native Studies marks an intervention upon the study of colonialism in the most general sense, establishing and refining the primary distinction between its metropolitan and settler forms. Put differently, it is an analytic *differentiation* of colonialism and settler colonialism. One of the clearest formulations of this position is provided in the work of Lorenzo Veracini (2010) and in the scholarship gathered together under his founding editorship at the journal *Settler Colonial Studies*.<sup>6</sup>

Veracini (2011) uses the introduction to the inaugural issue to outline what he terms ‘a proper appraisal of settler colonialism in its specificity’, based upon the following premise: ‘Colonizers and settler colonizers want essentially different things’ (p. 1). These essentially different wants produce structurally divergent fundamental directives. Whereas the colonizer demands of the native ‘you, work for me’, the settler colonizer demands of the native ‘you, go away’. Surely, colonialism and settler colonialism can and often do coexist within the same social formation, and even the same agent or agency with a particular order can issue colonial and settler colonial demands at once or in turn. But this

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4. See Manuel and Posluns (1974), McFarlane (1993) and, generally, the work of the Center for World Indigenous Studies, including its publication *The Fourth World Journal*. For discussion of indigenous women in relation to the Fourth World concept see Lewallen (2003).

5. For recent treatments of the ‘Three Worlds’ concept and Third Worldism see Berger (2009) and Prashad (2007).

6. *Settler Colonial Studies* (Taylor & Francis: London) was founded in 2011. On the history of US settler colonialism see Hixson (2013). I should add that this article does not address the emergent scholarship of Tiffany King (2014), who rightly argues that anti-blackness, and more specifically the production of black fungibility, is constitutive to settler colonialism. I hope to say something about her important intervention in subsequent work. Suffice it to say that it is not only settler colonialism that requires the material and symbolic production of fungible black bodies, but also, as I suggest herein, the political discourse and imagination of settler decolonization and native sovereignty.



empirical coincidence does not dissolve the need for analytic differentiation. More to the point, if the divergent spatiotemporal and relational logics of colonialism and settler colonialism cannot be fully comprehended, then the respective political-intellectual projects of decolonization and settler decolonization cannot be broached.

Veracini establishes that settler colonialism has been theoretically subsumed beneath the conceptual rubric of colonialism. As a result, the historical and geographical parameters of colonization become truncated and the political dimensions of the former situation—and longstanding, ongoing resistance to it—become illegible. For instance, the racial logic of colonialism tends to insist on permanent and unbridgeable differences between ‘the colonizer and the colonized’, to borrow the title of Albert Memmi’s famous 1957 text. Accordingly, the preoccupation of the colonial order falls upon the segregation and exclusion of the native population from the mainstream institutions of the colony, except for token positions of quasi-authority, in order to continue the colonizer’s domination—a relation that Jean-Paul Sartre described, in his introduction to Memmi’s treatise, as a ‘relentless reciprocity’ (Memmi, 2003: 24). This fundamental division between the colonizer and the colonized is pursued in the historic instance through the production and reproduction of racial difference (Fanon, 2004).<sup>7</sup>

The colonial paradigm preserves the colonizer and the colonized as categories of racial difference and maintains the populations in that state, even when relations of production for the political and libidinal economies of colonialism request or require the deployment of genocidal violence. The spatiotemporal logic of colonialism is permanent division in service of hierarchy and the relational logic of what Fanon identifies as colonialism’s characteristically stalled or frozen dialectic is one of interminable encounter (‘something that wants itself ongoing’). Decolonization in this context entails breaking the colonial relation, ending the encounter, and removing the colonizer from the territory in order

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7. See Wilderson (2010) for an attempt to rethink the racial logic of colonialism, described by Fanon as the disavowed racial logic of slavery, which is to say anti-blackness.

to destroy the zoning that creates spaces for different ‘species’ and enables such massive exploitation. In this, decolonization destroys the positions of both the colonizer and the colonized.

Settler colonialism, by contrast, seeks over time to eliminate the categories of colonizer and colonized through a process by which the former replaces the latter completely, usurping the claim to indigenous residence. ‘You, go away’ can mean the removal of the native population, its destruction through direct killing or the imposition of unlivable conditions, its assimilation into the settler colonial society, or some combination of each. As under the colonial paradigm, settler colonialism may deploy techniques for the production of racial difference, but it need not assume the strong form of permanent division. Likewise, settler colonialism may exploit the labor of the colonized en route, but the disappearance of the native is its *raison d’être*. The spatiotemporal logic of settler colonialism is transience in service of demographic substitution and its relational logic is one of radical non-encounter (‘something that wants itself terminated’). Decolonization in this context entails articulating the colonial relation, revealing the encounter, and transforming the elementary terms of cohabitation. In this, *settler* decolonization destroys the positions of both the colonizer and the colonized.

However, we should underline a crucial difference between decolonization and settler decolonization. While it is true that decolonization seeks to undermine the conditions of possibility of colonialism, in expelling the colonizer—rather than eliminating him *as* colonizer—it holds open the possibility of return in the form of neo-colonialism. Settler decolonization, in turn, seeks to undermine the conditions of possibility of settler colonialism, but its trajectory involves consequences that are more severe, as it were, because the colonizer, having taken root on conquered land, must stay and live under a new dispensation. Undergoing conversion to native lifeways and submitting to native sovereignty and its related modes of governance, the erstwhile colonizer ceases to exist *as* colonizer, having been either taken in by the native community and/or repositioned, materially and symbolically, as a migrant engaged in an open-ended practice of reconciliation. Indeed, ‘the struggle against settler colonialism must aim to keep

the settler-indigenous relationship ongoing' in order to transform both of the operative terms and not only the relation itself (Veracini, 2011: 7).

This may seem like settler decolonization provides a non-violent alternative to the violence of decolonization, but to frame things in this way would be to miss the point entirely. The settler colonial paradigm that informs Native Studies does not only demand specificity in our understanding of colonialism. This is not, in other words, a conceptual distinction among previously conflated varieties or forms of colonialism, but rather the analytic differentiation of heterogeneous political phenomena. Settler colonialism is not a particularly extreme form of colonialism. More to the point, in the space forged by the theoretical object of settler colonialism, in its delineation with respect to colonialism, a *radicalization* of decolonization is enabled and, in my view, that radicalization *is* settler decolonization. As a result of discrepant material conditions, settler decolonization must need not only, like decolonization, reclaim land and resources, assert the sovereignty of the indigenous people, protect or renew decolonial forms of collective life, and establish or reestablish decolonial forms of governance; but also, unlike decolonization, *pursue* the settler and undercut the very basis of his capacity and even his desire to rule. The project might be phrased as a re-articulation of Captain Richard Pratt's old Indian-hating maxim: kill the settler in him, and save the man. The analysis of settler colonialism developed within Native Studies is less a friendly amendment or point of clarification for the analysis of colonialism in general—simply broadening its scope—and more a critique and a challenge to contemplate a more profound liberation altogether.

## DECOLONIZING ANTI-RACISM

Settler decolonization pursues liberation in and as indigenous resurgence, and obstacles to that resurgence, whether structural or ideological, must be confronted. Here, the critique of colonialism rehearsed above redounds upon the indigenous critique of anti-racism.<sup>8</sup> From within the conceptual apparatus

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8. It redounds upon the indigenous critique of feminism as well (Arvie et al., 2013).

attendant to the 2011 'Our Legacy' conference, thinking about 'Indigenous-African relations' in the North American context means, above all, challenging 'the manner in which antiracism in Canada [and the USA] excludes Indigenous peoples'. This exclusion is far more than oversight; it indicates misrecognition of the nature of the state against which anti-racist politics is organized and to which the demands of anti-racist politics are addressed. Because Canada and the USA are settler colonial states, any progressive reform of relations with non-native black populations at best fails to disrupt that prior settler colonial situation and at worst serves to entrench its power and further conceal its basic facts. Anti-racism that is not grounded in the movement for settler decolonization is constrained to a politics whose 'horizon of ... aspiration largely is full inclusion in the nation as citizens' (Rikfin, 2009: 102). That is, anti-racism without indigenous leadership is a wager for black junior partnership in the settler colonial state.

Bonita Lawrence and Enakshi Dua (2005) are clear on several interrelated points to this end: First, any 'dialogue between antiracism theorists/activists and Indigenous scholars/communities requires talking on Indigenous terms' (p. 137). Second, anti-racism must find a way 'to place antiracist agendas within the context of sovereignty and restoration of land', a practice that requires learning 'how to write, research, and teach in ways that account for Indigenous realities as foundational' (p. 137). Third, the 'pluralistic method of presenting diverse views' must yield to a 'synthesis' that takes on 'Indigenous epistemological frameworks and values' (p. 137). For these authors, this is the way by which African Americans (in the hemispheric sense of the Americas) can transform themselves from settlers to allies 'in the interests of a deeper solidarity' (Amadahy and Lawrence, 2009: 105).

Let me add that I find no problem with the synthetic gesture that rejects the 'pluralistic method of presenting diverse views'. The impetus behind the demand for black people to adopt indigenous ontology, epistemology and ethics, to speak on indigenous terms, and to situate their politics within the context of sovereignty is consistent with the movement for settler decolonization described

above. In other words, settler decolonization sees in anti-racism the same pitfalls it sees in decolonization: both leave the colonizer intact and may even rely upon his continued existence for matters of recognition and redistribution. This point goes some way in explaining why there is a strong current *within* Native Studies cautioning its audience to avoid emulating black political struggle insofar as it is restricted to anti-racist aims.<sup>9</sup> The advice offered to native people and the critique and challenge posed to non-native black people (or to black people pursuing decolonization elsewhere) are recto and verso of a single axiom: ‘emancipatory potential’ is to be found in ‘the possibility of the return of a land-based existence’ (Waziyatawin, 2012: 82). Democratizing the settler colony as belatedly enfranchised citizens and subjects, or simply creating distance between colonizer and colonized without cancelling both terms, is to forfeit the possibility of genuine freedom for all while contributing to the destruction of ‘the lands, waters, and ecosystems upon which [native] people [and ultimately all life] must survive’ (p. 68). Hence:

To acknowledge that we all share the same land base and yet to question the differential terms on which it is occupied is to become aware of the colonial project that is taking place around us. (Lawrence and Dua, 2005: 126)

If the keywords of Native Studies are *resistance* (to settler colonial society and the global industrial civilization that comprises it) and *resurgence* (of native ways of life in and for our time) and if the source of both is a form of *self*-recognition among indigenous peoples—‘with the understanding that our cultures have much to teach the Western world about the establishment of relationships

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9. See, for instance, Coulthard (2007). For Coulthard, Fanon is right that the politics of recognition is a dead-end, yet he is nonetheless ‘ultimately mistaken regarding violence being the “perfect mediation” through which the colonized come to liberate themselves from both the structural and psycho-affective features of colonial domination’ (p. 455). Black thought can, in this way, inform and inspire, but not *orient* indigenous politics. [Editors’ Note: See Coulthard’s 2014 book *Red Skin, White Masks*, wherein the main argument is to categorically reject the liberal, recognition-based approach to Indigenous self-determination. See also Day, “Being or Nothingness” for a response to this article.]

within and between peoples and the natural world that are profoundly non-imperialist' (Coulthard, 2007: 456)—then it stands to reason that black-native solidarity would pivot upon black people's willingness 'to provide material and moral support to ... the Indigenous movement on Turtle Island' (Amadahy and Lawrence, 2009: 128). Solidarity here does not mean reciprocity. Because it is claimed that the 'majority of diasporic Black struggles ... want equity *within* the laws, economy, and institutions of the colonial settler state' (p. 128, emphasis added), there is little to be gained from the indigenous encounter with blacks.

Are native calls for black solidarity simply expedient in a situation of settler colonialism? My sense is that there is something more complicated, and concerning, at work. If one surveys the writing on black-native solidarity in the field of Native Studies, one finds frequent reference to histories of shared struggle, strategic alliance, and cohabitation in place of or alongside acknowledgment of histories of Indian slavery, ongoing exclusion of black-native people, and pervasive anti-black racism. In drawing up the historical balance sheet this way, scholars suggest there is ground for black-native solidarity in the present. Even where there is no denial or minimization of the history of Indian slavery, even where native anti-black racism is recognized and the struggles of black-native people are affirmed, an argument is forwarded that solidarity in this moment can be retrieved from the past and refashioned for the future. In this sense, native peoples are seeking to reunite with lost allies, namely, those enslaved Africans from the early colonial period who demonstrated a 'a spiritual worldview, land-informed practices, and were held together by kinship structures which created relationships that allocated everyone a role in the community' (p. 127). This is political solidarity derived from 'cultural similarities'.

The implications of this claim are considerable. If black-native solidarity is founded upon shared indigenous worldviews, practices and kinship structures, then the prerequisite for black people to move, politically and ethically, from settlers to allies 'in the interest of a deeper solidarity' with native people is, in a word, *re-indigenization*. In so doing, black people on the North American scene not only become politically relevant to settler

decolonization but also, en route, redress ‘the true horror of slavery’—the loss of culture:

Diasporic Black struggles, with some exceptions, do not tend to lament the loss of Indigeneity and the trauma of being ripped away from the land that defines their very identities. From Indigenous perspectives, the true horror of slavery was that it has created generations of ‘de-culturalized’ Africans, denied knowledge of language, clan, family, and land base, denied even knowledge of who their nations are. (Amadahy and Lawrence, 2009: 127)

From indigenous perspectives, diasporic black struggles would, first and foremost, need to lament the loss of indigeneity that slavery entails, a process that requires acknowledging that the loss is both historic and ongoing. This would be a more proper post-traumatic response than ‘internalizing colonial concepts of how peoples relate to land, resources, and wealth’ (p. 127). However, what becomes curious upon even the briefest reflection is the fact that ‘denied knowledge of language, clan, family, and land base’—and the consequent temptation toward ‘internalizing colonial concepts’—is precisely what native resistance and resurgence is struggling against to this day. To wit: ‘I believe that the systematic disconnection (and dispossession) of Indigenous Peoples from our homelands is the defining characteristic of colonization’ (Waziyatawin, 2012: 72). So, de-culturalization, or loss of indigeneity, is a general condition of black and native peoples, not one that native people can restrict to black people in order to offer (or withhold) sympathies.

The structuring difference between settler colonization and enslavement is to be found precisely in the latter’s denial of ‘knowledge of who their nations are’—that is, *deracination*. On this count, the loss of indigeneity for native peoples can be named and its recovery pursued, and that pursuit can (and must) become central to political mobilization. The loss of indigeneity for black peoples can be acknowledged only abstractly and its recovery is lost to history, and so something else must (and can) become central to political mobilization. Not the dialectics of loss and

recovery but rather the loss of the dialectics of loss and recovery as such, a politics with no (final) recourse to foundations of any sort, a politics forged from critical resources immanent to the situation, resources from anywhere and anyone, which is to say from nowhere and no one *in particular*.

From indigenous perspectives, this baseless politics can only ever be a liability. Without a base, which is to say a land base, a politics of resistance can only succumb to ‘civilization’s fallacies and destructive habits’. The quest for equality is perhaps the most pernicious of those fallacies. The conclusion of this line of thinking is that, due to ‘the trauma of being ripped away from the land that defines their very identities’, landless black people in diaspora cannot mount genuine resistance to the settler colonial state and society; they can only be held apart from it *as slaves*. Which is to say that, without the benefits of a land-base and absent the constitutive exclusion of slavery, blacks are destined to become white, and thus *settlers*, in thought and action and, moreover, have effectively become so post-emancipation.<sup>10</sup> But rather than argue that black people in North America do, in fact, have significant, if attenuated, indigenous worldviews, practices and kinship structures or, in any case, can learn such from others in order to begin fighting the *good* fight; I submit we must consider the possibility that 1) the ‘Black Diasporic struggles’ under examination are irreducible to anti-racism, 2) that anti-racism is irreducible to demands upon the state, and 3) that demands upon the state are irreducible to statist politics.<sup>11</sup> Blacks need not be indigenous and/or enslaved Africans in order to be allies to native peoples in the Americas, whatever that might mean. And I say all of this without need of mentioning the ‘notable

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10. As a rule, Native Studies reproduces the dominant liberal political narrative of emancipation and enfranchisement. See, for example, Cook-Lynn (1997). For a critique of emancipation that distinguishes it from the abolition of slavery see Binder (1995). See also, generally, Hartman (1997).

11. Smith (2013) acknowledges ‘it may be possible to strategically engage the US political system without granting it legitimacy’ (p. 366), but on this count it only seems to be true in the case of native peoples. Whenever black civil rights are addressed, they are reduced to bids for inclusion in state and civil society and capable of producing, at best, a form of liberal multiculturalism based upon a bankrupt politics of recognition.



exceptions' otherwise known as the black radical tradition.<sup>12</sup> What if there are, and will have always been, ways to pursue settler decolonization otherwise than as indigenous peoples and their immigrant allies, a movement from *within* that slavery whose abolition is yet to come?

Of course, not all Native Studies scholars adhere to this cultural criterion of political solidarity. But even among those attempting to coordinate struggles among black and native peoples on a political basis, related problems arise. The contributions of Andrea Smith in the last decade are perhaps most generative on this note (Smith, 2006, 2010, 2012, 2013). In a series of recent articles, Smith proposes one way to reframe the relational field of 'people of color' in North American political culture by thinking through the multiple logics of white supremacy, in relation to the enforcement of normative gender and sexuality, as a sort of permutation. The author thus nominates the three pillars: Slavery/Capitalism, Genocide/Colonialism, and Orientalism/War (Smith, 2010). We might recast them here as Racial Slavery, Settler Colonialism, and Orientalism, with the understanding that all are coeval, at least, with the history of capitalism. Each pillar operates according to a respective logic: the proprietary logic of slavery (through which captive Africans are rendered property of slaveholders and regarded as such by the larger society), the genocidal logic of settler colonialism (through which indigenous peoples are dispossessed of land, water and resources and made to disappear *as* indigenous peoples), and the militarist logic of Orientalism (through which the people of Asia, the Middle East, and eventually Latin America are constructed as inferior, yet threatening 'civilizations' subjected to imperial warfare and its domestic ramifications).

The aim of this tripartite scheme is to illustrate for each pillar how those inhabiting its logic might become complicit in the victimization of those inhabiting the other; the object is the fostering of strategic alliances across multiple axes of power, rather than a politics based on notions of shared victimhood

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12. The seminal study of the black radical tradition is, of course, Robinson (2000). For recent additional sources see Davies (2007), Kelley (2002), and Ransby (2005).

along a single axis. For present purposes, we are prompted to develop approaches to political struggle that address *both* the indigenous/settler binary *and* the slave/master binary, working for settler decolonization while dismantling the hierarchy established by racial slavery. And these movements would be set about in tandem with the movement to end American imperialism abroad. Smith's formulation seeks to ascertain the fundamental dynamics in the relative positioning of various social groupings. The adjudication of those dynamics may involve not only the old canard of compromise (politics reduced to the art of being uncomfortable), but also the creation of new abilities to think in different registers in turn or at once. To this end, 'we might focus on actually building the political power to create an alternative system to the heteropatriarchal, white supremacist, settler colonial state' (Smith, 2012: 87).

While the three pillars model seeks to typify and diagram interrelated logics, it makes no explicit attempt at analytical synthesis or integrated political strategy. Synthesis and strategy are implied, however, a point that becomes clear when we look more closely at the working definitions of racial slavery and settler colonialism. In 'Three Pillars', Smith describes the logic of slavery as one that 'renders Black people as inherently slaveable—as nothing more than property'. She goes on to situate slavery as the 'anchor of capitalism', but in a peculiar way:

That is, the capitalist system ultimately commodifies all workers—one's own person becomes a commodity that one must sell in the labor market while the profits of one's work are taken by someone else. To keep this capitalist system in place—which ultimately commodifies most people—the logic of slavery applies a racial hierarchy to this system. This racial hierarchy tells people that as long as you are not Black, you have the opportunity to escape the commodification of capitalism. This helps people who are not Black to accept their lot in life, because they can feel that at least they are not at the very bottom of the racial hierarchy—at least they are not property; at least they are not slaveable. (Smith, 2006: 67)

We can agree that under the capitalist system one must sell their labor power and that it will be commodified as labor, which is to say it will be converted into a factor of production. We can agree that under the capitalist system the surplus value of social labor—not the bourgeois notion of individual work—is appropriated by the owners of the means of production and converted into profit. That is the basic structure of labor exploitation under capital.<sup>13</sup> We must object, however, that labor exploitation is a commodification of ‘one’s own *person*’ or that the capitalist system ‘ultimately commodifies most *people*’. If this were true, then slavery as the conversion of person into property would simply be an extreme form of labor exploitation.<sup>14</sup> Or, vice versa, exploitation would be an attenuated form of slavery. In either case, there would be only a difference of degree rather than kind between exploitation and slavery. At any rate, disabusing ourselves of anti-black racism would, for Smith, enable us to see that they inhabit the same logic and that black struggles against racial slavery are *ultimately* struggles against capitalism.

Something similar happens with respect to Smith’s statement of the relation between racial slavery and settler colonialism. When she returns, in a more recent article on voting rights and native disappearance, to reprise her concept of racial slavery, she has this to say about the ideological formation of anti-black racism and its effects on critical intellectual production:

Because Africa is the property of Europe, Africa must then appear as always, already colonized. [...] The colonization of Africa must disappear so that Africa can appear as ontologically colonized. Only through this disavowed colonization can Black peoples be ontologically relegated to the status of property.

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13. I am gesturing, of course, to ideas outlined in Karl Marx’s 1847 lectures to the German Workingmen’s Club of Brussels, later serialized as *Wage Labor and Capital*, and subsequently developed in his 1859 *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* and his 1867 magnum opus *Capital, Volume 1*.

14. ‘African Americans have been traditionally valued for their labor, hence, it is in the interest of the dominant society to have as many people marked “Black” as possible, thereby maintaining a cheap labor pool’ (Smith, 2006: 71).

Native peoples by contrast, are situated as potential citizens. Native peoples are described as 'free' people, albeit 'uncivilized'. (Smith, 2013: 355)

Smith rightly argues that the racist designation of native people as free, albeit uncivilized, pre-citizens is not a privilege (i.e. proximity to whiteness) in relation to the racist designation of black people as unfree anti-citizens incapable of civilization (i.e. antipode of whiteness) because the civilizing mission through which native peoples are forcibly assimilated into the settler colonial society is, in fact, a form and aspect of genocide. Yet, what is missed in the attempt to demonstrate that Black Studies is also, like Native Studies, concerned with colonization is the plain fact that colonization is not essential, much less prerequisite, to enslavement. In other words, to say that it is *only* through 'disavowed colonization' that black people can be 'ontologically relegated to the status of property' is a feint, just as it is to suggest that capitalism 'ultimately commodifies most *people*'. In this case, enslavement would be enabled by a prior colonization that it extends *perforce*. If this were true, then slavery as the conversion of person into property would simply be an extreme form of colonization. Or, vice versa, colonization would be an attenuated form of slavery. In either case, there would be only a difference of degree rather than kind between colonization and slavery. At any rate, disabusing ourselves of anti-black racism would, for Smith, enable us to see that black struggles against racial slavery are *ultimately* struggles against colonialism.

Colonization is not a necessary condition of enslavement because: 1) slaves need not be colonial subjects, or objects of colonial exploitation, and they do not face the fundamental directive of colonialism, 'you, work for me', though slaves often enough labor; and 2) slaves need not be settler colonial subjects, or objects of settler colonial genocide, since they do not face the fundamental directive 'you, go away', though slaves often enough are driven from their native land. But the crucial problem with this formulation of the relations between racial slavery, settler colonialism and capitalism (leaving aside any problems with the pillar of Orientalism) has to do with the *drive* to confound the position of blacks in order to describe them as exploited and

colonized *degree zero*. Regarding the latter, Smith writes, ‘Africa is the property of Europe’; *Africa* rather than the *African*. As in the reduction of slavery to the exploitation of labor, there is here an elision of the permanent seizure of the body essential to enslavement.<sup>15</sup>

What can be done to a captive body? Anything whatsoever. The loss of sovereignty is a *fait accompli*, a byproduct rather than a precondition of enslavement. Genocide is endemic to enslavement insofar as slavery bans, legally and politically, the reproduction of enslaved peoples *as* peoples, indigenous or otherwise, whether they are removed from their native land, subjected to direct killing, unlivable conditions, or forced assimilation; or they are kept in place, allowed to live, provided adequate means, or supported in their cultural practices.<sup>16</sup> Native Studies scholars misrecognize ‘the true horror of slavery’ as de-culturalization or the loss of sovereignty because they do not ask what slavery is in the most basic sense—its local and global histories, its legal and political structures, its social and economic functions, its psychosexual dynamics, and its philosophical consequences. Perhaps they do not want to know anything about it, as they evaluate it through the lens of their own loss and lament and redress it through the

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15. The elision of the body can be found again in Rifkin (2009), who seeks to shift the reception of the political philosophy of Giorgio Agamben from a focus on the biopolitics of race to the geopolitics of place, with a correlative reworking on Agamben’s notion of ‘bare life’ as ‘bare habitation’. Without adjudging Rifkin’s reading of Agamben, we note that to displace race with place by juxtaposing body with land and rights with sovereignty—thereby juxtaposing blacks-as-*embodying* with natives-as-*inhabiting* (without thinking diacritically about black inhabitation and native embodiment)—serves to dis-embodiment and de-racialize native peoples, which is to say gain or maintain *distance* toward racial blackness, in order to pursue the critical discussion of metapolitical authority.

16. ‘To some degree the standard-of-living issue is universal: it applies to feudalism as well as to capitalism, to slave as well as free societies. But a slave was a slave, whether he lived a healthy hundred years or a sickly forty, whether she was better fed than a Polish peasant or more miserably housed than an American yeoman. [...] We can only measure the substance of such criticism if we understand why ‘*slavery*’ and ‘*freedom*’ do not refer to *material wellbeing*. [...] Freedom and slavery are at bottom political categories; they refer to the distributions of power in society’ (Oakes, 1990: xv-xvi).

promise of their own political imagination. Slavery is not a loss that the self experiences—of language, lineage, land, or labor—but rather the loss of any self that could experience such loss. Any politics based in resurgence or recovery is bound to regard the slave as ‘the position of the unthought’ (Hartman and Wilderson, 2003).<sup>17</sup>

## ABOLISHING SOVEREIGNTY

There is by now a literature on the historical relations between black and native peoples in the Americas, including, in the US context, the award-winning work of Tiya Miles (2006, 2010) and the signal contributions of Barbara Krauthamer (2013).<sup>18</sup> But Frank B. Wilderson, III’s *Red, White and Black* may be the first sustained attempt to theorize, at the highest level of abstraction, the structural positions of European colonists, Indigenous peoples, and African slaves in the ‘New World’ encounter and to think about how the conflicts and antagonisms that give rise to those positions in the historic instance establish the contemporary parameters of our political ontology. At this writing, Wilderson’s text has not been taken up in the field of Native Studies, despite dedicating fully 100 pages to addressing directly the machinations of settler colonialism and the history of genocide and to critically reading a range of indigenous thinking on politics, cosmology, and sovereignty. This is not a brief in favor of Wilderson’s project as resolution or answer. The upshot of *Red, White and Black* is a provocation to new critical discourse and just such an invitation is offered midway, even as it acknowledges the grand impediment: ‘What, we might ask, inhibits this analytic and political dream of a “Savage”/Slave encounter? Is it a matter of the Native theorist’s need to preserve the constituent elements of sovereignty, or is

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17. One should hear in this phrase the resonance between a political theory of the universal particular and a psychoanalytic theory of the unconscious. I hope to take this up in subsequent work.

18. These titles demonstrate not only the continuity between white and native forms of racial slavery in the 18th and 19th centuries, but also the *centrality* of native slavery to the history of racial slavery as such. Centrality is indicated here not as a measure of empirical preponderance, but rather of legal and political significance.

there such a thing as “Savage” Negrophobia? Are the two related’ (Wilderson, 2010: 182)?

We might understand something else about the historical relations between black and native peoples if we bear in mind that the dynamics of Negrophobia are animated, in part, by a preoccupation with sovereignty. We have learned already that settler colonialism is governed by a genocidal commandment and that, as a direct result, survival becomes central to indigenous movements for settler decolonization. We have also learned that sovereignty, even disarticulated from the state-form, is the heading for thinking about this survival as a matter of politics.<sup>19</sup> Yet, in its struggle against settler colonialism, the claim of native sovereignty—emerging in contradiction to the imposition of the imperial sovereignty of Euro-American polities<sup>20</sup>—‘fortifies and extends the interlocutory life of America [or Canada or ...] as a coherent (albeit genocidal) idea, because treaties are forms of articulation, discussions brokered between two groups presumed to possess the same kind of historical currency: sovereignty’ (Wilderson, 2003: 236).

This point is not mitigated by the fact that native sovereignty is qualitatively different from, not simply rival to, the sovereignty of nation-states. What links these statements discursively is an ‘ethico-onto-epistemological’ (Barad, 2007) point of contact: ‘At every scale—the soul, the body, the group, the land, and the universe—they can both practice cartography, and although at every scale their maps are radically incompatible, their respective “mapness” is never in question’ (Wilderson, 2010: 181).<sup>21</sup> Capacity for coherence makes more than likely a commitment ‘to preserve the constituent elements of sovereignty’ (2010: 182) and a pursuit of the concept of ‘freedom as self-determination’.<sup>22</sup>

19. On the critical differences between conceptions of native sovereignty and the sovereignty of the nation-state, see Simpson (2013).

20. ‘[An] origin is constituted as such only as an effect of displacement’ (Chandler, 2013: 138).

21. For a powerful meditation on cartographic incoherence and incapacity see Brand (2001).

22. For a fundamental critique of sovereignty and freedom as self-determination see da Silva (2007).

The political de-escalation of antagonism to the level of conflict is mirrored by a conceptual domestication at work in the field of Native Studies, namely, that settler colonialism is something already known and understood by its practitioners. The political-intellectual challenge on this count is to refine this knowledge and to impart it. The intervention of Native Studies involves bringing into general awareness a critical knowledge of settler colonialism.

We might contrast the unsuspecting theoretical status of the concept of settler colonialism in Native Studies with its counterpart in Black Studies: racial slavery. I remarked above that any politics of resurgence or recovery is bound to regard the slave as the position of the unthought. This does not suggest, however, that Black Studies is the field in which slavery is, finally, thought in an adequate way. The field of Black Studies is as susceptible to a politics of resurgence or recovery as any other mode of critical inquiry. Which is to say that the figure of the slave and the history of the emergence of the relational field called racial slavery remains the unthought ground of thought *within* Black Studies as well. The difference, provisionally, between these enterprises is that whereas Native Studies sets out to be the alternative to a history of settler colonialism and to pronounce the decolonial intervention, Black Studies dwells within an un-inheritable, inescapable history and muses upon how that history intervenes upon its own field, providing a sort of untranscendable horizon for its discourse and imagination. The latter is an endeavor that teaches less through pedagogical instruction than through exemplary transmission: rather than initiation into a form of *living*, emulation of a process of *learning* through the posing of a question, a procedure for study, for *black* study, or *black studies*, wherever they may lead.

Native Studies scholars are right to insist upon a synthetic gesture that attempts to shift the terms of engagement. The problem lies at the level of thought at which the gesture is presented. The settler colonial studies critique of colonial studies must be repeated, this time with respect to settler colonialism itself, in a move that returns us to the body in relation to land, labor, language, lineage—and the capture and commodification of each—in order to ask the most pertinent questions about



capacity, commitment, and concept. This might help not only to break down false dichotomies, and perhaps pose a truer one, but also to reveal the ways that the study of slavery is already and of necessity the study of capitalism, colonialism and settler colonialism, among other things; and that the struggle for abolition is already and of necessity the struggle for the promise of communism, decolonization, and settler decolonization, among other things. Slavery is the threshold of the political world, abolition the interminable radicalization of every radical movement. Slavery, as it were, precedes and prepares the way for colonialism, its forebear or fundament or support. Colonialism, as it were, the issue or heir of slavery, its outgrowth or edifice or monument. This is as true of the historic colonization of the Third World as it is the prior and ongoing settler colonization of the Fourth.<sup>23</sup>

‘The modern world owes its very existence to slavery’ (Grandin, 2014a).<sup>24</sup> What could this impossible debt possibly entail? Not only the infrastructure of its global economy but also the architecture of its theological and philosophical discourses, its legal and political institutions, its scientific and technological practices, indeed, the whole of its semantic field (Wilderson, 2010: 58). A politics of abolition could never finally be a politics of resurgence, recovery, or recuperation. It could only ever begin with degeneration, decline, or dissolution. Abolition is the interminable radicalization of every radical movement, but a radicalization through the perverse affirmation of deracination, an uprooting of the natal, the nation, and the notion, preventing any order of determination from taking root, a politics without claim, without demand even, or a politics whose demand is ‘too radical to be formulated in advance of its deeds’ (Trouillot, 2012: 88).<sup>25</sup>

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23. See, for instance, Blackburn (1997), Green (2011), Manning (1990), Solow (1991), Wynter (1995).

24. For a more fulsome argument see Grandin (2014b).

25. This reference to the Haitian Revolution does not only take it as a world-historical emblem of abolition, but also views it within the ongoing abolitionism that ties it to ‘a much larger and perhaps even more successful slave rebellion in the United States’ (Hahn, 2009).

The field of Black Studies consists in ‘tracking the figure of the unsovereign’ (Chandler, 2013: 163) in order to meditate upon the paramount question: ‘*What if the problem is sovereignty as such?*’ (Moten, 2013)? Abolition, the political dream of Black Studies, its unconscious thinking, consists in the affirmation of the unsovereign slave—the affectable, the derelict, the monstrous, the wretched<sup>26</sup>—figures of an order altogether different from (even when they coincide or cohabit with) the colonized native—the occupied, the undocumented, the unprotected, the oppressed. Abolition is beyond (the restoration of) sovereignty. Beyond the restoration of a lost commons through radical redistribution (everything for everyone), there is the unimaginable loss of that all too imaginable loss itself (nothing for no one).<sup>27</sup> If the indigenous relation to land precedes and exceeds any regime of property, then the slave’s inhabitation of the earth precedes and exceeds any prior relation to land—landlessness. And selflessness is the correlate. No ground for identity, no ground to stand (on). Everyone has a claim to everything until no one has a claim to anything. No claim. This is not a politics of despair brought about by a failure to lament a loss, because it is not rooted in hope of winning. The flesh of the earth demands it: the landless inhabitation of selfless existence.

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26. See, respectively, da Silva (2007) on the affectable, Wilderson (2010) on the derelict, Spillers (2003) on the monstrous, and Marriott (2011) on the wretched.

27. ‘What would the *politics* of a dead relation, a slave, look like’ (Wilderson, 2008: 106, emphasis added)? For recent writing on the global commons see Linebaugh (2014), Milum (2010), and Shantz (2013).

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## FURTHER READING

These materials cover a spectrum of theories and subjects and are not necessarily all within the framework of Afro-pessimism. They are, however, all relative to an understanding of anti-Blackness, whether through history, media, armed struggle, or feminism.

### BOOKS

W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*

Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*

*LIES: A Journal of Materialist Feminism, Vol. I and II*

David Marriott, *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity*

Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*

Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism*

Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*

Hortense Spillers, *Red, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*

Frank B. Wilderson, III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*

## ARTICLES

K. Aarons, “No Selves to Abolish: Afropessimism, Anti-Politics and the End of the World”

Chico, et al., *cosmic hoboos: an afropessimist meditation (no)space*  
<[www.cosmichoboes.blogspot.com](http://www.cosmichoboes.blogspot.com)>

Inko Day, “Being or Nothingness: Indigeneity, Antiblackness, and Settler Colonial Critique”

Anthony Farley, “Perfecting Slavery”

Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts”

Saidiya Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson, III, “The Position of the Unthought”

Kara Keeling, “‘In the Interval’: Frantz Fanon and the ‘Problems’ of Visual Representation”

R. L., “Wanderings of the Slave: Black Life and Social Death”

Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics”

Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness”

*Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, Issue 29 (2016),  
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Modernity” <[www.rhizomes.net/issue29](http://www.rhizomes.net/issue29)>

Jared Saxon, “People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery”

Calvin Warren, “Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope” and  
“Onticide: Afropessimism, Queer Theory, and Ethics”

Frank B. Wilderson, III, “Gramsci’s Black Marx: Wither the Slave in Civil Society?” and “‘We’re trying to destory the world’: Anti-Blackness and Police Violence After Ferguson”



“**T**O OVERCOME ANTI-  
BLACKNESS, THERE WOULD  
HAVE TO BE WHAT FANON HAD  
CALLED A ‘PROGRAM OF COM-  
PLETE DISORDER,’ AN EXPROPRI-  
ATION AND AFFIRMATION OF THE  
VERY VIOLENCE PERPETUATED  
AGAINST BLACK EXISTENCE AND  
A FUNDAMENTAL REORIENTATION  
OF THE SOCIAL COORDINATES  
OF THE HUMAN RELATION. IT  
WOULD ENTAIL A WAR AGAINST  
THE CONCEPT OF HUMANITY  
AND A WAR THAT SPLITS CIVIL  
SOCIETY TO ITS CORE, A CIVIL  
WAR THAT WOULD ELABORATE  
ITSELF TO THE DEATH.