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Dissolution to the left of me, dissolution to the right:
a glossary of self-overcomings

**Dissolution to the Left of Me,
Dissolution to the Right**
a Political Glossary of Self-overcomings

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We are thinking together about a taxonomy of self-dissolutions throughout the political spectrum and across class lines – the felt desire for an overcoming of the subject and the cultural representation of this desire. We are asking the question of what the language of proletarian self-dissolution might look like, and how the language of proletarian self-dissolution might sound.

The following represents part of an exchange that started in 2012. It was written in two phases, in January and May 2018: the first part for a presentation at the Academy of Fine Arts Nuremberg organised by Kerstin Stakemeier, the second for a study week in Brno organised by the Hic Rosa collective. We didn't edit it for publication, and by the time we next wrote something collaboratively in early 2021, the political conditions had changed along with everything else in our lives.

I've prepared this PDF version now because I think the material has some clarificatory value, and also for the basically sentimental reason that it's the most developed piece of work that Marina and I produced together. Whether or not the taxonomic idea of 'left- and right-wing' versions of self-dissolution is helpful, the question that Marina asks about the 'maintenance of the self' still remains basic: 'What is the subject, then, as this project of construction that's constantly being torn down, like a Palestinian home, and what political questions and desires oscillate around this?'

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It's now 2024, six years again. It's not possible to have the conversation anymore, but getting rid of myself was all that I ever wanted to do, was always my horizon, and in the absence of the person who I thought about it with it also becomes my means of remembering.

Part I

Introduction:

(freestyle)

then –

DH:

I tried to think a little about how to start this and it seemed to me that the best way to do it would be to begin to explain in clear terms how my own thinking about the overcoming of the subject has been modified, or contused, or dented, in the course of trying to keep up with our political culture during the last two years.

So I will have to retreat for a moment into the gentle mists of reminiscence.

The first idea of self-overcoming that I ever encountered in philosophy was Adorno's statement from

the beginning of *Negative Dialectics*, in the part of the Foreword where he says that he had felt since the moment that he became aware of himself as a living intellect that his task was to overcome the subject using the resources of the subject itself. (I am paraphrasing: I'll be more specific in a moment). I felt a kind of intense onrush of naïve commitment to that idea. To overcome it using its own resources. I am not sure now exactly what I understood by that qualification, or even yet what aspect it was of the dialectic that it disposes over that I felt myself to be drawn to; but the idea felt right to me. And the first art that I passionately cared for seemed to express the same impulse, in that it created the painstaking spectacle of a living and desiring personality whose intellectual and erotic life was constantly interrupted by a political reality that exceeded its own powers of action or portrayal. The awkward and preposterous dramatisation of that mismatch between subject and world never felt nihilistic to me even when its surface tone seemed to vibrate with an almost cartoonish self-disgust: it was a vision of the self punctured by a reality that I hardly knew to exist. It was all that I could do to find ways to disassemble myself to the point at which I could greet it.

That is not a very compelling sketch: plenty of its terms could be transposed to whatever we happened to feel last year or a month ago. But it's a first approximation. I want to set it out like this because it was only much more recently, after the increasing

electoral success of right-wing parties in Central and Western Europe, and then after the EU referendum in the UK, and during the first stages of the Trump campaign, that I began to think seriously about the history of fascist writing about the subject, or the self, and to realise with a kind of gaping embarrassment that the extreme right had its own history of idealism, and its own critical theories of the subject who is inoculated against it; and that within that history there was another strand of thinking whose particular instruction set concerned methods for overcoming the subject, either to annihilate it or to disclose it as a sham or a decorous bourgeois fiction, underneath which could be found lurking some other truth that might be more horrible but which at least we had to stare at unblinkingly.. And that process of discovery threw me back on the thesis that I had previously carried around quite unreflexively. What does it actually mean to overcome or to break through myself, if what I am is a subject capable of being climbed over or knocked down; and what kind of complex am I, if these are the verbs that I use to define myself, and with what kinds of fencing and flood-lights and security guards; and how can all of that protective apparatus be destroyed or circumnavigated? Does it matter what metaphors I choose to use in this situation? If I now know that the translated text in which this idea first became real for me was mistranslated, or was more than mistranslated, that it was unwarrantably redacted, mangled to the point of banality, and for no other reason than that the translator was

made anxious by an ambiguous metaphor, which to his mind (I am now conjecturing) implied either a shopping trip or a lung disease, does that make a difference? I.e., if I thought *then* that I should overcome myself using my own resources, but I know *now* that what was really meant, which is to say, what the words said, is that if I didn't break through myself then I would eat myself, which is, to put it idiomatically, a different kettle of chips – does that then have any political implications or not? Of course cannibalism has its own psychopolitical history in the life of the Western European ruling class. But it means that the chain of equivalence acquires a new branch outlet. Sanatorium – concentration camp – air raid shelter – breakfast bar? And what happens once we break into the subject – does it pour out or does something else rush in? Do you remember the parents of the Tory real-estate mogul who wanted to break into their own heads in order to let in more experiences? To break through the burden of the subject using the power (drill) of the subject?

To set out the stakes quite briefly. In Ernst Juenger's essay 'On Pain' it is argued that 'civilization' has been enfeebled by a cult of sensitivity (Conservative Revolutionaries had their own snowflake lingo). Juenger thinks that the subject should overcome itself by establishing a 'command center' from which, he says, it can reconceive its 'life' as an outpost, as war materiel that can be sacrificed heroically in the name of the nation, or some other transcendental ideal, God

maybe, or Kermit the Frog. By contrast, or in another world, in the section from Fred Moten's book that you just sent to me, it's argued that the limitation of Michael Fried's theory of artistic spectatorship is that 'self-absorption comes in moments of calmness, not under the disruptive and catalytic pressure of an object'.¹ I think that it isn't possible to understand how these ideas are in conflict with one another until it's recognized just what it is that they share, which is a relation to a third idea, not of the super-subject who looks on impassively through his binoculars as the pathetic empirical subject perishes in a hail of machine-gun fire, or the radically open subject that is capable in the moment of collision with an object of splitting apart, and therefore of reconstituting itself in a new and passionate unity with that which differs from it, but of another kind of subject: one that only wants to hold itself together, to hunch down into itself and guard over its stock of 'moments of calmness'. In other words, the ideas are not 'polarized', as self-effacing liberals like to say when rehearsing their assumptions about the dangers of 'extremism' of all kinds; but they are painfully triangulated with a culture of bourgeois norms and presumptions that establishes the terms of their reality and mediates the negativity of their mutual relation. And perhaps this is part of why this issue of self-overcoming seems like a significant problem for me. Right now we're living through a moment in which the organizing structures

1 Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), pp. 233ff.

of bourgeois institutional life are beginning to subside. The phraseology in which that process is defined has two wings, its left wing and its right, which have to do with (hold your breath) redistributive spending, reproductive rights, constitutional norms, trade union rights, environmental protections and so on; and for so long as we find ourselves stuck somewhere in this net *then this is what politics is*: it is policies and not selves.

I am not saying that learning to speak in another language will be enough. But if we don't break through ourselves then we will eat ourselves. Does any of that make sense?

MV:

OK, so starting from a similar or at least hopefully related place.

I'm also familiar with the logos and the pathos of that phrase from *Negative Dialectics*. The constitutive subject being overcome through the resources of the subject. Which now can't help but evoke, in light of your discussion here, the image of Baron Munchausen pulling himself out of the hole by his own hair, or the Russian idiom 'you can't leap over yourself'. There's something about these moral tales which I'll revisit later on, in light of the question of cannibalism. My reading of that formulation, or, rather its translation, has never really changed from the way I

was first compelled by it, and that had two moments, one that the subject could only be overcome actively, through a living and social praxis, and not conceptually, as so much theory was trying to do (and that's similar to my, maybe fanciful, reading of the Real is the Rational and the Rational is the Real in Hegel). We can, in the most preliminary way here, note, with Hegel, that if the 'rational is the real and the real is the rational', then that is true to the degree that the real did not take its present form accidentally but through an ongoing series of complex mediations, as part of the 'rationality' of capital in its reproduction, for example, or state rationality. Likewise, it cannot change in any other way, the real can only negate it dialectically, preserving by cancelling, coming to find out what 'it' (the thing) really is in the collective process of overcoming.

The virtue of the thought of abolition is that it sets a horizon decisively within the immanence of struggle. The structural analysis of abolition is interested in determinate negation, that is, not an abstract and ideal dismissal of certain elements or structures of the present reality but seeing what is the specific structural role those elements have in the reproduction of the total system we would want to change or get out of. But there are still limitations to the concept no less than to the implied praxis of abolition. This chiefly has to do with the break between the determinacy of the analysis and the abstraction of the imperative 'to abolish'. One of the most sali-

ent of these abstractions is the so-called paradox of self-abolition, which has lately been opened up in a rather specific philosophical context by Ray Brassier. The subject of abolition emerges through the struggle that abolition entails, yet must also arrive at a point where the militant identity emerging through struggle has to eliminate its basis in the society the movement wants to change or overcome. This is not a situation which can be dealt with by fiat, but has to be one of the modes and horizons of struggle itself, in which it will continue to unfold as a painful contradiction. Who is the subject that initiates and who comes out of the other side of self-abolition? The politics of abolition seem to be unable either to be done with, or even to really formulate, this paradox of ‘subjectivity’, which Brassier’s text goes some way toward articulating, albeit opening itself up at times to critiques of formalism.

The problematic of abolition also stands within the question of mediation – what is to be abolished, and do the processes of abolition not necessarily partake of what they are setting out to abolish? The abolition discourse seems to harbour within it a slide into gnosticism – in its postulation of a wholesale cancellation of a fallen world.

So, the subject cannot be wished away but has to be processed – and the other point was that non-identity was basic to what it felt like to be a subject – the subject as a pretext or a premise, a temporary site, for its own constant re-working and becoming un-

recognizable. It installed negation at both the core of a subject's sense of self and its principle of motion. So a very dialectical take on psychology which seemed philosophically adequate to someone who was looking to the 'real movement' to reflect both her own experience and her style of analysis, whether applied to that experience or anything else. This reassuring quality can of course be said to signal perhaps why this notion of the subject, or this emphasis on constitutive non-identity, is not 'negative enough', precisely because it is constitutive or a grounding un-grounding. At the same time, that poses the question of 'negative enough' for what? What kind of praxis is at issue? That perhaps is where we can start to invoke 'de-subjectification to the left me, de-subjectification to the right'.

The subject cannot be wished away but has to be processed, just like the fact that the subject is already a reification, thus an object to itself, and insofar as this is an epistemological problem, that's because epistemology is social and historical. The subject as its own object, or, the subject which is also an object, is of course not just a way of narrating the 'constitutively' split modern person, but a way of talking about the artwork. The artwork is the object which is more of a subject than the alleged human subject engaging with it. I know we're not meant to be talking quite so much about Adorno, but this will be quick. I want to think about these figures you outline of the bunker-mentality subject who has private aesthetic

experiences which are tranquil and confirming, the subject who is disorganized but restored at a higher level by their encounter with an artwork, and the kind of encounter Moten sketches out which destabilizes and profoundly messes up the subject-object relation by messing up not just the form and content of a work, but its materiality and milieu, its outside and its inside. With regard to Piper's work, and how it critiques all sorts of norms, be they the social norms of the artworld, or the modernist normativity of someone like Fried, Moten writes 'This is what objection is, what performance is – an internal complication of the object that is, at the same time, her withdrawal into the external world.' That is, the subject is overcome by merging with the object but not as a viewer, as a performer – her displacement is a condition of her appearing, which kind of reinstates the difference between artwork and object at a 'higher level', perhaps, except that the external world – its 'self-consciousness', its racism – is both objectified and objected to in the way the displacement is performed. At the same time, Piper seeks to isolate herself, reconstitute her subjectivity, ultimately in rationalist terms (her performances are conceived as 'catalytic' instances, and at their limit they are pedagogical, over time moving from classical conceptual to performative means, but always having this technical demonstration element to them), becoming a Kantian philosopher and side-stepping the moment of instability of the rational in Kant, according to Moten's critique.

But where does all that come back to our main questions? The political stakes of Piper's performance work (always conducted inconspicuously and confrontationally in quotidian situations) as Moten develops them are that she puts forward an anti-contemplative engagement with objecthood – materiality as social materiality: a re-materialization – rather than treating it as the medium of absorption. It is not an illicit bridge between art and life, as Fried would have it, but a deployment of the mediations that art both needs and disavows, a transcendental critique of the conditions of possibility for there to be anything like an ontology of art which is not a determined flouting of the subject-object distinction that perpetuates and grounds social and structural violence, one of whose moments of disavowal is the existence of art. She uses art to do this and constitutive subjectivity is her vehicle, as she explains. A rational critique of the irrational, the refusal of the object to be subjected. And Monique Wittig in her response to de Beauvoir, 'One is Not Born a Woman' – doesn't she do something comparable to what's been discussed so far?² She says women have to take the position of the subject, a class subject, in order to overcome that position – the subject has to be sublated. This also happens by means of negation – a woman is not an identity but a class position in relation to the class of men, thus women who repudiate that relation are no longer women, no longer the subject of that class

2 Monique Wittig, 'One is Not Born a Woman', <http://www.micheleleigh.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Wittig.pdf>

relation. Everywhere we see the constitutive role of negation, negation as a motor.

DH:

Moten's account of the Piper piece is so exceptionally intricate as to be difficult to get a hold of. That I suppose is part of the point of it: to be as intellectually lubricious as possible, to use Emerson's word; and so to slip out of the grasp of the art theorist who wants to experience the artwork 'momently, immediately, in its entirety, in the entirety of its internal differentiation, as if it were a sign'.

I think it might be worth sticking on that point about aversiveness for a moment. Moten makes the case that this is the essential point about Piper's work. The first sentence of his essay: 'What if the beholder glances, glances away, driven by aversion as much as desire?' What if they do? If I glance away 'driven by aversion', what does that demonstrate about who I am? *Mutatis mutandis*, what does it demonstrate about who I can be? The development of this argument in relation to Piper seems quite benign to me, since what she presents to her spectators is a manifestation of the discomfort that THEY produce and that would otherwise be securely internalized. A private affair. Moten doesn't just say that this obliviousness to discomfort exists in the interests of those who produce it: he says that it is literally decor-

porealizing, dematerializing; that it ephemeralizes experience, that it negates reality; and it is in that broadening of the claim that the audience at the bar where Piper makes her intervention begins to recall the aesthetics of Michael Fried and his conceptual concoction of frames and anti-theatricality. Perhaps that move symbolizes another kind of exit, this time on Moten's own part: out of the difficult space of mutual hostility structured by racist presumption and onto the pastoral slopes of art theory. I don't know about this.

Regarding what you say about Adorno: personally I also have a taste for psychological readings of negation. I think we have to recognize all of the loop-the-loops and ditches on the way to self-overcoming: the twitches and the doldrums in it. And I agree with what you say about the vocabulary of negation being vague. Where does negation leave us? Or as you put it in the real subsumption text, 'what comes out of the other side of self-abolition?'³ That seems like an excellent question to me. Is it transcendental consciousness or the fascist suprasensible? All of these questions were easier to answer when we could just hit the button marked 'absolute Spirit' and listen to the opening bars of its theme tune. Moten's negations are by contrast nowhere near so teleological, which is one of the reasons why they can feel so close to the bone; and also why sometimes they seem to drift

3 Marina Vishmidt, 'Procedures of Abolition and Some Paradoxes They Throw Up', in *What Is To Be Done About Real Subsumption* (Berlin: Archive Books, forthcoming).

around aimlessly like a spinning top. Indirection is the downside risk of a painstaking hostility to nihilism. Nihilism is negation outstripping its own determinacy.

But it is still worth focusing on this issue of disgust, as a reflex of subject constitution (I am disgusted by what I am not) and therefore as a state through which any attempt at subject dissolution will necessarily pass. A lot of right-wing art sets up its stall in exactly the same complex of physical responses and shudders; though of course in terms of its fundamental political tendency it may be as dissimilar to the work of Adrian Piper as it is possible to be.

Julia Kristeva's book that we talked about gradually turns into a disquisition on 'Fascism', which she treats as a fairly monolithic entity, a sort of predilection or habit of appetite, rather than, say, a political theory or a state form.⁴ It's for that reason that she's so centrally preoccupied with Celine. Celine's writings are an encyclopaedia of Nazi drives. The encyclopaedia is exhaustive and has the basic characteristics of a medical dictionary. Basically the argument is that we all have an overwhelming desire to self-nullify, to ecstatically dissolve ourselves into nothingness or 'The Void', like Saturday shoppers on Broadway Market; that the desire is omnipresent and unabating, insuppressible within the table-etiquette systematics of 'the symbolic order'; and that its origin is

4 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia, 1982).

a desire to restore a primary narcissism (union with the mother or ‘femininity’: which seem to be the same thing) that, because of the mythological violence of the birth scene, is also deeply traumatic (‘horrific’). The argument recalls Carl Schmitt on the formation of state constitutions and could be argued to share with it a basic tendency; but Kristeva denies that commonality, and vindicates Celine, with all of his coprophagic tea parties and tirades, all of the warts of racist psychopathy, by arguing that Nazism only ‘seduces, manipulates, makes use of’ etc a fundamental (or: ontological) drive structure that is in fact universal, so that the *real* blame for authoritarianism lies at the feet of the small-minded authors (writers of ‘frivolous literature’), and dwarf philosophers, and small bourgeois (those without airy apartments facing onto the Luxembourg Gardens) who fail to put the drive to more useful ends. Those ends are called – Literature. It’s pretty wild how much responsibility is attributed to that word. For Kristeva it’s a kind of non plus ultra: it is what lurks beneath. When I said last night that her book is a kind of phenomenology of spirit for filth and vomit, it’s this that I was referring to: Literature is the Absolute Spirit of the abject, the place where it achieves its highest and most purulent fruition. It is its inner sanctum and most precious waste disposal unit. It’s a wild incongruity, I think, that it should be ascribed this role, because it means that a book that is all about overcoming, or that seems as if it ought to be all about overcoming, or would like to be all about overcoming the enclosure of the subject

against the abject that defines it, that this book ends up sanctifying in the most tiresomely prudish and obsessive-compulsive manner imaginable the aseptic, quarantined integrity of Art. And there are political consequences to that decision, since it is the same line of argument that ends up arguing, with ridiculous, inane improbability, that *the more* vile, vengeful, delusionally anti-Semitic or authoritarian Celine becomes, the more completely he defends himself against the petty charges of small-minded people who might despise and wish to oppose his writings on the grounds that they happen to be – vile, authoritarian and delusionally anti-Semitic.

I don't believe in that kind of autonomy, I feel like the writing that I care about is in the world, that it lives in that world and that it emerges from it only to return to it, that it wants to be judged against the same standards as the rest of life, even if only to defy them as the rest of life does incessantly. Nothing in my own present experience resembles the kind of salon culture in which 'Literature' might seem like it receives a special pass. The best writing that my friends produce emerges in scraps and tatters during the free periods of the workday: the moments when they aren't having a conversation with their manager or being assaulted by a person for whom they're paid to care. But for the same reason I don't think that we ought to inhabit the deep 'ontological' drive structure of fascism so as the better to understand it. I think that the deep ontological drive structure

of fascism *is itself a historical product* that needs to be resisted; so that whatever there is in the experience of ecstatic dissolution that we might preserve, or imagine to be progressive, is at the same time, and by the same token, a self-dissolution that is *opposed* to the kind of prurient and hyperbolic suburb of the 'abject' in which fascists from Celine to Nick Land have built their belle lettrist retirement homes. It never seems to occur to Kristeva that there might be more than one way of exceeding the boundaries of the subject: the process of self-annulment is a one-way street, a storm drain leading directly from the 'founding violence' of parturition to the ultimate violence of murderous apocalypse, a ball pit in the pit of the stomach for traumatized newborn and Nazi man-child alike: *Stahlgewittern* in Kidzania. And it seems to me that somewhere at the root of the problem is a facile treatment of disgust. The Celinean-Kristevian self-annulment is always *disgusting*; it is always intended to activate the disgust of others. For the same reason the self is reestablished even in the act of its overcoming: the self that dissolves itself must have a strong stomach (or a stomach of iron? (more shades of Juenger?)); and it must be able to enjoy the blanches and gag-reflexes that it induces in its weak-kneed audiences. It must have this. It simply must: the a priorism of the assumption has the displaced character of a command. There can never be another starting point for self-overcoming. The self is not *able* to imagine the desire to bring an end to revulsion *in general*, which is to say that it isn't *allowed to*, for the simple reason

that this would bring an end to the whole universe of winces, grimaces and fliches, of gag-reflexes and paroxysms of revulsion and squeamishness, that together make up the spectrum of subjective weakness in which fascists, and people who incline to fascism, ecstatically dissolve themselves, again and again, in the way that other people might put on a swimsuit; i.e., not with the intention of overcoming their own subjecthood but with the aim of wallowing in the brittleness and inconsequence of other people's.

I can try to make this a little bit clearer by quoting the passage from Celine that I think is most essential for Kristeva's thinking about abjection and the supersession of the bourgeois self:

When you stop to examine the way in which words are formed and uttered, our sentences are hard put to it to survive the disaster of their slobbery origins. The mechanical effort of conversation is nastier and more complicated than defecation. That corolla of bloated flesh, the mouth, which screws itself up to whistle, which sucks in breath, contorts itself, discharged all manner of viscous sounds across a fetid barrier of decaying teeth — how revolting! Yet that is what we are adjured to sublimate into an ideal ... we shall always have trouble with sentiment.⁵

5 Louis Ferdinand Celine, *Journey to the End of the Night* (San Francisco: New Directions, 2006).

The reason for this has to do again with your point about ‘what comes out of the other side’, or, as you also say, what happens when the subject is ‘processed’, i.e., once it undergoes the collapse of its ideals by way of the eruption of their diverse materials and categorical preconditions. In the negativity of the object it seems to me that what comes out of the other side is... nothing at all. Or at least nothing that we should want. A fissure opens up in the idea of the bourgeois subject and sewage pours out of it like from a burst pipe. No development results from this, no sublation, no new peregrinations of the concept; and so the only way for this radical anti-idealism to sustain itself is by way of a discrete counter-idealism, which is to say by means of an exaggerated emotional investment in the idea of the physical-natural origins of our most cherished self-conceptions. This is what reactionary self-overcoming is: it is the disavowed intensification of the subject’s investment in the disclosure of whatever the bourgeois subject finds disgusting. And in fact on reflection it isn’t quite right to say that it’s non-developmental. By virtue of its exaggerated significance in the psychology of the person who is committed to it, it can acquire its own sham upward ascent. The aesthetic discovery of the reversibility of the mouth as the instrument of song and the asshole as instrument of defecation can mimic the transformation of the concept by way of determinate negation, by constantly increasing the intensity of our revulsion for the person who lives under the narcotic halo of their own rarefied ideals. What Celine

recognises is that this evolution is strictly quantitative. As the idealistic subject who is projected in the imagination of the sober materialist becomes more and more narcotically oblivious to the conditions of their material life, the revulsion that the materialist feels for her/him begins to grow in equal proportion; and eventually the growth of that revulsion becomes a kind of compensation for the stagnancy of the worldview that gives rise to it, making amends for the transcendental boredom of a biological ontology in which all noble human feelings get swallowed. This is the pseudo-dialectic of anti-subjective nihilism, driving an anti-bourgeois polemic against ideal sentimentalism from stage to stage, and proceeding by means of that one-dimensional escalation into a more and more grotesque parody of the pathology that it wishes to define itself against. Bildungsroman as Threat Level Classification. Self-overcoming as total and complete shutdown.

Does that get us any further? What was it that you were going to say about cannibalism?

MV:

Aversiveness is really worth talking about, because of its encompassing both disgust and shame or confusion as affects of encounter: looking away from the object and looking away from yourself, feeling aversion and averting the gaze, and it would be interest-

ing to see how we go about drawing lines between these, both lines of separation and entanglement, as dispositions that crack the self-consistency of the subject. In the Fanon chapter we've been talking about he speaks about blackness as being one such eruption – the person who has blackness ascribed to them in a white world (we can take this white world as a phenomenological, ontological, or structural, also, category) cannot achieve consistency of subjecthood – they have 'no ontological resistance' to white eyes – because they are always being formed as an image, spectre or fetish in those eyes.⁶ They are chased, pinned down, to the status of the object. The black subject is nothing more than their objectification; their private self-image 'explodes' into fragments on encountering the white social gaze and must constantly be re-assembled according to one or another diagram (equality, rationality, emotionality, supremacy, history, etc. – these are some of the frames Fanon cycles through in the course of the chapter). The black human is de-humanized. The black body has no ontological stability; it is turned into image or brute matter, flesh, as Hortense Spiller writes, to be processed. This is why Fanon gets referred to so often in afro-pessimist work, despite his obvious debts to existentialist and Hegelian humanism: he describes the precarity of being for humans who have the administrative as well as casual presumption of 'full subjectivity' withheld from them – a kind of inverted world.

6 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), Chapter 5.

So here disgust is a condition of appearing at all – white disgust, which is then internalised in all kinds of pathological ways, a pathology that Fanon argues is ‘sociogenic’ – an etiology that can only be dragged out of social relations, reproducing at scales ranging from the French mother and child hailing Fanon like creepy playmates of Althusser’s policeman all the way to the globalised system of colonial violence and extraction, as well as the various literary, theoretical and political exegeses of the phenomena of race that he catalogues.

To connect this more securely to what you say below, the Fanon chapter is perhaps a good demonstration of the primordial sociality, collectivity of disgust, disgust as power, the power of establishing asymmetries in which zones of humanity and sub-humanity or bestiality proliferate in the guise of natural orders – I’m interested here also in the aesthetic dimension of this, the aesthetics of reaction (it’s obviously all over alt-right social media, from ‘feels’ to the relentless degradation of opponents in terms of their appearance or their comportment – all the while trumpeting some kind of ‘rationalism’ fetish) that you discuss in such high resolution. ‘An exaggerated emotional investment in the idea of the physical-natural origins of our most cherished self-conceptions. This is what reactionary self-overcoming is: it is the disavowed intensification of the subject’s investment in the disclosure of whatever the bourgeois subject finds disgusting.’ That makes me think of the blocked po-

sition of self-overcoming in Keston's text, where the bourgeois subject simply cannot get out of the box, or the cauldron, of other people's misery, that sustains them, or, however minimally and brutally, sustains everyone.⁷ Keston writes how Marx wants to inflict disgust on the reader but a disgust which can't be expelled or be abjected insofar as the very cause of that disgust is everyone's implication in it, whatever the position in the relations of production. Which is not a fable about complicity, since complicity ultimately restores, renovates, the subject, a subject now aware of their implication and thus smarter, more sensitive, more complex in their attunement to tragedy, weakness, and the callous omnivorousness of the system vis-a-vis virtuous intention, than the next gal. Yet the hypothesis is fragile, since the affect of complicity in cannibalism is portrayed as an irony, a literary irony, that Marx deploys so corrosively there's no way out for the well-meaning reader, the one who consumes the misery of others from their coffee to their choice of reading material.

The question of self-dissolution from the left, and the significance of thinking in those terms, seems to be at its base about breaking down a self that is contemplative, is consistent, well-intentioned, needs reassurance and stabilization. There can be no such self or subject since the material conditions are not of a kind that can foster subjectivity which is not fragments or shrapnel of competitive damage. The

7 Keston Sutherland, 'Marx in Jargon', World Picture, <http://world-picturejournal.com/article/marx-in-jargon/>

subject is a vehicle, as in Wittig, but the path is overgrown and the car won't start. The impetus of self-dissolution from the right, which is also a challenge to a pious, whole, insulated yet empathetic subject, just restores that subject somewhere else, if purely as an artefact of domination, of the cleansing operations required to maintain its sovereignty. Disgust is a condiment but the self is not eaten, it's just turned into a mouth full of sharp teeth at the end of a long digestive tube. The aversive image portrayed here is a kind of self-revulsion within materialism per se, a drift in the signification of the term; the materialist who wants to distribute subjectivity to everyone, like universal health care, or the materialist whose vendetta against the subject is rooted in the grossness of biological life, and yet only a few are clean enough to prevail. In the Fanon chapter, everything is in movement all the time, fragments are flying everywhere and fusing in disfiguration. What you say about negation outstripping its own determinacy and becoming nihilism is played out here as a drama between 'sociogeny' and the pathos of (non-)existence – the black individual is the object of a determinate negation which is simply the white world, both its hostility and its innocence, but what does it feel like to be an object? What kind of subject should be expected to emerge from this ongoing crafts project, the maintenance of a self whose self is questioned, pushed down in the most prosaic terms every second? What is the subject, then, as this project of construction that's constantly being torn down, like

a Palestinian home, and what political questions and desires oscillate around this?

I frame this with the keenest knowledge of its quasi-psychologizing bent, but just as a foray – it seems to me that people who work in art or academia (or indeed any sort of occupation that relies on monetizing a deeply-felt sense of generative exceptionalism) have the greatest weakness in the direction of thinking-for-by thinking-against, so to speak – the ‘aristocratic’ impulse that affirms the existent by undercutting the stultified common sense of e.g. ‘left politics’ or ‘social justice’. (This is to bracket out something like a ‘nihilist’ complex of ideas and dispositions – that can take different political and organisational forms. I am thinking of something much more omnipresent and unreflected.) This is a kind of subservience to given powers by means of radical intransigence/skepticism against the seeming appeal of the ‘pieties’ of the day, whose political-historical provenance or context or real-life stakes are of little consequence, so long as they can be shown to be stultified and the products of ‘not thinking hard enough’. Whether or not this is a professional deformity or a compensation for child/adolescent bullying or both is the psychologizing thing that I refrain from tampering with here, but nonetheless it is an embarrassingly widespread pattern in those anxious to establish their singularity and insight. The parodic conservation of ‘Art’ as the sphere of higher complexity/ambiguity/human experience comes naturally in this train, whether it is conducted

in pompous or affectless tones (the latter is of course more contemporary). It is only correctable in those who do it out of a political desire rather than a ultimately narcissistic one. I observe it in my students on occasion, and of course I experienced it myself as an adolescent. Apologies for this little excursion into folk-developmental psychology.

Now for Kristeva. Curiously, your description of her ontologization and culturalization of fascism echoes the critique of e.g. Susan Sontag formulated by the writers of the Ultra text I was reading last night, which is possibly the most coherent element of a long and haphazardly assembled text.⁸ The argument is that, by turning fascism into a determinate cultural form which compasses and underlies superficial differences like fascism and communism (interest in physical perfection, for example, in her reading), its contingent and not overdetermined emergence from historical situations of conflict and specific genealogies is occluded, and the implication is that what results is an aestheticisation of politics similar to what Benjamin posits in the flourish at the end of his text. Which of course describes the interested parties in the ‘totalitarianism’ camp a bit more universally than just those of them who mobilize the standpoint in ‘disgusted’ overviews of bodybuilding as death cult. As for the category of the ‘abject’, it may be, to state it roughly, as with her use of ‘fascism’, that the ontol-

8 Ultra, ‘Class Combat’, 4 August 2017, <http://www.ultra-com.org/project/class-combat/>.

ogization of the category makes it at best politically irrelevant, at worst retrogressive. This would be a question to pose to Maya and Marina's use of it in 'The Logic of Gender' (apart from the fascination of the weird collision of register it introduces into their essay), as well as Dimitra's using it as a vehicle to bring the psychoanalytic into an analysis of anti-migrant populism from above and below in Greece.⁹ I think Imogen Tyler's critique is right: that the category's grounding in the 'maternal' is, well, politically useless if not retrogressive, simply because it roots it in some kind of violent metaphysics of generation and its projection outward as annihilating disgust, without any consideration of these as historically and socially produced phenomena as if, indeed, this is immaterial to a universally efficient underlying logic.¹⁰ While it can be argued that Tyler is engaging with the consequences rather than the structure of Kristeva's theory and is thus committing a relatively conventional operation, if one not as simple as the term 'category error' would seem to imply, it's a salient point about what it means to take ontological categories over whole into theoretical work that would situate itself in (historical) materialism.

But initially what I was going to say about cannibalism has maybe already been developed obliquely in

9 Endnotes, 'The Logic of Gender: On the Separation of Spheres and the Process of Abjection'; Dimitra Kotouza, *Surplus Citizens: Struggle and Nationalism in the Greek Crisis* (London: Pluto, 2019).

10 Imogen Tyler, *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain* (London: Pluto, 2013).

the above, and that's how the boundaries of the 'self' that can be eaten are drawn – is it a personal or social body, is it a species or one's own flesh? Because those boundaries are clearly important for disgust and the dynamics of abjection. Where does disgust end and avidity begin? However, just touching on the Octavia Butler story we were talking about and the fictional disease she outlines there,¹¹ the sufferers mentally drift and lose their sense of their personal boundaries, which go inward – their bodies become alien and hostile, and they try to destroy them as a means to save themselves, to find the spirit trapped in the corporeal coffin. This process is called 'digging', and the destruction of the flesh of oneself and others in this condition is not incorporative in its trajectory but de-materializing. I really want to think the Fanon chapter and the Octavia Butler story together somehow....

DH:

There's more here than I know immediately what to do with and so you'll have to forgive me if this is only a very splintered summary. Where have we got to.

I said in my first mail that the poetry that first realised for me the idea of self-overcoming as a formal and felt commitment had a surface-tone of cartoonish

11 Octavia Butler, 'The Evening and the Morning and the Night', in *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, New York: Seven Stories Press, 1995.

self-disgust, and as this dialogue has proceeded that idea seems to have become progressively more profound, if not in the conceptual sense then at least in its downgrading to a fascist gut instinct. You call it ‘a self-revulsion within materialism per se’, and I think that that formulation is a very brilliant and telling condensation, although I do still wonder if ‘materialism’ is quite the right word for the Celinean position. But perhaps that’s a trivial conceptual quibble. The difficulty of the point seems to me to jut up from the preposition —self-disgust within materialism, for materialism, under or over it, crowded around its base or leaping out of its top like a jack-in-the-box from Mar-o-Lago (do they call them Springteufel here?). The devil is in the detail. If Celine represents self-revulsion *within* materialism and Juenger represents revulsion *for* it (this is the difference between a fascist medical orderly and a fascist aristocrat), then Fanon is self-revulsion spinning around it like a particle fired through an accelerator. You describe that difference very beautifully when you talk about the movement of Fanon’s writing, his supreme fixation on splintering and fragmentation, which starts off in his text as a kind of mantra and then grows into something more fundamental, into the organizing principle of the entire chapter, its phenomenology of deflagrations – ‘it shatters my unreflected position ... shattered my last illusion ... in order “to shatter the hellish cycle” I explode’ etc. You describe it without yet quite fitting him into our preliminary taxonomy, and you’re right not to do that, he doesn’t

belong in it, since the whole impassioned movement of his argument in the freefall of its desire to outstrip itself is meant to smash straight through any comparable architecture of niches, on the way to something else. When I first read that passage of your email I thought of Juenger again, this time of *Storms of Steel*, the First World War novel in which likewise everything is in perpetual motion and fragments are flying everywhere; but on even a moment's reflection the comparison is totally inappropriate, since what that book drills into the head of its reader is a kind of transcendence by way of desensitisation: by the time the millionth Grenade has been geschleudert into the millionth filthy trench you begin to read about the devastation with a kind of insensible glazed-over serenity, which is of course exactly the effect that the author of the book wants to achieve. Insensible glazed-over serenity is the aristocracy of the spirit when it gets home and takes off its uniform, and the result is nothing like what you get in Fanon, and it could never hope to be like it, because in Fanon's case it is the self that explodes, and not 'just' the empirical self, which the ideal self looks down on from its viewing platform with grim satisfaction, but the whole self locked into its effort to conceive its life in such a way as to make it liveable, material conditions being what they are. In the end it is the ideal that spills its guts out, for Fanon: 'I saw the sky turn upon itself ... the disemboweled silence fell back on me'. And I see in that final passage of argument a kind of wrenching effort to arrive at a contortion in conceptual self-rep-

resentation that is so involved and so painfully singular that no effort of philosophical parsing can disentangle it into one or another of the cells that a colonial society and its gendarmerie of concepts have constructed for exactly that purpose. The author wants to rise up to the sky that is the most degraded symbol for the ideal but the sky falls on him instead, and its organs that should be his organs fall out, and the wings that he ought to be able to use to rise up to it are the sky's wings and not his, and his brokenness and his damaged singularity is suddenly and inexplicably its brokenness and its damaged singularity; and at this point, at which reality has been so painstakingly turned upside down that nothing seems to make sense any more, and where the words have bulged out of shape so much that they no longer resemble 'an ideology' that anyone could be locked into or burst out of, he begins 'to weep', and so at last rains down on the sky that he is, and achieves in and throughout and beneath and around this figurative havoc and in nothing less than that the upward movement that was denied to him by any more conventional means.

Or like someone else put it:

And now, each night I count the stars.
And each night I get the same number.
And when they will not come to be counted,
I count the holes they leave.

I realize that the more that I write the further away

I get from anything resembling a conclusion, and perhaps we won't get any further than the scheme that you've already set out. But since you bring up the Octavia Butler story perhaps I can say one more thing about that. The flipside in that story to the kind of terrifying self-mutilation of the disease carrier is the state of contemplative absorption into which the same person subsequently passes. There is no alternative to these two states that reverse into one another and are equally defined by the cancellation of any active living subject: the vegetative preoccupation with the world as it is constitutes a variation on and not a contrary of (or a cure for) the ferocious obliteration of the conditions of the self in the effort to arrive at its 'core'. I think that you're right that this is the point at which the whole topic of the 'self' has to be given up on the grounds of its incorrigible vagueness; and I suppose that it could be argued that the whole of Butler's story is (among other things) a sort of disturbing allegory about the consequences of our insistence that there is 'a subject' that we could know, if only we could annihilate all of the things that happen to discolour or distort it. But there is also another kind of allegory that can be constructed out of the image of the divided personality that she develops, on a different axis of implication. And the point of that allegory would be to suggest that for so long as we associate 'politics' with contemplative absorption in the world and its objectivity, whether under the guise of realism or rationalism or technophilia or Prometheanism, or any of the other ration-

alizations of political helplessness now more or less in fashion; that for so long as we insist on this point and invest in it all of our intellectual energies, then there will be no reason to believe that the subject that tears itself to shreds in a violent fit, whether in rage or out of disgust or for competitive reasons, or just to prove a point – that this subject and its form of self-relation is a parody of self-overcoming and not its radical fulfilment.

Part II (a few months later)

MV:

Thinking of why I wanted us to read this Jared Sexton interview together, first between us and eventually in public, I think the proximate reason was the deliberate, meticulous and expansive way that ‘figures of negativity’ are developed there, in ways that clearly build out their implications philosophically, politically and psychically.¹² Negativity as both vehicular – a way of doing something, a way of getting somewhere – so having this strategic or conjunctural capacity, but also as this kind of impossible horizon, a way of breaking the feedback loop between affir-

12 Jared Sexton, ‘On Black Negativity, Or the Affirmation of Nothing’, *Society and Space*, 18 September 2017. <https://www.societyand-space.org/articles/on-black-negativity-or-the-affirmation-of-nothing>

mation and negation as reactive and reproductive dynamics of action and thought, as well as the one between affirmation and transcendence – a negative dialectic that takes the form of an interminable movement. It's thus a way of constantly linking radical thought, unfolding, say, in the academy but not just there, to its material conditions, but also of turning that material contact into a scene of 'invention' rather than moralism (the whole discussion of Fanon, existence vs life, invention vs creation, and the philological ethics of that also), keeping that horizon fractured and also introverted in such a way that there is never a guarantee of legitimacy, but also no shelter in the ethics of complexity/complicity. It seems like a very compelling movement of thought to me, with several moments that stringently register: the insistence on psycho-politics, the 'agential paradox' and the conditions of desire for emancipation and emancipation from the desiring self, traced back to a militant, processual understanding of care drawn from Fanon's therapeutic practice as well as black cultural performance, and how the imbricatedness of the 'systemic' and 'personal' – as placeholder terms – can help undermine the too-affirmative notions as well as critiques of 'radical [self-]care' currently circulating; and finally this idea of black thought as coterminous with critical thought, as it starts from the position of the unthought. This latter is a constant in 'afro-pessimist' theoretical practice, and there are many ways we can think about it and constellations to relate it to. The universalism here is also interesting to me,

that blackness can imply universality but one which again can only unpick all other universals and particulars: ‘a black universality, the universality of blackness, is one that cannot settle or rest or accept what is universal within it. It is a ceaselessly universalizing universality, attentive to, insistent on, and skeptical about every particularity, every local situation through which it is articulated.’ But it is specifically a universality phrased in terms of the particular historical, or, rather, ontological experience of blackness and anti-blackness, and this is something I have always felt compelled to both accept and resist, particularly from the standpoint of gender, but also a resistance I would like to resist by spending some time thinking about precisely the horizon of this blackness. I wonder if that’s anything you’d like to maybe pick up on in your reply – but obviously you should pick up from wherever and whatever solicits your thinking.

DH:

I can only approach that horizon by means of a massive lateral shuffle; but I hope that the digression might be useful, somehow, in some way. We’re talking about the dissolution of the subject and the politics thereof. The Sexton interview does seem to bring very sharply into view a deliberate and conscious extension of just that theme (‘variations on a kind of self-cancelling’, as Sexton puts it); and it is an ex-

tension also of the theoretical vocabulary with which that practice of negativity might be understood, or if not understood then at least felt more viscerally. More on that below. Feel free to take or leave the questions at the end as you see fit.

Reading through Sexton's interview for the second time I noticed more directly the centrality to it of a particular defence of metaphorical vocabulary, or of condensed description, that seems to be intended to act as a kind of pre-emptive response to the problematics of Theory. (By 'Theory' I mean not so much an assembly of bits of all other academic subjects, but history, painfully concertinaed into practical knowledge.) Sexton has this to say about those who criticize the centrality to afro-pessimist Theory of the figure of the slave: 'as if this were not about a kind of attack on the ethnographic imagination altogether; as if none of us have read anything about the dangers of speaking for others or using risky figures of speech or generalizing from the specific or abstracting from the concrete'. That idea of risk as a quality of compressed ('theoretical') assertion runs throughout the rest of the interview like a red thread. It comes back first quite subtly in the discussion of the misrecognition by black and white critics of the 'invitation' of blackness and its recasting as a 'threat', which to my eyes at least is partly a recognition of the frustration that Sexton's style of argument is fated to lead to, when 'There is nothing to affirm', and when the negativity extends, as you note

in your email when you talk about the text's 'impossible horizon', not only to any affirmative political programme but even to particular modes of negativity itself. (This is what I take to be the challenge of Sexton's anathema on the whole question of attitudinal self-definition: 'Who knows what to do with their damnation? Rise above it, wallow in it, or pay it no mind: all transcendent sense making, all so many attempts to take control.') And it comes back yet again in the final, painful, self-consciously tentative approach to the 'taboo' of the relationship between 'violability' and 'affectability', in which the unstated and unbearable hypothesis is that the heightening of the second is unthinkable without the reality of the first, so that that reality may even therefore be justified (however indirectly) by the facultative adaptations to which against all likelihood – and through the most gigantic, centuries-long effort of collective will – it seems to have led: adaptations that in the long-run make the police-concept of adaptation itself seem like an anachronism and an insult. Sexton is saying, if I read him rightly, something about the way that a taboo (a felt risk, a justified fear) invades our language and makes it disarticulated and circuitous, as the parenthetical construction of my last sentence most certainly was. Does the depth and accomplishment of blackness warrant the violence of its formation? Is slavery a 'legal standing' or a 'sociopolitical (and ... psychosexual) status'? But also, what do we want these questions to mean to us? Who do we have to be in order to meet them in the spirit in which they

are formulated? What attitude towards language does this require, since what we are facing is not the whole of historical reality but the most brutally abbreviated short-hand formulations into which we could ever hope to cram or squash it, under the pressure of time-constraints that are not just innate to an academic discipline called Theory but to the lives of billions of people harassed by the circumstances of their lives and the pain and livid optimism that shoot through them, literally, figuratively, however you like or if you've nothing to hide then what do you have to be afraid of?

I want to make this clearer; but this is where I arrive at what may prove to be a terminal diversion rather than a digression. Let's see. It goes like this: there is one other place in which Sexton introduces his approach to the horizon of blackness in terms of a particular orientation towards language. This is when he brings up Keats's account of negative capability:

Now, Žižek's 'Bartleby politics' are obviously not quietist, insofar as they are meant to prepare the way for a true political act. (Frédéric Neyrat [2014] has a related conception: 'Rather than its heart, passivity should be the skin of politics. Without passivity, without a "negative capability", to refer to Keats's notion, there isn't any creative imagination, this chaotic imagination that generates the promises of new worlds'. And, not for nothing, Hortense Spillers (2003) makes another, earlier argument for 'negative capability' in a pair

of essays first published in the 1990s...

This is in connection with his idea that afro-pessimism would involve a negativity that is ‘strictly unfathomable’ and that would be opposed to the ‘desperate demand to do something’ of a stereotyped ‘activism’. Sexton goes on: ‘Think of the performative contradiction of trying to relax; the harder you try to attain it, the more it evades you. As every athlete worth their salt knows, your best performance requires your least effort. The more you relax, the more intensely you can exert yourself. In this scenario, you do more the less you try.’

Obviously I have an appetite for crude formulations and so I’ll just put this as bluntly as I can. Sexton is discussing something like the linguistic significance of curtailed or violently abbreviated formulations. If the question is about whether antebellum slavery persists in the US today, a strictly literalist response would say that it does and it doesn’t, and, furthermore, since contradiction is in general to be avoided, it would be better to say that it can’t. Literalists like this abound in every domain of social life and often hold literal positions of authority in the institutions that literally violate, imprison and oppress black people and resist even the most minimal reforms that might serve to meliorate the cruelty to which they are asymmetrically and gratuitously exposed. Jeff Sessions is a strict literalist in this sense. Dame Anne Elizabeth Owers, Commander of the Order of the British Empire and head of the Independent Police

Complaints Committee, is a fanatic of literalism. And Sexton's argument as I perceive it is that afro-pessimism is (among other things) a sort of experiment in the defensiveness that is folded up in this literalness that wants to evacuate the psychosexual from political language. I.e.: an investigation into how it is that an invitation to encounter the enormous complexity of historical phenomena in the crude medium of compressed statement ('risky figures of speech') comes to bring white supremacy out in a hot flush of linguistic positivism. *You can't mean that literally* implies you just couldn't; and behind that echoes *how could you?*, which is the phraseology of a backlash metamorphosed by means of expensively acquired rhetoric into inscrutable legalese: Wikipedia tells me on what day the Emancipation Proclamation was issued and that, as positivists like to say, is that.

The point of all of this is to adjust the way in which we understand the theory. It is a challenge, it is a form of language, it engages in radical acts of compression, we need it to do this for us, it is the performative embodiment of what we ask from our practices of understanding and it is the test of the capacity of our addressees to bear with us for as far as we can bear to go. At the same time it risks being none of these things; which is anyway what differentiates it from the defensive literalism that proves nothing except that it definitely isn't.

I recognize that in conducting this kind of gloss I risk an endorsement of Sexton's writing that purges it of

its most specific claim, which is that the problem that calls forth this attitude towards theoretical assertions is, more than any other, differentially experienced, and therefore irreducible to a particular relationship to language that any individual is equally capable of inhabiting or not inhabiting, as the mood dictates. I don't have an immediate answer to that objection, other perhaps than that this is the only way that I feel that I can answer to what the text is trying to do. I might also note in passing that Sexton's approach amounts to a kind of very sustained attack on the fiction of theoretical impersonality. His interview begins with a candid statement of how hurt he feels, that the kind of self-exposure that he believed his work to involve (the hurt of those who attempt to think 'from the position of the slave') has so often been misconstrued by a defensiveness that disavows itself, literalizes metaphysical (or ontological) claims, and so obliterates the subjective (psychosexual) impulses of justified anger or vengefulness that gave rise to defensiveness in the first place. Christina Sharpe too when she begins to talk in terms of the labour of the wake ('wake work') begins to write in a prose that is full of exposed pronouns (*'I am trying ... I am trying ... I am trying'*, all p. 19).¹³ The self can't be overcome unless it can be seen at work and in process; and to make it visible itself costs a concerted expenditure of effort.

I want to ask a few questions that might bring us back towards the question of self-overcoming and

13 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

perhaps the (limited or compromised) left-right axis with which we started out. But I realize too that I've digressed from my digression.

I mentioned to you earlier that Keats's negative capability is a concept that I've been interested in for a while. I've wanted for a long time to know what made him commit to this idea, of the need to be 'capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason'. I wanted to understand what historical circumstances might have pledged him to that vision. I think that in other circumstances it might be worth noting that the painting that prompts him to this reflection depicts (among other things: I am quoting from another contemporary description) 'The banners of the Crusaders ... advanced against the flower of Painim valour, the Sultan Saladin and his army' ('the imagination is fired by a crowd of memorable recollections. The white turbans of the Moslems ... the British hero, clad in steel, and mounted on a white charger ... the strokes of his ponderous mace' etc etc). The painting is a veritable scale model of European orientalism and has a supplement of anti-blackness. But there is also the question of the generational fixation of this commitment to negativity. To make the argument as brief as possible. Keats is a poet of the second generation of authors following the revolutions of the 1790s. His relationship to the major political upheavals of his era is similar to that of revolutionaries today to the insurgencies of the '60s. The passions and the

traumas that had shaped the lives of authors born forty years earlier were accessible to him only indirectly; which is one reason why he was compelled to carry out a kind of wrenching transvaluation of values and to make into the central object of his art not the experiences that he had had (the practical tasks, the defeats, the lessons learned) but those that he had been denied or could never have accessed in the first place.

The first question for me is: is this the circumstance in which ‘unfathomable’ negativity becomes a political imperative? Every generation attempts to overcome itself in conditions that are not of its own choosing. I am not saying that writers whose attempts to conceive negativity begin in a society that has been more or less ruthlessly pacified are ‘wrong’ for that reason – that would be like telling Rosa Luxemburg or George Jackson that they were ‘wrong’ for writing occasionally about prisons – but I do want to hold on to the idea that an adequate negativity should be able to hold on to its historical contingency even as it drives as far into the unfathomable depths of its own conditions of life as language or praxis will permit. How do you conceive of this problem?

The second question is about how to retrieve the problem of fascism that was in the background of some of our earlier exchanges. Sexton is clearly deeply skeptical of the unreflexive idea that we should do ‘something’ (*anything*: the italics serve as the orthographic expression of the contentlessness that

Sexton diagnoses in official ‘activism’) to oppose Trump, and he makes a cogent argument about how heroic, isolated acts of resistance can serve the interests of a far right that is just itching to receive official ratification of its persecution complex. The question is, does the horizon of blackness help us to understand that itch? Celine wanted to dissolve himself in an ecstatic frenzy; the ‘reactionary’ quality of his politics derives from the hypertrophic exaggeration of that impulse to the point at which it reverses into an ideological hatred of ordinary people laboring under the fantastical delusion that they have things that it would be appropriate to describe as ‘lives’. The Trump fan and Youtube addict wants his feeling of woundedness to be confirmed in the same way as his membership application. Does that represent a historical shift? How else to account for the difference?

The last question is about labour and the ‘position of the slave’. It’s one of the perversities of a negativity towards the edifice of theoretical (therefore, in general terms, educated, bourgeois, Western) language that we have to fight to show that we mean in it less than what it seems to say: to show our faces in it ‘swelling into reality’, in Keats’s words: since it is the kind of place in which so many are people are made to feel as if they aren’t entitled to show theirs, even sometimes when the whole place purports to have been named after them. ‘Language and form fracture more every day’, says Sharpe, on the same page that she accumulates all of the ‘I am trying’ statements

that I mentioned above; and the assertion of effort in the abstract really is the content of this fragmentation and the reality to which it wakes up: the effort of staying alive, of preserving an object, or a subject, beneath the threshold of its self-elaboration or expressive disalienation; and therefore of reproduction rather than production, which is an object that (as you know better than I do) is easy enough to put into theory but very difficult to get back out again, because the experience that it covers is incomplete and blurry and innately refractory to well-finished concepts. Maya G: No labour power ever simply drops off an assembly line.

I am trying in a very imprecise way to suggest a way (less a horizon than a chink) in which those two 'ontologies' or 'standpoints' that you point out at the end of your email might be thought together, though absolutely not 'integrated' (integrated is just a euphemism for stitched up). How does theory confront the reality of contentlessness: not as a metaphysical reality, but as a complex social experience, with many levels and gradients and amplitudes?

MV:

I am not sure if it is possible, at least given our current time and space exigencies, or maybe just the plain inadequacies of our current time and space regime, to approach the richness and plurivalence of

what you write here in anything but the most key-hole of exploratory surgeries. So see if you can forgive the laproscopy, and the metaphor.

There are two points you mention that I will see about elaborating upon first, and then will try to ('trying to...' in the mode of contingency and aspiration) concentrate on two of the three questions that it felt like I had the most fully realised apprehension of.

There was the point you made that I could reformulate as the impoverished concretion, or, the illogical positivism, of the enemy. The literalism of those who can afford it, for whom any deviation from the flattened experience of privilege seems like illegitimate poetic license, unethical poetics, one of those tricks of the underclass, another one of those weapons of the weak and shiftless who have a tenuous grip on consensus reality, the weak and conniving, always pilfering your goodwill. This literalism of power is legalistic but also fantastical, and when wounded, it is in startling proximity to your figure of the Trump fan / YouTube addict. When not impervious in its calcified pedantry, its impososity to what is literally unimaginable to it, this attitude is wounded, it is out of control, it is flailing in the wind, like the officious middle-class middle-aged lady who accosted me at the train station recently and told me off for cycling up a road to the back of the station that apparently I shouldn't have, according to the road sign. This is an allusion to the pain and bewilderment of people whose viewpoint extends no further or wider than

one pixel in front of their faces and go into a frenzy if there's any motion at the edge of the frame might seem a bit diversionary, but it came to mind as a desperate way of keeping control over reality, either one that's under threat from a deviant cyclist or by the inadmissibility of structurally institutionalised and differentiated social violence to not just liberal ignorance but active racist malevolence (this being perhaps – I do not know the IPCC person's history enough – the distinction between her and Jeff Sessions). The subject here is barely held together by their belief in structures that must be adhered to, and that if adhered to will ensure the same 'chances' for the poor and the rich – structures like the famous radically democratic bridge anyone can sleep under, maybe. So the dissolution of the officious subject, the subject of liberal common-sense – that is certainly a subject who self-dissolves to the right, since they cannot imagine anything but an impersonal justice which provides for the individual until it doesn't, then it's each atom for themselves in a lawless universe. But the literalism of the powerful, I guess, in the most magnanimous of our scenarios, echoes up from a sincere acceptance of the rules as the bedrock of all that allows them to live and believe, and to not be able, or really not to have to, imagine a world where those rules didn't provide for everyone as they do for them and their class – call it confirmation bias, just-world theory or optimistic cruelty. Yet maybe the point was rather literalism as power, as brutality, as a disbelief in a world where the conditions that enable both the belief and the disbelief

to be reproduced simply are exposure to death, slow and attritive or haphazard and exemplary, of those 'blackened' by the operations of a just world. This is roughly the thesis of civil society and the slave, as allegorical keystones of the real, the figures of a negativity so thoroughgoing that it may be corrosive to a relationship with history, to any movement at the edge of the frame. This is the question that shouldn't be reduced to a philosophical contretemps between Being and history, or the historical, nor be framed as an ethical or aesthetic commitment. I'll come back to that later.

Then I wanted to come back to the conjunction between skin and politics and passivity in the Neyrat quote Sexton cites, and then the relationship between affectability and violability, with the latter, as you say, hovering over or through the former as its extimate condition of possibility. Spillers is mentioned, and this briefly brought to mind the necessity of her work as a reference here since she talks about the supersession of the body by its status as a fungible commodity, the supersession of its gender or any other customary or legal status (with this anchoring the somewhat disquieting insistence of Christina Sharpe on the fact that the anonymous child captured in the photo from the aftermath of the 2010 Haitian earthquake is a girl child), and as this fungible commodity it is nothing but anonymous, useful or superfluous, exploitable or surplus, flesh. Dehumanization by the market, to make a maniacal understatement, rather

than humanization through it, as in every theodicy of liberalism (and of course dehumanization by the market, in another sense, is the ground of fellow fascist feeling – the limits to the ability to objectify everyone as completely as the market dictates you must in order to attain subjecthood or succeed according to its racial and gendered optima). So the subject can also be dissolved, is dissolved, as we saw in Fanon's writing, by being annihilatingly sealed, asphyxiated in this abject flesh, not like the yearnings of a Christian mystic but 'suicided by society', a violence introverted and incised. But the skin is what is violable; is the skin a surface beneath which more questionable humanisms teem, such as subjects, persons or even bodies, or is it more like flesh, a membrane between the impersonal and the personal, between human and thing, or rather traversing them? The skin is what separates bodies, individualises them, exposes them; politics supposedly is instigated by that exposure, though I'm not sure I follow that – I'm more interested in undermining the correlation between politics and exposure, the phantoms of authenticity that invariably creates, and the jargon of bodies seems to me like one, like a jargon, especially when confronted with the historical generativity of a concept like flesh. Affectability, violability as sites, some sites, for an open-ended and a truly volatile negativity, unemployed rather than unemployed perhaps (no standing reserve there). But an ethics of exposure makes me wonder, ethics as a brilliantly fragile shield against the psychopolitical implications of this negativity as

a vast critical wager, and also a quotidian fact.

You say, ‘The self can’t be overcome unless it can be seen at work and in process; and to make it visible itself costs a concerted expenditure of effort.’ Sexton says ‘If I truly have nothing to lose but my chains, then why would I want to lose those and have nothing? If my psyche is assaulted so relentlessly that I cannot form a coherent self, then why would I want to subject that shattered ego to “a complete lysis” and risk losing my mind altogether? That’s the challenge.’ How to situate the experience of a negativity so immanent it becomes a problem in and for the self, for those who are already ‘overexposed’ to dispossession and destruction – without compounding/being complicit in that dispossession and destruction? So two kinds of accelerationist fallacy: from one side, how not to execute the mechanical twist of the absolute negative dial to the 11 of affirmation, and from the other end how to take damage and turn it into an emancipatory movement which can both negate and invent – is this the impossible, outside of as well as within political praxis, that Fanon lived through? But also what could that conceivably mean in a life, and what kinds of subject-object manoeuvrings would have to be granted for ‘I’ to ‘subject’ my shattered ego to any specific test situation of dissolution? In the service of what could be the beginning of another fable.

And this somehow, with some contortions admittedly, brings me to the question about history, or the his-

torical dimension, or whether unfathomable negativity and the ‘ruthless critique of all that exists’ have much of significance to say to each other, what they could organise or plan together. Is all this metaphorical production, of language, of thought, of diagrams of the unthought, of radical black feeling and blackness as critique full stop because it’s the position of the unthought, always pushing, but always opening something up (‘dehiscence’) – is it compensatory for the lack of politics, or is it rather creating a conceptual and affective field for something which may instantiate itself, very differently or unrecognizably, as politics, whether or not we stay with ‘black life’ as the likeliest referent? My access to this question, as per our habitual charming division of intellectual labour is you come at it through history and you come at it through language, and you develop arguments of spellbinding conceptual depth and intricacy, whereas I start from huge philosophical generalities and gradually work my way into language – my access to this question I think remains prospective as well as mediated through the imperative to think historically, at least for the moment, as in how to relate this work, this work on the self and its fractured objects and conditions, to a thinking of strategy, what kind of praxis it implies. I think it doesn’t, necessarily, there is a non-relation there, it has a kind of autonomy which is aesthetics rather than anything so dubious as the ‘autonomy of the political’, it is in a juddering negative dialectic with anything that has happened or is happening. The ‘prospective’ is rather how can

we imagine this working politically, and that is why I keep coming back to the universalism of this negativity, unfathomable negativity as not a nihilism or a formalism (nihilism being a sort of ‘eliminativist’ formalism) but an aesthetic and historical (affective maybe rather than only aesthetic, but maybe aesthetic already has this sensible, affective dimension to it) standpoint of universality. I want to think more about passivity though, and what Žižek is doing here, and what this junction between the Lacanian and Heideggerian directions is called upon to do and whether we can ever have this kind of unfathomable negativity without this recurrent horizon of Being (indifferent to the ontic rather than ontological slave – is this the passivity?), and then whether the basis is merely displaced, say to the ‘metabolism with nature’ or ‘labour’ or the ‘human’? I like the idea you pose at the end of your letter about throwing something into theory but then having a hard time getting it back out again, like it was some kind of impulsive washing machine. Is the problem the experience or the theory?

