Gramsci’s Black Marx:  
Whither the Slave in Civil Society?

FRANK WILDERSON, III  
University of California, Berkeley

The Black experience in this country has been a phenomenon without analog.  
Eugene Genovese, Boston Review October/November 1993.

A Decisive Antagonism

Any serious consideration of the question of antagonistic identity formation — a formation, the mass mobilisation of which can precipitate a crisis in the institutions and assumptive logic which undergird the United States of America — must come to grips with the limitations of marxist discourse in the face of the black subject. This is because the United States is constructed at the intersection of both a capitalist and white supremacist matrix. And the privileged subject of marxist discourse is a subaltern who is approached by variable capital — a wage. In other words, marxism assumes a subaltern structured by capital, not by white supremacy. In this scenario, racism is read off the base, as it were, as being derivative of political economy. This is not an adequate subalternity from which to think the elaboration of antagonistic identity formation; not if we are truly committed to elaborating a theory of crisis — crisis at the crux of America’s institutional and discursive strategies.

The scandal with which the black subject position threatens Gramscian discourse is manifest in the subject’s ontological disarticulation of Gramscian categories: work, progress, production, exploitation, hegemony, and historical self-awareness. By examining the strategy and structure of the black subject’s absence in Antonio Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks and by contemplating the black subject’s incommensurability with the key categories of Gramscian theory, we come face to face with three unsettling consequences.

Firstly, the black American subject imposes a radical incoherence upon the assumptive logic of Gramscian discourse. In other words, s/he implies a scandal. Secondly, the black subject reveals marxism’s inability to think white supremacy as the base and, in so doing, calls into question marxism’s claim to elaborate a comprehensive, or in the words of Antonio Gramsci, ‘decisive’ antagonism. Stated another way: Gramscian marxism is able to imagine the subject which transforms her/himself into a mass of antagonistic identity formations, formations which can precipitate a crisis in wage slavery, exploitation, and/or hegemony, but it is asleep at the wheel when asked to provide enabling antagonisms toward unwaged slavery, despotism, and/or terror.
Finally, we begin to see how marxism suffers from a kind of conceptual anxiety: a desire for socialism on the other side of crisis — a society which 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 democratise work and thus help keep in place, ensure the coherence of, the Reformation and Enlightenment ‘foundational’ values of productivity and progress. This is a crowding-out scenario for other post-revolutionary possibilities, i.e. idleness.

Why interrogate Gramsci with the political predicament and desire of the black(ened) subject position in the Western Hemisphere? Because the *Prison Notebooks’* intentionality, and general reception, lay claim to universal applicability. Neither Gramsci nor his spiritual progenitors in the form of scholars or activists say that the Gramscian project sows the seeds of freedom for whites only. Instead, they claim that deep within the organicity of the organic intellectual is the organic black intellectual, the organic Chinese intellectual, the organic South American intellectual and so on; that though there are historical and cultural variances, there is a structural consistency which elaborates all organic intellectuals and undergirds all resistance.

Through what strategies does the black subject destabilise — emerge as the unthought, and thus the scandal of — historical materialism? How does the black subject distort and expand marxist categories in ways that create, in the words of Hortense Spillers, ‘a distended organisational calculus’? (Spillers 1996, p. 82). We could put the question another way: How does the black subject function within the American desiring machine differently than the quintessential Gramscian subaltern, the worker?

Before going more deeply into how the black subject position destabilises or disarticulates the categories foundational to the assumptive logic of marxism, it’s important to allow ourselves a digression that attempts to schematise the Gramscian project on its own terms.

**The Gramscian Dream**

Students of struggle return, doggedly, to the *Prison Notebooks* for insights regarding how to bring about a revolution in a society in which state/capital formations are in some way protected by the ‘trenches’ of civil society. It is this outer perimeter, this discursive ‘trench’, constructed by an ensemble of private initiatives, activities, and an ensemble of pose-able questions (hegemony), which must be reconfigured before a revolution can take the form of a frontal assault. But this trench called civil society is not, for Gramsci, in and of itself the bane of the working class. Instead it represents a terrain to be occupied, assumed, and appropriated in a pedagogic project of transforming ‘common sense’ into ‘good sense’. This notion of ‘destruction-construction’ is a War of Position which involves agitating *within* civil society in a ‘revolutionary movement’ that builds ‘qualitatively new social relationships’ (Sassoon, 1987, p. 15):

[A War of Position] is a struggle that engages on a wide range of fronts in which the state as normally defined ... is only one aspect. [For
Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society? 227

Gramsci a War of Position is the most *decisive* form of engagement because it is the form in which bourgeois power is exercised [and victory on] these fronts makes possible or conclusive a frontal attack on War of Movement. (Sassoon, 1987, pp. 15-17)

In other words, for revolution to be feasible the proletariat must be 'hailed', in the Althusserian sense of the word, to a revolutionary position. And, for Gramsci, it is within this 'trench' between the economic structure and the state (with its legislation and its coercion), within civil society, that this hailing must take place. Again, for that to happen the trench, civil society, must be transformed. A War of Position can be summed up as a process by which workers struggling against capital and the state forge organs of working class civil society which in turn elaborate organic intellectuals capable of assimilating certain traditional intellectuals, and throughout the whole process all the struggle's personnel, if you will, fashion a discourse on all of civil society's fronts through which they eventually become hegemonic. In this way the 'common sense', the 'spontaneous' consent of the ruled toward the ideology of the rulers, finds its 'good sense', fragments of antagonistic sentiment transformed into an ensemble of questions which, prior to this process, could not be posed (i.e., What is to be done?). Common sense, by way of contrast, is an effect of the prevailing *forma mentis*. It involves

the notion that the social order can be perfected through 'fair and open' competition ... [and it] seeks to remedy problems and injustices through reforms fought for and negotiated among competing groups within the existing overall structure ... thus leaving the juridical-administrative apparatus of the state more or less intact ... It ... makes the revolutionary idea of eliminating competitiveness (i.e., greed) as the primary motivating force in society seem unreasonable, unrealistic, or even dangerous. (Buttigieg, 1995, p. 13)

The pedagogical implications are self-evident. For Gramsci this is a process through which various strata of the class struggling for dominance achieve 'historical self-awareness' (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 333-35). And for this reason civil society itself is not the bane of workers because its constituent elements (as opposed to the way those elements are combined) are not anti-worker. Therefore:

[Gramsci's] purpose is not to repress civil society or to restrict its space but rather to develop a revolutionary strategy (a 'war of position') that would be employed precisely in the arena of civil society, with the aim of disabling the coercive apparatus of the state, gaining access to political power, and creating the conditions that could give rise to a consensual society wherein no individual or group is reduced to a subaltern. (Buttigieg, 1995, p. 7)

At this moment (the end of subalternity by way of the destruction of the ruling class) the State becomes 'ethical'. Gramsci writes:

Every State is ethical in as much as one of its most important functions
is to raise the great mass of the population to a particular cultural and moral level, a level (or type) which corresponds to the needs of the productive forces for development, and hence to the interests of the ruling classes. (1971, p. 258)

He suggests that schools and courts perform this function for the State, before describing the ‘so-called private initiatives and activities’ which form the hegemonic apparatuses of the ruling class. But these private initiatives (i.e., newspapers, cinema, guild associations) are not ‘ethical’ precisely because of their ability to exist in tandem with the State and/or due to their function as its outright handmaidens (i.e., lobbyists, PACs).

[Therefore] only the social group [his code word for ‘class’, in an attempt to secure the Notebooks’ safe passage past Mussolini’s prison censors] that poses the end of the State and its own end as the target to be achieved can create an ethical State — i.e. one which tends to put an end to the internal divisions of the ruled ... and to create a technically and morally unitary social organism. (p. 259)

In other words, ‘civil society can only be the site of universal freedom when it extends to the point of becoming the state, that is, when the need for political society is obviated’ (Buttigieg, 1995, p. 30).

‘[T]he phenomenon of ‘subordination’ ... occurs without coercion; it is an instance of power that is exercised and extended in civil society, resulting in the hegemony of one class over others who, for their part, acquiesce to it willingly or, as Gramsci puts it, ‘spontaneously’. (Buttigieg, 1995, p. 22)

What appears to be spontaneous is a product of consent manufactured by intellectuals of the ruling class. Again, not only is consent manufactured but it is backed up by coercion-in-reserve, what Gramsci calls political society: the courts, the army, the police, and, for the past 57 years, the atomic bomb.

It is true that Gramsci acknowledges no organic division between political society and civil society. He makes the division for methodological purposes. There is one organism, ‘the modern bourgeois-liberal state’ (Buttigieg, 1995, p. 28), but there are two qualitatively different kinds of apparatuses: on the one hand, the ensemble of so-called private associations and ideological invitations to participate in a wide and varied play of consensus-making strategies (civil society), and on the other hand, a set of enforcement structures which kick in when that ensemble is regressive or can no longer lead (political society). But Gramsci would have us believe not that white positionality emerges and is elaborated on the terrain of civil society and encounters coercion when civil society is not expansive enough to embrace the idea of freedom for all, but that all positionalities emerge and are elaborated on the terrain of civil society. Gramsci does not racialise this birth, elaboration, and stunting, or re-emergence, of human subjectivity — because civil society, supposedly, elaborates all subjectivity and so there is no need for such specificity.

Anglo-American Gramscians, like Buttigieg and Sassoon, and US activists in
the anti-globalisation movement whose unspoken grammar is predicated on Gramsci’s assumptive logic, continue this tradition of unraced positionality which allows them to posit the valency of Wars of Position for blacks and whites alike. They assume that all subjects are positioned in such a way as to have their consent solicited and to be able to extend their consent ‘spontaneously’. This is profoundly problematic if only — leaving revolution aside for the moment — at the level of analysis; for it assumes that hegemony with its three constituent elements (influence, leadership, consent) is the modality which must be either inculcated or breached, if one is to either avoid or incur, respectively, the violence of the state. However, one of the primary claims of this essay is that, whereas the consent of black people may seem to be called upon, its withdrawal does not precipitate a ‘crisis in authority’. Put another way, the transformation of black people’s acquiescent ‘common sense’ into revolutionary ‘good sense’ is an extenuating circumstance, but not the catalyst, of State violence against black people. State violence against the black body, as Martinot and Sexton suggest in their introduction, is not contingent, it is structural and, above all, gratuitous.

Therefore, Gramscian wisdom cannot imagine the emergence, elaboration, and stunting of a subject by way, not of the contingency of violence resulting in a ‘crisis of authority’, but by way of direct relations of force. This is remarkable, and unfortunate, given the fact that the emergence of the slave, the subject-effect of an ensemble of direct relations of force, marks the emergence of capitalism itself. Let us put a finer point on it: violence towards the black body is the precondition for the existence of Gramsci’s single entity ‘the modern bourgeois-state’ with its divided apparatus, political society and civil society. This is to say violence against black people is ontological and gratuitous as opposed to merely ideological and contingent. Furthermore, no magical moment (i.e., 1865) transformed paradigmatically the black body’s relation to this entity. In this regard, the hegemonic advances within civil society by the Left hold out no more possibility for black life than the coercive backlash of political society. What many political theorists have either missed or ignored is that a crisis of authority that might take place by way of a Left expansion of civil society, further instantiates, rather than dismantles, the authority of whiteness. Black death is the modern bourgeois-state’s recreational pastime, but the hunting season is not confined to the time (and place) of political society; blacks are fair game as a result of a progressively expanding civil society as well.

Civil Death in Civil Society

Capital was kick-started by the rape of the African continent. This phenomenon is central to neither Gramsci nor Marx. The theoretical importance of emphasising this in the early twenty-first century is two-fold: first, ‘the socio-political order of the New World’ (Spillers, 1987, p. 67) 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 — the ‘accumulation’ of black bodies regardless of their utility as labourers (Hartman,
Johnson) through an idiom of despotic power (Patterson) — is closer to capital’s primal desire than is waged oppression — the ‘exploitation’ of unracial bodies (Marx, Lenin, Gramsci) that labour through an idiom of rational-symbolic (the wage) power: A relation of terror as opposed to a relation of hegemony. Secondly, today, late capital is imposing a renaissance of this original desire, direct relations of force (the prison industrial complex), the despotism of the unwaged relation: and this Renaissance of slavery has, once again, as its structuring image in libidinal economy, and its primary target in political economy, 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 re-introduction into the discourse expands the intensity of the antagonism. In other words, the slave makes a demand, which is in excess of the demand made by the worker. The worker demands that productivity be fair and democratic (Gramsci’s new hegemony, Lenin’s dictatorship of the proletariat), the slave, on the other hand, demands that production stop; stop without recourse to its ultimate democratisation. Work is not an organic principle for the slave. The absence of black subjectivity from the crux of marxist discourse is symptomatic of the discourse’s inability to cope with the possibility that the generative subject of capitalism, the black body of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and the generative subject that resolves late-capital’s over-accumulation crisis, the black (incarcerated) body of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, do not reify the basic categories which structure marxist conflict: the categories of work, production, exploitation, historical self-awareness and, above all, hegemony.

If, by way of the black subject, we consider the underlying grammar of the question ‘What does it mean to be free?’ that grammar being the question ‘What does it mean to suffer?’ then we come up against a grammar of suffering not only in excess of any semiotics of exploitation, but a grammar of suffering beyond signification itself, a suffering that cannot be spoken because the gratuitous terror of white supremacy is as much contingent upon the irrationality of white fantasies and shared pleasures as it is upon a logic — the logic of capital. It extends beyond textualisation. When talking about this terror, Cornel West uses the term ‘black invisibility and namelessness’ to designate, at the level of ontology, what we are calling a scandal at the level of discourse. He writes:

[America’s] unrelenting assault on black humanity produced the fundamental condition of black culture — that of black invisibility and namelessness. On the crucial existential level relating to black invisibility and namelessness, the first difficult challenge and demanding discipline is to ward off madness and discredit suicide as a desirable option. A central preoccupation of black culture is that of confronting candidly the ontological wounds, psychic scars, and existential bruises of black people while fending off insanity and self-annihilation. This is why the ‘ur-text’ of black culture is neither a word nor a book, not an architec-
tural monument or a legal brief. Instead, it is a guttural cry and a
wrenching moan — a cry not so much for help as for home, a moan less

Thus, the black subject position in America is an antagonism, a demand that
can not be satisfied through a transfer of ownership organisation of existing
rubrics; whereas 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, the slave calls into question the legitimacy of productivity
itself. From the positionality of the worker the question, ‘What does it mean to
be free?’ is raised. But the question hides the process by which the discourse
assumes a hidden grammar which has already posed and answered the
question, ‘What does it mean to suffer?’ And that grammar is organised around
the categories of exploitation (unfair labour relations or wage slavery). Thus,
exploitation (wage slavery) is the only category of oppression which concerns
Gramsci: society, Western society, thrives on the exploitation of the Gramscian
subject. Full stop. Again, this is inadequate, because it would call white
supremacy ‘racism’ and articulate it as a derivative phenomenon of the
capitalist matrix, rather than incorporating white supremacy as a matrix
constituent to the base, if not the base itself.

What I am saying is that 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 ‘generalised trust’, the precondition for the solicititation of
consent, ‘equals racialised whiteness’ (Barrett). Furthermore, as Patterson
points out, slavery is natal alienation by way of social death, which is to say
that a slave has no symbolic currency or material labour power to exchange: a
slave does not enter into a transaction of value (however asymmetrical) but is
subsumed by direct relations of force, which is to say that a slave is an
articulation of a despotic irrationality whereas the worker is an articulation of
a symbolic rationality. White supremacy’s despotic irrationality is as founda-
tional to American institutionalism as capitalism’s symbolic rationality because,
as West writes, it

dictates the limits of the operation of American democracy — with black
folk the indispensable sacrificial lamb vital to its sustenance. Hence
black subordination constitutes the necessary condition for the
flourishing of American democracy, the tragic prerequisite for America
itself. This is, in part, what Richard Wright meant when he noted, ‘The
Negro is America’s metaphor’. (1996, p. 72)

And it is well known that a metaphor comes into being through a violence
that kills, rather than merely exploits, the object so that the concept might live.
West’s interventions help us see how marxism can only come to grips with
America’s structuring rationality — what it calls capitalism, or political econ-
omy; but cannot come to grips with America’s structuring irrationality: the
libidinal economy of white supremacy, and its hyper-discursive violence that
kills the black subject so that the concept, civil society, may live. In other words, from the incoherence of black death, America generates the coherence of white life. This is important when considering the Gramscian paradigm (and its progenitors in the world of US social movements today) which is so dependent on the empirical status of hegemony and civil society: struggles over hegemony are seldom, if ever, asignifying — at some point they require coherence, they require categories for the record — which means they contain the seeds of anti-blackness.

Let us illustrate this by way of a hypothetical scenario. In the early part of the twentieth century, civil society in Chicago grew up, if you will, around emerging industries such as meat packing. In his notes on ‘Americanism and Fordism’ (1971, pp. 280–314), Gramsci explores the ‘scientific management’ of Taylorism, the prohibition on alcohol, and Fordist interventions into the working class family, which formed the ideological, value-laden grid of civil society in places like turn of the century Chicago:

It is worth drawing attention to the way in which industrialists (Ford in particular) have been concerned with the sexual affairs of their employees and with their family arrangements in general. One should not be misled, any more than in the case of prohibition, by the ‘puritanical’ appearance assumed by this concern. The truth is that the new type of man demanded by the rationalisation of production and work cannot be developed until the sexual instinct has been suitably regulated and until it too has been rationalised. (1971, pp. 296–97)

The discourse of this ‘suitable’ regulation and rationalisation underwrote the ‘common sense’ which hailed the proletariat through the influence, leadership, and ‘spontaneous’ consent of an ensemble of questions (hegemony) and simultaneously crowded out the project of transforming proletarian shards and fragments of ‘good sense’ into a revolutionary project. Gramsci called it a ‘psycho-physical adaptation to the new industrial structure [pre-Crash], aimed for through high wages’ (p. 286). And it meant that the working class struggle was pre-hegemony, existing, he suggested, ‘still in defense of craft rights against “industrial liberty”’. In this scenario a war of position has yet to commence because even unions, the vanguard of the working class, were simply ‘the corporate expression of the rights of qualified crafts and therefore the industrialists’ attempts to curb them [had] a certain “progressive” aspect’.

Gramsci’s preceding diagnosis is indicative of his well known pessimism of the intellect but it also contains the glimmer of his optimism of the will. For the unflinching nature of his analysis illustrates the moves that the worker must make (against Americanism and Fordism) in order to bring about the ‘flowering of the “superstructure”’ (a War of Position) so that ‘the fundamental question of hegemony [can be] posed’. But we must ask ourselves, for whom does his analysis provide an optimism of the will? Most American political theorists and social movement activists have not pried open even the crevice of a doubt about the Gramscian Dream’s applicability to all US positions, which Gramsci himself acknowledges when he writes:
The absence of the European historical phase, marked even in the economic field by the French Revolution, has left American popular masses in a backward state. To this should be added the absence of national homogeneity, the mixture of race-cultures, the negro question (emphasis mine, pp. 286-87)

For the sake our scenario — the impact of a successful War of Position on our hypothetical meat packing plant — let us not refer to the question as ‘the negro question’. Instead, let us call it the ‘cow question’. Let us suppose that the superstructure has finally ‘flowered’, and that throughout the various fronts where the power to pose the question held by the private initiatives and associations elaborated by the industrialists, hegemony has now been called into question and a war of position has been transposed into a war of manoeuvre. The scandal with which the black subject position threatens Gramscian discourse is manifest in the subject’s ontological disarticulation of Gramscian categories: work, progress, production, exploitation, hegemony, and historical self-awareness. Gramsci’s notes on ‘Americanism and Fordism’ demonstrate his acumen in expressing how the drama of value is played out in civil society (i.e. the family) away from the slaughter house, while being imbricated and foundational to the class exploitation which workers experience within the slaughter house. But still we must ask, what about the cows? The cows are not being exploited, they are being accumulated and, if need be, killed.

The desiring machine of capital and white supremacy manifest in society two dreams, imbricated but, I would argue, distinct: the dream of worker exploitation and the dream of black accumulation and death. Nowhere in Gramsci can one find sufficient reassurance that, once the dream of worker exploitation has been smashed — once the superstructure, civil society, has ‘flowered’ and the question of hegemony has been posed — the dream of black accumulation and death will be thrown into crisis as well.

I submit that death of the black body is (a) foundational to the life of American civil society (just as foundational as it is to the drama of value — wage slavery), and (b) foundational to the fantasy space of desires which underwrite the industrialist’s hegemony and which underwrite the worker’s potential for, and realisation of, what Gramsci calls ‘good sense’. Thus, a whole set of new and difficult, perhaps un-Grampsian, questions emerge at the site of our meat packing plant in the throes of its War of Manoeuvre. First, how would the cows fare under a dictatorship of the proletariat? Would cows experience freedom at the mere knowledge that they’re no longer being slaughtered in an economy of exchange predicated on exploitation? In other words, would it feel more like freedom to be slaughtered by a workers’ collective where there was no exploitation, where the working day was not a minute longer than the time it took to reproduce workers’ needs and pleasures, as opposed to being slaughtered in the exploitative context of that dreary old nine to five? Secondly, in the river of common sense does the flotsam of good sense have a message in a bottle that reads ‘Workers of the World Become Vegetarians!’? Finally, is it enough to just stop eating meat? In other words, can the Gramscian worker simply give the cows their freedom, grant them emanci-
vation, and have it be meaningful to the cows? The cows need some answers before they raise a hoof for the ‘flowering of the superstructure’.

The cows bring us face to face with the limitations of a Gramscian formulation of the question, what does it mean to be free? by revealing the limitations of the ways in which it formulates the question, what does it mean to suffer? Because exploitation (rather than accumulation and death) is at the heart of the Gramscian question, what does it mean to suffer? — and thus crowds out analysis of civil society’s foundation of despotic terror and white pleasure by way of the accumulation of black bodies — the Gramscian question also functions as a crowding out scenario of the black subject herself/himself, and is indexical of a latent anti-blackness which black folks experience in the most ‘sincere’ of social movements. So, when Buttigieg tells us that:

The struggle against the domination of the few over the many, if it is be successful, must be rooted in a careful formulation of a counterhege-
monic conception of the social order, in the dissemination of such a con-ception, and in the formation of counterhegemonic institutions —
which can only take place in civil society and actually require an expansion of civil society. [emphasis mine] (1995, p. 31)

... a chill runs down our spine. For this required expansion requires the intensification and proliferation of civil society’s constituent element: black accumulation and death.

No Data for the Categories

What does it mean to be positioned not as a positive term in a counterhege-
monic struggle, i.e. as a worker, but to be positioned in excess of hegemony, to be a catalyst which disarticulates the very rubric of hegemony, to be a scandal to its assumptive, foundational logic, to threaten its discursive integrity? Why is American civil life, whether regressive or expansive, predicated on black death? Why are black folk the indispensable sacrificial lamb vital to its sustenance?

In White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa, J.M. Coetzee examines the positionality of the KhoiSan in what he calls the early Discourse of the Cape: travel, ethnographic and scholarly writing of Europeans between the late sixteenth and eighteenth centuries.

Those Europeans who encountered the KhoiSan during this period came face to face with an Anthropological scandal: a being without (recognisable) customs, religion, medicine, dietary patterns, culinary habits, sexual mores, means of agriculture, and most significantly, without character — without character because, according to the literature, they did not work. Even when press-ganged into service by the whip, by the bible, by the spectre of star-
vation, they showed no valuation of industry. The only remedy for this condition, according to one Cape writer, was terror — their annihilation.

Wherever the European went in South Africa the project of colonisation was sutured, brokered, and fought with the help of discourse, and therefore, no matter how bloody it became, no matter how much force it necessitated, the
project did not face the threat of incoherence. Africans like the Xhosa who were agriculturalists provided European discourse with enough anthropological categories for the record so that, through various strategies of articulation, they could be known by the textual project which was the accompaniment to the colonial project. But not the KhoiSan. S/he did not produce the necessary categories for the record, the play of signifiers that would allow for a sustainable semiotics.

According to Coetzee, European discourse has two structuring axes upon which its coherence depends: the Historical Axis, codes distributed along the axis of temporality and events; and the Anthropological Axis, an axis of cultural codes. It mattered very little which codes on either axis a particular indigenous community was perceived to possess — and possession is the operative word here for these codes act as a kind of currency — what matters is that the community has some play of difference along both axes; enough differences to construct taxonomies that can be investigated, identified, and named by the discourse: without this the discourse literally can’t function. The discourse is reinvigorated by the momentary tension which ensues when an unknown entity presents itself, but this tension becomes a crisis, a scandal, when the entity remains unknown. Something unspeakable occurs. Not to possess a particular code along the anthropological axis or along the historical axis is akin to not having a gene for brown hair or green eyes on an X or Y chromosome. But not possessing a historical or anthropological axis altogether is akin to not having the chromosome itself. The first predicament throws the notion of what kind of human into play. The second predicament throws the notion of humanity itself into crisis.

Whereas even the Xhosa presented the Discourse of the Cape with both an anthropological and historical play of difference, the KhoiSan presented the Discourse of the Cape with an anthropological void.

Without those textual categories of Dress, Diet, Medicine, Crafts, Physical Appearance, and most importantly, Work, the KhoiSan stood in refusal of the invitation to become Anthropological Man. S/he was the void in Discourse which could only be designated as ‘idleness’. And idleness had been (a) counterposed to work and (b) criminalised and designated with the status of sin, long before the Europeans reached the Cape: it was not a signifier within anthropology but the death knell of humanity and spirituality itself.

Thus, the KhoiSan’s status within Discourse was not the status of an opponent or an interlocutor, but was the status 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 United States, the slave, presents both marxism and American social movement practice with a historical scandal. Every group provides American discourse with acceptable categories for the record (a play of signifiers, points of articulation) except black Americans. How is black incoherence in the face of the Historical Axis germane to the black experience as ‘a phenomenon without analog’?

A sample list of codes mapped out by an American subject’s Historical Axis
include the following. (1) Rights or Entitlements: here even Native Americans provide categories for the record when one thinks of how the Iroquois constitution, for example, becomes the American constitution. (2) Sovereignty: whether that state be one the subject left behind, or one, once again as in the case of American Indians, which was taken by force and dint of broken treaties. White supremacy has made good use of the Indian subject’s positionality: a positionality which fortifies and extends the interlocutory life of America 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. The code of sovereignty can have both a past and future history, if you'll excuse the oxymoron, when one considers that there are 150 Native American tribes with applications in at the B.I.A. for federal recognition, that they might qualify for funds harvested from land stolen from them. In other words, the curse of being able to generate categories for the record manifests itself in Indians’ ‘ability’ to be named by white supremacy that they might receive a small cash advance on funds (land) which white people stole from them. (3) Immigration: another code which maps the subject onto the American Historical Axis — narratives of arrival based on collective volition and premeditated desire. Chicano/a 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, or of sovereignty, i.e., the Mexican-American War. In this way, whites and Chicano/as both generate data for this category.

Slavery is the great leveller of the black subject’s positionality. The black American subject does not generate historical categories of Entitlement, Sovereignty, and/or Immigration for the record. We are off the record. To the data generating demands of the historical axis we present a virtual blank, much like the Khoisan’s virtual blank presented to the data generating demands of the anthropological axis. The work of Hortense Spillers on black female sexuality corroborates these findings. Spillers’ conclusions regarding the black female subject and the discourse of sexuality are in tandem with ours regarding the black ungendered subject and the question of hegemony and, in addition, unveil the ontological elements which black women and men share: a scandal in the face of New World hegemony.

[T]he black female [is] the veritable nemesis of degree and difference [emphasis mine]. Having encountered what they understand as chaos, the empowered need not name further, since chaos is sufficient naming within itself. I am not addressing the black female in her historical apprenticeship as inferior being, but, rather, the paradox of non-being [emphasis mine]. Under the sign of this particular historical order, black female and black male are absolutely equal. (Spillers, 1984 p. 77)

In the socio-political order of the New World the black body is a ‘captive body’ marked and branded from one generation to the next. A body on which 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 [is lost]. To that extent, the procedures adopted for the captive flesh demarcate a total objectification, as the entire captive community becomes a living laboratory. (emphasis mine, p. 68)

The gratuitous violence begun in slavery, hand in hand with the absence of data for the New World Historical Axis (Rights/Entitlement, Sovereignty, Immigration) as a result of slavery, position black subjects in excess of Gramsci’s fundamental categories, i.e. labour, exploitation, historical self-awareness; for these processes of subjectification are assumed by those with a semiotics of analogy already in hand — the currency of exchange through which ‘a dimension … of relatedness between one human personality and another, between human personality and cultural institutions’ can be established. Thus, the black subject imposes a radical incoherence upon the assumptive logic of Gramscian discourse. S/he implies a scandal: ‘total objectification’ in contradistinction to human possibility, however slim, as in the case of working class hegemony, that human possibility appears.

It is this scandal which places black subjectivity in a structurally impossible position, outside of the ‘natural’ articulations of hegemony; but it also places hegemony in a structurally impossible position because our presence works back upon the grammar of hegemony and threatens it with incoherence. If every subject — even the most massacred subjects, Indians — are required to have analogues within the nation’s structuring narrative, and one very large significant subject, the subject upon which the nation’s drama of value is built, is a subject whose experience is without analogue then, by that subject’s very presence all other analogues are destabilised. Lest we think of the black body as captive only until the mid-nineteenth century, Spillers reminds us that the marking and branding, the total objectification are as much a part of the present as they were of the past.

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. (1987, p. 68)

Herein, the concept of civil war takes on a comprehensive and structural, as opposed to merely eventful, connotation.

Conclusion

Civil society is the terrain where hegemony is produced, contested, mapped. And the invitation to participate in hegemony’s gestures of influence, leadership, and consent is not extended to the black subject. We live in the world, but exist outside of civil society. This structurally impossible position is a paradox
because the black subject, the slave, is vital to civil society's political economy: s/he kick-starts capital at its genesis and rescues it from its over-accumulation crisis at its end — black death is its condition of possibility. Civil society's subaltern, the worker, is coded as waged, and wages are white. But marxism has no account of this phenomenal birth and life-saving role played by the black subject: in Gramsci we have consistent silence.

The black body in the US is that constant reminder that not only can work not be reformed but it cannot be transformed to accommodate all subjects: work is a white category. The fact that millions upon millions of black people work misses the point. The point is we were never meant to be workers; in other words, capital/white supremacy's dream did not envision us as being incorporated or incorporative. From the very beginning, we were meant to be accumulated and die. Work (i.e. the French shipbuilding industry and bourgeois civil society which finally extended its progressive hegemony to workers and peasants to topple the aristocracy) was what grew up all around us — 20 to 60 million seeds planted at the bottom of the Atlantic, 5 million seeds planted in Dixie. Work sometimes registers as a historical component of blackness, but where whiteness is concerned, work registers as a constituent element. And the black body must be processed through a kind of civil death for this constituent element of whiteness to gain coherence. Today, at the end of the twentieth century, we are still not meant to be workers. We are meant to be warehoused and die.

The U.S. carceral network kills ... more blacks than any other ethnic group ... [and] constitute[s] an 'outside' in U.S. political life. In fact, our society displays waves of concentric outside circles with increasing distances from bourgeois self-policing. The state routinely polices the unassimilable in the hell of lockdown, deprivation tanks, control units, and holes for political prisoners. (James, 1996, p. 34)

Work (i.e. jobs for guards in the prison industrial complex and the shot in the arm it gives to faltering white communities — its positive reterritorialisation of White Space and its simultaneous deterritorialisation of Black Space) is what grows up around our dead bodies once again. The chief difference today, compared to several hundred years ago, is that today our bodies are desired, accumulated, and warehoused — like the cows. Again, the chief constant to the dream is that, whereas desire for black labour power is often a historical component to the institutionality of white supremacy, it is not a constituent element.

This paradox is not to be found at the crux of Gramsci's intellectual pessimism or his optimistic will. His concern is with subjects in a white(ned) enough subject position that they are confronted by, or threatened with the removal of, a wage, be it monetary or social. But black subjectivity itself disarticulates the Gramscian dream as a ubiquitous emancipatory strategy, because Gramsci (like most US social movements) has no theory of, or solidarity with, the slave. Whereas the positionality of the worker enables the reconfiguration of civil society, the positionality of the slave exists as a destabilising force within civil society because civil society gains its coherence,
the very tabula rasa upon which workers and industrialists struggle for hegemony, through the violence of black erasure. From the coherence of civil society the black subject beckons with the incoherence of civil war. Civil war, then, becomes that unthought but never forgotten spectre waiting in the wings — the understudy of Gramsci’s hegemony.

Frank B. Wilderson, III may be contacted at the University of California, Berkeley, e-mail: suture@uclink.berkeley.edu.

Notes

1. The constituent elements of civil society are, however, anti-black. And it is this notion of civil society-qua-anti-black, in its formal dimensions — regardless of its content — that I will illustrate in this paper.

2. The most ridiculous question a black person can ask a cop is, ‘why did you shoot me?’ How does one account for the gratuitous? The cop is at a disadvantage: ‘I shot you because you are black; you are black because I shot you.’ Here is the tautology at the heart of the colonial experience. The inverse of which Fanon has already depicted: ‘In the colonies … [the] cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich’ (1968, p. 40).

3. See Marriott’s On Black Men and the last few chapters of Hartman’s Scenes of Subjection for an analysis of how the idiom of power, irrational despotism, which blacks lived under in the nineteenth century, changed its method of conveyance after Jubilee, while maintaining gratuitous irrationality through the twentieth century.

4. It’s important to bear in mind that for Hartman, Johnson, Patterson, and Spillers the libidinal economy of slavery is more fundamental to its institutionality than is the political economy. In other words, the constituent element of slavery involves desire and the accumulation of black bodies and the fact that they existed as things ‘becoming being for the captor’ (Spillers, 1987, p. 67). The fact that black slaves laboured is a historical variable, seemingly constant, but not a constituent element.

5. What’s being asserted here is that 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 allow for us to fully discuss this here. But Churchill and others explain how — unlike civil society’s junior partners — genocide of the Indian, just like the enslavement of blacks, is a precondition for the idea of America: a condition of possibility upon which the idea of immigration can be narrativised. 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. So, though white supremacy appropriates Native American codes of sovereignty, it cannot solve the contradiction that, unlike the codes civil society’s junior partners, Native American codes
of sovereignty are not dialogic with New World codes of immigration and access. It should also be noted that prior to the late eighteenth century and early to mid-nineteenth century the notion of Native America as sovereign nations was subordinated to the idea of the ‘savage’. In short, articulation comes, conveniently, into play as the ‘Indian Wars’ are being won.

References


Fanon, Frantz (1968) The Wretched of the Earth, New York: Grove Press, Inc.


- (1996) ‘All the Things You Could be by now if Sigmund Freud’s Wife was your Mother: Psychoanalysis and Race’, Boundary 2, 23 (3).

BLACK STUDIES IS A DEHISCENCE AT THE HEART OF THE INSTITUTION AND ON ITS EDGE; ITS BROKEN, CODED DOCUMENTS SANCTION WALKING IN another world while passing through this one, graphically disordering the administered scarcity from which black studies flows as wealth. The cultivated nature of this situated volatility, this emergent poetics of the emergency in which the poor trouble the proper, is our open secret.

This open secret is the aim of black studies—a weight, a compartment, where what it is to carry converges with what it is to arrive, always more and less than completely. The critique of the structures and tendencies whose delimitation and denial of that aim appear integral to their own foundation has rightly been understood to be indispensable to black studies: "the critique of Western Civilization" is black studies, according to Cedric Robinson, which is to say that what is called Western civilization is the object of black studies. This black optics is an auditory affair: night vision given in and through voices that shadow legitimate discourse from below, breaking its ground up into broken air; scenes rendered otherwise by undertones that are overheard, but barely. (Consider the rustle of a garment as the open, internally noncoerced, interrogatory punctuation of a collective chop or clap; the worked, songlike irregularity animating Andrew Cyrille’s brushed analytic of flavor; the breathy tortuosity of Jeanne Lee’s brightening of taste; the seen, scared, heard, sheared relation between what is there and not there, on the outskirts of all belonging, that the music gives.) Bearing vast repertoires of high-frequency complaints, imperceptible frowns, withering turns, silent sidesteps, and ever-vigilant attempts not to see and hear, black studies’ pleasurable series of immanent upheavals and bad, more than subjunctive moods are the critique of Western civilization. Often this critique shows up in a range of unpaid, imposed pedagogical duties carried out at various faculty meetings and conferences; in all its justifiable, fetishized performativity, it is often manifest as a sublation of anger mistaken for uncut ire or the absence of ire. Black students have to think about the give and take of such surplus being stripped from the thickness

FRED MOTEN teaches in the Department of English at Duke University. He is author of In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition (U of Minnesota P, 2003) and of three collections of poetry, Arkan- sas (Presses Walker, 2000), I Ran from It but Was Still in it (Cusp, 2007), and Hughson’s Tavern (Leon Works, 2008). He is working on a book to be called Stolen Life: Blackness and Form (U of Minnesota P).
of their skin, then decide that it is best understood, best distilled, as the mood for love.

This is why Robinson is equally adamant that black studies’ critical modalities are driven toward and directed by an aim—the ontological totality and its preservation—that, in all its secret openness, is called blackness. Black studies’ aim has always been bound up with and endangered by its object. When the prosecutorial gaze that is trained on that object (Western civilization) passes over that aim (blackness, which is not but nothing other than Western civilization), the danger is brutally, ironically redoubled. Talk of the preservation of the ontological totality produces great consternation in certain circles, which is unsurprising given the scarred, grainy, phonic inscription that accompanies such utterance. When that sound is received as mere catastrophic effect, as an always-already-broken acoustic mirror, critique turns into litigation in the hope of silencing it. But catastrophe must be sounded for the terrible, beautiful resonance it bears of that anoriginal recording of constant incision and expansion whose irreducible priority persists only insofar as preservation is transformation. It is in the recognition of the interplay of rupture and irruption in and as the given that black studies’ aim and object intermittently, inconsistently, but serially reconvene, again and again momentarily escaping danger. Black studies breaks/ a rhythm whose tactile complexity must be maintained while moving in and out of the institution, where smooth abrasion never seems to have a chance. Black studies’ inordinate feeling for divisions and collections requires every last bit of texture, as an opening gambit held in reserve—the “para-ontological distinction” between blackness and the people (which is to say, more generally, the things) that are called black.

In abiding with this distinction, one might instantiate an adequate challenge to the voraciously instrumental antiessentialism, powered in an intense and terrible way by good intentions, that sanctions black studies’ ongoing struggle with the misplacement of its aim and object. A kind of carelessness is revealed—as if the truth of old-new things is made available through their neglect—when invocations of home are subject to the continual misrecognition of their perpetual ideation of perpetual motion, while claims on homelessness are held to be everything other than the most radical mode of being-in-the-world. Similarly, when the strained desire the history of thinking imposes on those who have to think their way out of the exclusionary constrictions of that history succumbs to the anterotic power of summary judgment, the work that emerges is undone by what it misses. Behind such pseudocritical nonsolicitousness often lies a conflation of totality and the specter of a still univocality from which an etiolated idea of blackness is derived in order that it might be rescued by appeals to multiplicity that never fully regulate their own dismissive impulses. In fact, to be down with the dialectic of home and homelessness within which blackness persists, a dialectic that n(eg)ation language seems to bring into the sharpest audiovisual relief, one must have indexed (but more than this—grasped and inhabited in order to have thrown and departed) the ensemble of uptown operations that are migration’s precedent, held, as they are, in captive movements that still take place and flight up the country. The mysteries of a certain kind of locomotive whine are always given and withheld by way of the underwater cables some alien folk lay down when they are barred from travel and forcibly removed. The submerged span remains as its own convention. So that out of the unjustified margin between the ascription of contagion as slur and the vicious infatuation surveillance imposes, blackness is a general, material aspiration, the condition of possibility of politics understood, along but also off Foucauldian tracks, as the irreducible unconventionality of race war—covert, gentle violence in the midst of conversion, an effect of conversion and imminently
convertible in and as this essence of covering rolled back (flourished, ex-caped) and aggressively forgiving modesty. No government can take responsibility for it, however much it emerges in and out of governmental conditions; at the same time, it remains unresponsive to the governance that it calls and the governments that it rouses. The parasontological distinction brings the secrecy and openness of this gathering into relief as well.

All this—which was always so essentially and authentically clear in its wrought, inventive, righteous obscenity—now often suffers being revealed and reviled in critique that advances by way of what is supposed to be the closure of authenticity, essence, and experience, all of which continue to be made to share the most precise and predictably easy-to-dismiss name, local habitation, and communal form of life. That blackness is often profiled and found wanting what it is and has, in work that involuntarily falls under the admittedly imprecise rubric of African American studies, is also unsurprising and is due not so much to chauvinistic reactions to real or perceived chauvinism but to the fact that blackness's distinction from a specific set of things that are called black remains largely unthought. Paraontological resistance to this particular brand of orthodoxy requires a paleonymic relation to blackness, which is not in need of a highlight it already has or an extrachromatic saturation it already is or a rampant internal differentiation it already bears. As such, it need not be uncoupled from the forms that came to stand (in) for blackness, to which they could not be reduced and which could not be reduced to them.

What is often overlooked in blackness is bound up with what has often been overseen. Certain experiences of being tracked, managed, cornered in seemingly open space are inextricably bound to an aesthetically and politically dangerous supplementarity, an internal exteriority waiting to get out, as if the prodigal's return were to leaving itself. Black studies' concern with what it is to own one's dispossession, to mine what is held in having been possessed, makes it more possible to embrace the underprivilege of being sentenced to the gift of constant escape. The strain of black studies that strains against this interplay of itinerancy and identity—whether in the interest of putting down roots or disclaiming them—could be said, also, to constitute a departure, though it may well be into a stasis more severe than the one such work imagines (itself to be leaving). In contradistinction to such skepticism, one might plan, like Curtis Mayfield, to stay a believer and therefore to avow what might be called a kind of metacritical optimism. Such optimism, black optimism, is bound up with what it is to claim blackness and the appositional, runaway, phonoptic black operations—expressive of an autopoetic organization in which flight and inhabitation modify each other—that have been thrust upon it. The burden of this paradoxically aleatory goal is our historicity, animating the reality of escape in and the possibility of escape from.

What if the study of comparative racialization begins to extend and deepen its critical and imaginative relation to the terms abolition and reconstruction in a genuine, fundamental, fantastic, radical collective rethinking of them that will take into account their historical ground while also propelling them with the greatest possible centrifugal force into other, outer, space? Then, even though these terms index a specific history in the United States, their continued relevance and resonance will be international as well as intranational insofar as the ongoing aggressive constitution of the modern nation-state as a carceral entity extends histories of forced migration and stolen labor and insofar as the imperial suppression of movements that would excavate new aesthetic, political, and economic dispositions—as well, of course, as those movements themselves—is a global phenomenon. Abolition and
reconstruction might then be seen as ongoing projects animating the study of comparative racialization as well as black studies, two fields that will be seen as each other’s innermost ends, two fields that will be understood as constituted through the claim they make on—their thinking of and in—blackness.

Finally, one might plan to continue to believe that there is such a thing as blackness and that blackness has an essence given in striated, ensemblic, authentic experience (however much a certain natural bend is amplified by the force of every kind of event, however productive such constant inconsistency of shape and form must be of new understandings of essence and experience). It is obvious (particularly after the recent lessons of Lindon Barrett, Herman Bennett, Daphne Brooks, Nahum Chandler, Denise Ferreira da Silva, Brent Edwards, Saidiya Hartman, Sharon Holland, and Achilles Mbembe, among others) that blackness has always emerged as nothing other than the richest possible combination of dispersion and permeability in and as the mass improvisation and protection of the very idea of the human. Thus, concern over the supposedly stultifying force of authenticity exerted by supposedly restrictive and narrow conceptions of blackness, or worry over the supposed intranational dominance of blackness broadly and unrigorously conceived (in ways that presuppose its strict biological limitation within an unlimited minoritarian field), or anxiety over the putatively intradiasporic hegemony of a certain mode of blackness (which presumes national as well as biological determinations that are continually over- and underdetermined) indexes some other trouble, which we would do well to investigate. Such investigation is best accompanied by vigilant remembrance of and commitment to the fact that blackness is present (as E. P. Thompson said of the English working class) at its own making and that all the people who are called black are given in and to that presence, which exceeds them (in an irrevocable, antenational combination of terror and enjoyment, longing and rejection, that Hartman, in particular, illuminates).

Ultimately, the ontological force that is transmitted in the long chain of life and death performances that are the concern of black studies is horribly misunderstood if it is understood as exclusive. Everyone whom blackness claims, which is to say everyone, can claim blackness. That claim is neither the first nor the last anticipatory reorientation but is, rather, an irreducible element of the differentially repeating plane that intersects and animates the comparativist sphere.

In this regard, black studies might best be described as a location habitually lost and found within a moving tendency where one looks back and forth and wonders how utopia came to be submerged in the interstices and on the outskirts of the fierce and urgent now. The temporal paradox of optimism—that it is, on the one hand, a necessarily futurial attitude while being, on the other hand, in its proper Leibnizian formulation, an assertion of the necessity, rightness, and timelessness of the already existing—resonates in the slim gap between analytic immersion and deictic reserve. This bitter earth is the best of all possible worlds, a fact that necessitates the renewed, reconstructed, realization of imaginative intensities that move through the opposition of voluntary secrecy and forced exposure in order to understand how the underground operates out in, and as, the open. What’s the relation between the limit and the open? Between blackness and the limit? Between a specific and materially redoubled finitude called blackness and the open? The new critical discourse on the relation between blackness and death has begun to approach these questions. That discourse reveals that optimism doesn’t require—indeed, it cannot persist within—the repression of that relation; rather, it always lives (which is to say, escapes) in the faithful, postfactual assertion of a right to refuse, in the prenatal instantiation of a
collective negative tendency to differ, and in the resistance to the regulative powers that resistance, differing, and refusal call into being. The general insistence that we don’t mind leaving here is inseparable from the fact that it’s all right. Black optimism persists in thinking that we have what we need, that we can get there from here, that there’s nothing wrong with us or even, in this regard, with here, even as it also bears an obsession with why it is that difference calls the same, that resistance calls regulative power, into existence, thereby securing the simultaneously vicious and vacant enmity that characterizes here and now, forming and deforming us. However much trouble stays in mind and, therefore, in the light of a certain interest that the ones who are without interests have in making as much trouble as possible, there is cause for optimism as long as there is a need for optimism. Cause and need converge in the bent school or marginal church in which we gather together to be in the name of being otherwise.

WORKS CITED

NOTE
I dedicate this essay to the memory of Lindon Barrett, a scholar of beautiful, severe, generous brilliance. His influence on me—and our friendship—overcame delay and survived estrangement. His work was driven by love.
Fred Moten

Blackness and Nothingness
(Mysticism in the Flesh)

Just Friends

In the past decade, the most exciting and generative advance in black critical theory, which is to say critical theory, is the announcement and enactment of Afro-pessimism in the work of Frank B. Wilderson III and Jared Sexton. Black study such as theirs refreshes lines of rigorously interdisciplinary intervention, effecting intellectual renewal against academic sterility. When wardens of established disciplines and advocates of interdisciplinary reform fight to secure depleted sovereignty in and over the same depleted real estate— whose value increases as its desertification progresses; whose value is set by the new masters of another form of what Thomas Jefferson called silent profit—and when note of this false alternative is taken by those who offer nothing but a critique of the very idea of a true one, Wilderson and Sexton keep on pushing over the edge of refusal, driven by a visionary impetus their work requires and allows us to try to see and hear and feel. This essay is dedicated to Sexton’s and Wilderson’s work, out of love for the common project, out of love for such rigorous devotion to the common project, out of love for black people, out of love for...
blackness. I have thought long and hard, in the wake of their work, in a kind of echo of Bob Marley’s question, about whether blackness could be loved; there seems to be a growing consensus that analytic precision does not allow for such a flight of fancy, such romance, but I remain under the impression, and devoted to the impression, that analytic precision is, in fact, a function of such fancy. And this, perhaps, is where the tension comes, where it is and will remain, not in spite of the love but in it, embedded in its difficulty and violence, not in the impossibility of its performance or declaration but out of the exhaustion that is their condition of possibility. More to the point, if Afro-pessimism is the study of this impossibility, the thinking that I have to offer (and I think I’m as reticent about the term black optimism as Wilderson and Sexton are about Afro-pessimism, in spite of the fact that we make recourse to them) moves not in that impossibility’s transcendence but rather in its exhaustion. Moreover, I want to consider exhaustion as a mode or form or way of life, which is to say sociality, thereby marking a relation whose implications constitute, in my view, a fundamental theoretical reason not to believe, as it were, in social death. Like Curtis Mayfield, however, I do plan to stay a believer. This is to say, again like Mayfield, that I plan to stay a black motherfucker.

Over the course of this essay, we’ll have occasion to consider what that means, by way of a discussion of my preference for the terms life and optimism over death and pessimism and in the light of Wilderson’s and Sexton’s brilliant insistence not only upon the preferential option for blackness but also upon the requirement of the most painstaking and painful attention to our damnation, a term I prefer to wretchedness, after the example of Miguel Mellino, not simply because it is a more literal translation of Fanon (though often, with regard to Fanon, I prefer the particular kinds of precision that follow from what some might dismiss as mistranslation) but also because wretchedness emerges from a standpoint that is not only not ours, that is not only one we cannot have and ought not want, but that is, in general, held within the logic of im/possibility that delineates what subjects and citizens call the real world (Mellino 2013). But this is to say, from the outset, not that I will advocate the construction of a necessarily fictive standpoint of our own but that I will seek to begin to explore not just the absence but the refusal of standpoint, to actually explore and to inhabit and to think what Bryan Wagner (2009: i) calls “existence without standing” from no standpoint because this is what it would truly mean to remain in the hold of the ship (when the hold is thought with properly critical, and improperly celebratory, clarity). What would it be, deeper still, what is it, to think from no standpoint; to think outside the desire for a standpoint? What emerges in the desire that
constitutes a certain proximity to that thought is not (just) that blackness is ontologically prior to the logistic and regulative power that is supposed to have brought it into existence but that blackness is prior to ontology; or, in a slight variation of what Chandler would say, blackness is the anoriginal displacement of ontology, that it is ontology's anti- and ante-foundation, ontology's underground, the irreparable disturbance of ontology's time and space. This is to say that what I do assert, not against, I think, but certainly in opposition to Afro-pessimism, as it is, at least at one point, distilled in Sexton's work, is not what he calls one of that project's most polemical dimensions, “namely, that black life is not social, or rather that black life is lived in social death” (Sexton 201b: 28). What I assert is this: that black life—which is as surely to say life as black thought is to say thought—is irreducibly social; that, moreover, black life is lived in political death or that it is lived, if you will, in the burial ground of the subject by those who, insofar as they are not subjects, are also not, in the inerminable (as opposed to the last) analysis, “death-bound,” as Abdul JanMohamed (2005) would say. In this, however, I also agree with Sexton insofar as I am inclined to call this burial ground “the world” and to conceive of it and the desire for it as pathogenic. At stake, now, will be what the difference is between the pathogenic and the pathological, a difference that will have been instantiated by what we might think of as the view, as well as the point of view, of the pathologist. I don't think I ever claimed, or meant to claim, that Afro-pessimism sees blackness as a kind of pathogen. I think I probably do, or at least hope that it is, insofar as I bear the hope that blackness bears or is the potential to end the world.

The question concerning the point of view, or standpoint, of the pathologist is crucial but so is the question of what it is that the pathologist examines. What, precisely, is the morbid body upon which Fanon, the pathologist, trains his eye? What is the object of his “complete lysis” (Fanon 2008: xiv)? And if it is more proper, because more literal, to speak of a lysis of universe, rather than body, how do we think the relation between transcendental frame and the body, or nobody, that occupies, or is banished from, its confines and powers of orientation? What I offer here as a clarification of Sexton's understanding of my relation to Afro-pessimism emerges from my sense of a kind of terminological dehiscence in Orlando Patterson's (1982) work that emerges in what I take to be his deep but unacknowledged affinity with and indebtedness to the work of Hannah Arendt, namely, with a distinction crucial to her work between the social and the political. The "secular excommunication" that describes slavery for Patterson (1982: 5) is more precisely understood as the radical exclusion from a
political order, which is tantamount, in Arendt's formulation, with something on the order of a radical relegation to the social. The problem with slavery, for Patterson, is that it is political death, not social death; the problem is that slavery confers the paradoxically stateless status of the merely, barely living; it delineates the inhuman as unaccommodated bios. At stake is the transvaluation or, better yet, the invalidation or antivaluation, *the extraction* from the sciences of value (and from the very possibility of that necessarily fictional, but materially brutal, standpoint that Wagner [2009: i] calls "being a party to exchange"). Such extraction will, in turn, be the very mark and inscription (rather than absence or eradication) of the sociality of a life, given in common, instantiated in exchange. What I am trying to get to, by way of this terminological slide in Patterson, is the consideration of a radical disjunction between sociality and the state-sanctioned, state-sponsored terror of power-laden intersubjectivity, which is, or would be, the structural foundation of Patterson's epiphenomenology of spirit. To have honor, which is, of necessity, to be a man of honor, for Patterson, is to become a combatant in transcendental subjectivity's perpetual civil war. To refuse the induction that Patterson desires is to enact or perform the recognition of the constitution of civil society as enmity, hostility, and civil butchery. It is, moreover, to consider that the unspoken violence of political friendship constitutes a capacity for alignment and coalition that is enhanced by the unspeakable violence that is done to what and whom the political excludes. This is to say that, yes, I am in total agreement with the Afro-pessimistic understanding of blackness as exterior to civil society and, moreover, as unmappable within the cosmological grid of the transcendental subject. However, I understand civil society and the coordinates of the transcendental aesthetic—cognate as they are not with the failed but rather with the successful state and its abstract, equivalent citizens—to be the fundamentally and essentially antisocial nursery for a necessarily necropolitical imitation of life. So that if Afro-pessimists say that social life is not the condition of black life but is, rather, the political field that would surround it, then that's a formulation with which I would agree. Social death is not imposed upon blackness by or from the standpoint or positionality of the political; rather, *it is the field of the political,* from which blackness is relegated to the supposedly undifferentiated mass or blob of the social, which is, in any case, where and what blackness chooses to stay.

This question of the location and position of social death is, as Sexton has shown far more rigorously than I could ever hope to do, crucial. It raises again that massive problematic of inside and outside that animates thought since before its beginning as the endless end to which thought always seeks
to return. Such mappability of the space-time or state of social death would, in turn, help us better understand the positionalities that could be said, figu-
atively, to inhabit it. This mass is understood to be undifferentiated pre-
cisely because from the imaginary perspective of the political subject—who is also the transcendental subject of knowledge, grasp, ownership, and self-
possession—difference can only be manifest as the discrete individuality that holds or occupies a standpoint. From that standpoint, from the artificial, officially assumed position, blackness is nothing, that is, the relative noth-
ingness of the impossible, pathological subject and his fellows. I believe it is from that standpoint that Afro-pessimism identifies and articulates the imperative to embrace that nothingness which is, of necessity, relative. It is from this standpoint, which Wilderson defines precisely by his inability to occupy it, that he, in a painfully and painstakingly lyrical tour de force of autobiographical writing, declares himself to be nothing and proclaims his decision, which in any case he cannot make, to remain as nothing, in gene-
ealogical and sociological isolation even from every other nothing.

Now, all that remains are unspoken scraps scattered on the floor like Lisa’s grievance. I am nothing, Naima, and you are nothing: the unspeakable answer to your question within your question. This is why I could not—would not—answer your question that night. Would I ever be with a Black woman again? It was earnest, not accusatory—I know. And nothing terrifies me more than such a question asked in earnest. It is a question that goes to the heart of desire, to the heart of our black capacity to desire. But if we take out the nouns that you used (nouns of habit that get us through the day), your question to me would sound like this: Would nothing ever be with nothing again? (Wilderson 2008: 265)

When one reads the severity and intensity of Wilderson’s words—his assertion of his own nothingness and the implications of that nothingness for his reader—one is all but overwhelmed by the need for a kind of affirm-
ative negation of his formulation. It’s not that one wants to say no, Professor Wilderson, you are, or I am, somebody; rather, one wants to assert the presence of something between the subjectivity that is refused and which one refuses and nothing, whatever that is. But it is the beauty—the fantastic, celebratory force of Wilderson’s and Sexton’s work, which study has allowed me to begin more closely to approach—of Afro-pessimism that allows and compels one to move past that contradictory impulse to affirm in the interest of negation and to begin to consider what nothing is, not from its own standpoint or from any standpoint but from the absoluteness
of its generative dispersion of a general antagonism that blackness holds and
protects in as critical celebration and degenerative and regenerative preserva-
tion. That’s the mobility of place, the fugitive field of unowning, in and from
which we ask, paraontologically, by way of but also against and underneath
the ontological terms at our disposal: What is nothingness? What is thingli-
ness? What is blackness? What’s the relationship between blackness, thingli-
ness, nothingness and the (de/re)generative operations of what Deleuze
might call a life in common? Where do we go, by what means do we begin, to
study blackness? Can there be an aesthetic sociology or a social poetics of
nothingness? Can we perform an anatomy of the thing or produce a theory
of the universal machine? Our aim, even in the face of the brutally imposed
difficulties of black life, is cause for celebration. This is not because celebra-
tion is supposed to make us feel good or make us feel better, though there
would be nothing wrong with that. It is, rather, because the cause for celebra-
tion turns out to be the condition of possibility of black thought, which ani-
mates the black operations that will produce the absolute overturning, the
absolute turning of this motherfucker out. Celebration is the essence of
black thought, the animation of black operations, which are, in the first
instance, our undercommon, underground, submarine sociality.

In the end, though life and optimism are the terms under which I
speak, I agree with Sexton—by way of the slightest, most immeasurable
reversal of emphasis—that Afro-pessimism and black optimism are not but
nothing other than one another. I will continue to prefer the black optimism
of his work just as, I am sure, he will continue to prefer the Afro-pessimism
of mine. We will have been interarticulate, I believe, in the field where anni-
hilative seeing, generative sounding, rigorous touching and feeling, requires
an improvisation of and on friendship, a sociality of friendship that will have
been, at once, both intramural and evangelical. I’ll try to approach that field,
its expansive concentration, by way of Don Cherry and Ed Blackwell’s (1982)
extended meditation on nothingness; by way of Panon’s and Peter Line-
baugh’s accounts of language in and as vehicularity; by way of Foucault’s
meditations on the ship of fools and Deleuze’s consideration of the boat as
interior of the exterior when they are both thoroughly solicited by the
uncharted voices that we carry; by way, even, of Lysis and Socrates; but also,
and in the first instance, by way of Hawk and Newk, just friends, trading
fours. Perhaps I’m simply deluding myself, but such celebratory perform-
ance of thought, in thought, is as much about the insurgency of imma-
nence as it is about what Wagner (2009: 2) calls the “consolation of transcenden-
cence.” But, as I said earlier, I plan to stay a believer in blackness, even as
thingliness, even as (absolute) nothingness, even as imprisonment in passage on the most open road of all, even as—to use and abuse a terribly beautiful phrase of Wilderson’s (2010: xi)—fantasy in the hold.

**Mu First Part/Mu Second Part**

To stay in the hold of the ship, despite my fantasies of flight.

—Frank B. Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*

Where we were, notwithstanding, wasn’t there . . .
Where we
were the hold of a ship we were
caught
in. Soaked wood kept us afloat . . . . It
wasn’t limbo we were in albeit we
limbo’d our way there. Where we
were was what we meant by “μu.”

Nathaniel Mackey, “On Antiophon Island—‘μu’ twenty-eight part—”

There are flights of fantasy in the hold of the ship: the ordinary fugue and fugitive run of the language lab, black phonographies’ brutally experimental venue. Paraontological totality is still in the making. Present and unmade in presence, blackness is an instrument in the making. *Quasi una fantasia* in its paralegal swerve, its mad-worked braid, the imagination produces nothing but excess sense in the hold. Do you remember the days of slavery? Mackey (2006: 65) rightly says, “The world was ever afer, / elsewhere. / . . . no / way where we were / was there.” Do you remember where we are? No way where we are is here. Where we were, where we are, is what we meant by μu, which Wilderson (2010: xi) rightly calls the void of our subjectivity, which we extend, in consent beyond all voluntariness, in our avoidance of subjectivity. And so it is that we remain in the hold, in the break, as if entering again and again the broken world, to trace the visionary company and join it. This contrapuntal island, where we are marooned in search of marronage, where we linger in stateless emergency, is our mobile, constant study, our lysed cell and held dislocation, our blown standpoint and lyred chapel. We study our seaborne variance, sent by its prehistory into arrivance without arrival, as a poetics of lore, of abnormal articulation, where the relation between joint and flesh is the pleated distance of a musical moment that is emphatically, palpably imperceptible and, therefore, exhausts description. Having defied
degradation, the moment becomes a theory of the moment, of the feeling of a presence that is ungraspable in the way that it touches. Such musical moments—of advent, of nativity in all its terrible beauty, of the alienation that is always already born in and as parousia, of the disruption in duration of the very idea of the moment—are rigorous performances of the theory of the social life of the shipped, given in the terror of enjoyment and its endlessly redoubled folds. If you take up the hopelessly imprecise tools of standard navigation, the deathly reckoning of difference engines, maritime clocks, and tables of damned assurance, you might stumble on such a moment about two and a half minutes into "Motron," a duet by Blackwell and Cherry recorded in 1982. You'll know the moment by how it requires you to think the relation between fantasy and nothingness: what is mistaken for silence is, all of a sudden, transubstantial.

It's terrible to have come from nothing but the sea, which is nowhere, navigable only in its constant autodislocation. The absence of solidity seems to demand some other ceremony of hailing that will have been carried out on some more exalted frequency. This is exacerbated by the venal refusal of a general acknowledgment of the crime, which is, in any case, impossible, raising the question of whether the only way adequately to account for the horror of slavery and the brutality of the slaver, the only way to be (in Sexton's words) a witness rather than a spectator, is to begin by positing the absolute degradation of the enslaved. This is not a trick question; it's not merely rhetorical. If the slave is, in the end and in essence, nothing, what remains is the necessity of an investigation of that nothingness. What is the nothingness, which is to say the blackness, of the slave that it is not reducible to what they did, though what they did is irreducible in it? This is a question concerning the undercommon inheritance of another world, which is given in and given as fantasy in the hold. Those who are called into being by the desire for another call relinquish the fantastic when they make the choice to leave the hold behind. In resistance to such departure we linger in the advent, in the brutal interplay of advent and enclosure. Marcus Rediker offers us a scene of the interplay:

They resumed paddling and soon began to sing. After a while she could hear, at first faintly, then with increasing clarity, other sounds—the waves slapping the hull of the big ship, its timbers creaking. Then came muffled screaming in a strange language.

The ship grew larger and more terrifying with every vigorous stroke of the paddles. The smells grew stronger and the sounds louder—crying and
wailing from one quarter and low, plaintive singing from another; the anarchic noise of children given an underbeat by hands drumming on wood; the odd comprehensible word or two wafting through: someone asking for money, water, another laying a curse, appealing to myabra, spirits. As the canoemen maneuvered their vessel up alongside, she saw dark faces, framed by small holes in the side of the ship above the waterline, staring intently. Above her, dozens of black women and children and a few red-faced men peered over the rail. They had seen the attempted escape on the sandbar. The men had cutlasses and barked orders in harsh, raspy voices. She had arrived at the slave ship. (Rediker 2007: 2)

Her name is Hortense. Her name is NourbeSe. Her name is B. The black chant she hears is old and new to her. She is unmoored. She is ungendered. Her mother is lost. Exhausted, exhaustive maternity is her pedagogical imperative: “consent not to be a single being” (Glissant 2001: 5).

What’s required is some attempt to think the relation between fantasy and nothingness: emptiness, dispossession in the hold; consent (not to be a single being) in the; an intimacy given most emphatically, and erotically, in a moment of something that, for lack of a better word, we call “silence,” a suboceanic feeling of preterition—borne by a common particle in the double expanse—that makes vessels run over or overturn. The temporal coordinates 2′29″ and 2′30″ mark the in-betweenness and mobile location of the span, so we can consider that what is mistaken for silence can also be given in and as nothingness in its full transubstantiality, but also the compression and dispersion, the condensation and displacement, of caged duration, the marking more emphatically of its beginning and end, and, especially, the concentrated air of its propulsion that shows up as waiting. *Erwartung*, embarrassment in our expectation, Blackwell’s antic, anticipatory pulse. This moment of nothingness. “Unhoused vacuity” (Mackey 2000: 118), metaikic vernacular, the rich materiality of the hold’s, the jug’s, emptiness, its contents having fled in their remaining, fled as the remainder, the danger, the supplement, votive and unequal. Blackwell offers what is held in *mu* as the impossible to understand black thing, the Cherry thing as a seriality of openings, a vestibular chain, a kind of spillway, as Hortense Spillers might say.

I am concerned with the *mu* in “Mutron”—by way of an approach through Rediker that describes Rediker’s attempt to describe what might be called a birth into death, or an entrance into bare life or raw life, but which I will insist, not despite but precisely because of its being the blood-stain’d
gate through which the radically nonanalagous enters, is the impure imma-

nence of the undercommons' (an)original refrain—because the task of

continually instigating this flown, recursive imagining demands the inhabi-
tation of an architecture and its acoustic, an inhabitation given as if in an

approach from outside. What is required, and this is recited with such ter-
rible beauty in the work of Wilderson and Sexton, in echo of Lewis Gordon,
is not only to reside in an unlivability, an exhaustion that is always already
given as foreshadowing afterlife, as a life in some absolutely proximate and
unbridgeable distance from the living death of subjection, but also to discover
and to enter it. Mackey, in the fantastic sear and burned, spurred overbearing
of his preface to Splay Anthem, outlining the provenance and relationship
between the book's serial halves ("Each was given its impetus by a piece of
recorded music from which it takes its title, the Dogon 'Song of the Andoum-
boulou' in one case, Don Cherry's 'Mu' First Part and 'Mu' Second Part in the
other" [Mackey 2006: ix]), speaks of mu in relation to a circling or spiraling
or ringing, this roundness or rondo linking beginning and end; the wailing
that accompanies entrance into and expulsion from sociality; that makes you
wonder if music, which is not only music, is mobilized in the service of an
eccentricity, a centrifugal force, whose intimation Mackey also approaches,
that marks sociality's ecstatic existence beyond beginning and end, ends and
means. Forgive this long series of long quotations from that preface, to pas-
sages of which I remain imprisoned insofar as the range of phonemic, his-
torical, and parageographic resonance in mu get me to the elsewhere and
elsewhen that I already inhabit but which I have to keep learning to desire.
Actually, if you forgive me, there will be no need to thank me.

Multi-instrumentalist Don Cherry, best known as a trumpeter, includes
voice among the instruments used on the "Mu" albums and resorts to a sort
of dove-coo baby talk on one piece, "Teo-Teo-Can," emitting sounds that
might accompany the tickling of a baby's chin if not be made by the baby
itself. It recalls Amiri Baraka's comment on hearing a John Coltrane solo
that consisted of playing the head of "Confirmation" again and again, twenty
times or so: "like watching a grown man learning to speak." In both cases,
as with the Dogon trumpet burst and as it's put in "Song of the Andoum-
boulou: g8," one is "back / at / some beginning," some extremity taking one
back to animating constraint. The antelope-horn trumpet's blast and bleat,
Cherry's ludic warble and Trane's recursive quandary are variations on
music as gnostic announcement, ancient rhyme, that of end and beginning,
gnostic accent or note that cuts both ways.
But not only music. "Mu" (in quotes to underscore its whatsaid-ness) is also lingual and imaginal effect and affect, myth and mouth in the Greek form μοῦθος that Jane Harrison, as Charles Olson was fond of noting, calls "a re-utterance or pre-utterance, . . . a focus of emotion," surmising the first μοῦθος to have been "simply the interjectional utterance mu." "Mu" is also lingual and erotic allure, mouth and muse, mouth not only noun but verb and muse likewise, lingual and imaginal process, prod and process. It promises verbal and romantic enhancement, graduation to an altered state, momentary thrill translated into myth. Proffered from time immemorial, poetry's perennial boon, it thrives on quixotic persistence, the increment or enablement language affords, promise and impossibility rolled into one (Anuncia/Nunca).

"Mu" carries a theme of utopic reverie, a theme of lost ground and elegiac allure recalling the Atlantis-like continent Mu, thought by some during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century to have existed long ago in the Pacific. The places named in the song of the Andoumboulou, set foot on by the deceased while alive but lost or taken away by death, could be called "Mu." Any longingly imagined, mourned or remembered place, time, state, or condition can be called "Mu." . . .

Serial form lends itself to andoumboulouous liminality, the draft unassured extension knows itself to be. Provisional, ongoing, the serial poem moves forward and backward both, repeatedly "back / at / some beginning," repeatedly circling or cycling back, doing so with such adamance as to call forward and back into question and suggest an eccentric step to the side— as though, driven to distraction by shortcircuiting options, it can only be itself beside itself. So it is that "Mu" is also Song of the Andoumboulou, Song of the Andoumboulou also "Mu." H.D.'s crazed geese, circling above the spot that was once Atlantis or the Hesperides or the Islands of the Blest, come to mind, as do John Coltrane's wheeling, spiraling runs as if around or in pursuit of some lost or last note, lost or last amenity; a tangential, verging movement out (outastish). The ring shout comes to mind, as do the rings of Saturn, the planet adopted by Sun Ra, one of whose albums, Atlantis, opens with a piece called "Mu." (Mackey 2006: ix-xii)

Now I want us to try to think about the relation between Mackey's and Wilderson's dialectics of held fantasy. Wilderson's register is more explicitly philosophical and, so, our registers might have to shift as well. Entrance into the philosophy of the subject is also perilous, but it seems as if our belated-ness makes such peril necessary if the goal is to approach the ship and its hold. Wilderson says:
To put it bluntly, the imaginative labor of cinema, political action, and cultural studies are all afflicted with the same theoretical aphasia. They are speechless in the face of gratuitous violence.

This theoretical aphasia is symptomatic of a debilitated ensemble of questions regarding political ontology. At its heart are two registers of imaginative labor. The first register is that of description, the rhetorical labor aimed at explaining the way relations of power are named, categorized, and explored. The second register can be characterized as prescription, the rhetorical labor predicated on the notion that everyone can be emancipated through some form of discursive, or symbolic, intervention.

But emancipation through some form of discursive or symbolic intervention is wanting in the face of a subject position that is not a subject position—what Marx calls "a speaking implement" or what Ronald Jody calls "an interdiction against subjectivity." In other words, the Black has sentient capacity but no relational capacity. As an accumulated and fungible object, rather than an exploited and alienated subject, the Black is openly vulnerable to the whims of the world and so is his or her cultural "production." What does it mean—what are the stakes—when the world can whimsically transpose one's cultural gestures, the stuff of symbolic intervention, onto another worldly good, a commodity of style? (Wilderson 2010: 56)

He continues:

The Afro-pessimists are theorists of Black positionality who share Fanon's insistence that, though Blacks are . . . sentient beings, the structure of the entire world's semantic field . . . is saturated by anti-Black solidarity. . . . Afro-pessimism explores the meaning of Blackness not—in the first instance—as a variously and unconsciously interpellated identity or as a conscious social actor, but as a structural position of noncommunicability in the face of all other positions; this meaning is noncommunicable because, again, as a position, Blackness is predicated on modalities of accumulation and fungibility, not exploitation and alienation. (58–59)

A certain kind of sociological desire is announced in this utterance, in echo not only of Fanon, not only of Patterson, but of an anticipatory counterutterance in Du Bois as well. What is our methodological comportment in the face of the question concerning the strange meaning of being black when the ontological attitude is already under a kind of interdiction with regard to such being? A sociology of relations that would somehow account for the radically nonrelational—but this only insofar as relationality is understood
to be an expression of power, structured by the givenness of a transcendental subjectivity that the black cannot have but by which the black can be had; a structural position that he or she cannot take but by which he or she can be taken. The givenness and substantiveness of transcendental subjectivity is assured by a relative nothingness. In a relationality that can only be manifest as a general absence of relations, by way of a theoretically established non-communicability that is, itself, somehow given for thought by way of some kind of spooky action at a distance (How else would we know this noncommunicability? How else would it show up as the nonrelationality that structures all relationality?).

Within this framework blackness and antiblackness remain in brutally antisocial structural support of one another like the stanchions of an absent bridge of lost desire over which flows the commerce and under which flows the current, the logistics and energy of exclusion and incorporation, that characterizes the political world. Though it might seem paradoxical, the bridge between blackness and antiblackness is "the unbridgeable gap between Black being and Human life" (Wilderson 2010: 57). What remains is the necessity of an attempt to index black existence by way of what Chandler (2007: 41) would call paraontological, rather than politico-ontological, means. The relative nothingness of black life, which shows up for political ontology as a relation of nonrelation or counterrelation precisely in the impossibility of political intersubjectivity, can be said both to obscure and to indicate the social animation of the bridge's underside, where the im/possibilities of political intersubjectivity are exhausted. Political ontology backs away from the experimental declivity that Fanon and Du Bois were at least able to blaze, each in his own way forging a sociological path that would move against the limiting force, held in the ontological traces, of positivism, on the one hand, and phenomenology, on the other, as each would serve as the foundation of a theory of relations posing the nothingness of blackness in its (negative) relation to the substance of subjectivity-as-nonblackness (enacted in antiblackness). On the one hand, blackness and ontology are unavailable for one another; on the other hand, blackness must free itself from ontological expectation, must refuse subjection to ontology's sanction against the very idea of black subjectivity. This imperative is not something up ahead, to which blackness aspires; it is the labor, which must not be mistaken for Sisyphean, that blackness serially commits. The paraontological distinction between blackness and blacks allows us no longer to be enthralled by the notion that blackness is a property that belongs to blacks (thereby placing certain formulations regarding non/relationality and non/communicability on a different footing.
and under a certain pressure) but also because ultimately it allows us to detach blackness from the question of (the meaning of) being. The infinitesimal difference between pessimism and optimism lies not in the belief or disbelief in descriptions of power relations or emancipatory projects; the difference is given in the space between an assertion of the relative nothingness of blackness and black people in the face, literally, of substantive (anti-black) subjectivity and an inhabitation of appositionality, its internal social relations, which remain unstructured by the protocols of subjectivity insofar as mu—which has been variously translated from the Japanese translation of the Chinese wu as no, not, nought, nonbeing, emptiness, nothingness, nothing, no thing but which also bears the semantic trace of dance, therefore of measure given in walking/falling, that sustenance of asymmetry, difference's appositional mobility—also signifies an absolute nothingness whose anti-relative and antithetical philosophical content is approached by way of Nishida Kitarō's enactment of the affinities between structures and affects of mysticism that undergird and trouble metaphysics in the "East" and the "West." Indeed, the content that is approached is approach, itself, and for the absolute beginner, who is at once pilgrim and penitent, mu signals that which is most emphatically and lyrically marked in Édouard Glissant's phrase "consent not to be a single being" and indicated in Wilderson's and Mackey's gestures toward "fantasy in the hold," the radical unsettlement that is where and what we are. Unsettlement is the displacement of sovereignty by initiation, so that what's at stake—here, in displacement—is a certain black incapacity to desire sovereignty and ontological relationality whether they are recast in the terms and forms of a Lévinasian ethics or an Arendtian politics, a Fanonian resistance or a Pattersonian test of honor.

Unenabled by or in this incapacity, Nishida's philosophy folds sovereignty in the delay that has always given it significance, putting it on hold, but not in the hold, where to be on hold is to have been committed to a kind of staging, a gathering of and for the self in which negation is supposed to foster true emergence in "a self-determination of that concrete place of the contradictory identity of objectivity and subjectivity" (Nishida 1987: 96). What I term here, a delay is understood by Nishida as "the moment [that] can be said to be eternal . . . [wherein] consciously active individuals, encounter the absolute as its inverse polarity, its mirror opposite, at each and every step of our lives" (96). It is in echoing a traditional Buddhist teaching, which asserts the nonselven against what are considered foolish declarations of the nonexistence of self, that Nishida restages a standard ontotheological skit in which sovereignty—whether in the form of the consciously active indi-
vidual or in that individual's abstract and equivalent dispersion in the nation, "the mirror image of the Pure Land in this world" (123)—takes and holds the space-time, the paradoxically transcendental ground, of the everyday unreal-
ity of "the real world," where the sovereign's endless show carries a brutally material imposition. What remains to be seen is what (the thinking and the study of) blackness can bring to bear on the relation between the un/real world and its other(s). What if blackness is the refusal to defer to, given in the withdrawal from the eternal delay of, sovereignty? What if Nishida's preparatory vestibule for a general and infinite self-determination is pierced, rather than structurally supported, by (the very intimacy of) the no-place to which it is opposed in his own work? When Nishida argues that "the human, consciously active volitional world makes its appearance from the standpoint of the paradoxical logic of the Prajnaparamita Sutra literature," which offers us the phrase "Having No Place wherein it abides, this Mind arises," he means to assert the legitimacy of an idea or image of the whole that takes "the form of the contradictory identity of the consciously active self and the world, of the volitional individual and the absolute" (95–96). What if (the thinking and the study of) blackness is an inhabitation of the hold that disrupts the whole in which the absolute, or absolute nothingness, is structured by its relation to its relative other? What if the nothing that is in question here moves through to the other side of negation, in "the real presence" of blackness, in and as another idea of nothingness altogether that is given in and as and to things?

Both against the grain and by way of Fanon's negation of the condition of relative nothingness, which is instantiated in what he takes to be the white man's manufacture of the black, black study is attunement of and toward blackness as the place where something akin to the absolute nothingness that Nishida elaborates and a radical immanence of things that is not disavowed so much as it is unimagined in that same elaboration converge. This is to say that what remains unimagined by Nishida—not simply radical thingliness but its convergence with nothingness—is, nevertheless, made open to us by and in his thinking. Nishida helps prepare us to consider, even in the nationalist divagation of his own engagement with the heart of a teaching that has no center, that blackness is the place that has no place. "Having no place where it abides, this Mind [of the Little Negro Steelworker] arises." Things are in, but they do not have, a world, a place, but it is precisely both the specificity of having neither world nor place and the generality of not having that we explore at the nexus of openness and confinement, internment and flight. Having no place wherein they abide, in the radically dispossessive
no-place of the hold, in "Mutron," Cherry and Blackwell touch intimacy from the walls. In that break, the architectonic intent of the hold as sovereign expression and recuperation breaks down. Feel the complete ysis of this morbid body/universe. Touch is not where subjectivity and objectivity come together in some kind of self-determining dialectical reality; beyond that, in the hold, in the hako (the place of nothingness, that underground, undercommon recess), is the social life of black things, which passeth (the) understanding. In the hold, blackness and imagination, in and as consent not to be a single being, are (more and less than) one.

We are prepared for this generative incapacity by Wilderson's work, where what distinguishes the sovereign, the settler, and even the savage from the slave is precisely that they share "a capacity for time and space coherence. 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. This capacity for cartographic coherence is the thing itself, that which secures subjectivity for both the Settler and the 'Savage' and articulates them to one another in a network of connections, transfers and displacements" (Wilderson 2010: 18). Absent the "cartographic coherence [that] is the thing itself," we must become interested in things, in a certain relationship between thingliness and nothingness and blackness that plays itself out—outside and against the grain of the very idea of self-determination—in the unmapped and unmappable immanence of undercommon sociality. This is fantasy in the hold, and Wilderson's access to it is in the knowledge that he can have nothing and in the specific incapacity of a certain desire that this knowledge indexes. It remains for us to structure an accurate sense of what nothing is and what it constitutes in the exhaustion of home, intersubjectivity, and what Sexton calls "ontological reach" (Sexton 2011a). The truth of the formulation that the black cannot be among or in relation to his or her own is given in terminological failure. What's at stake is how to improvise the declension from what is perceived as a failure to be together to the unmappable zone of paraontological consent. The promise of another world, or of the end of this one, is given in the general critique of world. In the meantime, what remains to be inhabited is nothing itself in its fullness, which is, in the absence of intersubjective relationality, high fantastical or, more precisely, given in the fugal, contrapuntal intrigue that we can now call, by way of Mackey and Wilderson, fantasy in the hold, where the interplay of blackness and nothingness is given in an ongoing drama of force and entry.
In a tradition of Buddhist teaching that goes back to the opening of *The Gateless Gate*, a thirteenth-century gathering of kōans (case studies that take the form of stories, dialogues and/or questions meant to induce in the initiate dual intensities of doubt and concentration), that drama emerges as a deconstructive and deconstructed question, as exemplified in conventional presentations and interpretation of “Jōshū’s Dog.” The kōan reads: “A monk asked [Zen master] Jōshū in all earnestness, ‘Does a dog have Buddha nature or not?’ Jōshū said, ‘Mu!’” (Yamada 2004: 11). Even when we take into account Steven Heine’s warnings (Heine 2012) regarding the legitimacy of traditional attributions and interpretations of the *Mu Kōan*—which require us to consider both that it was not Jōshū who responded to the question or that Jōshū’s response was the opposite of *mu* and that, therefore, the negative way that response is understood to open ought now to be closed—we are left with an ontological possibility that blackness may well exhaust. There is an appositional response, which this phantom query cannot properly be said to have called, that persists in and as an echoepistemology of passage, a sociotheology of the anzschaution, the instrumental interruption of telos by the universal (drum) machine, Blackwell’s prompt out to the study of the last things, the study carried out by the things that are last, by the least of these, whose movement constitutes a critique of the general and necessary relation between politics and death, a critique of the critique of judgment, a deconstruction of the opposition of heaven and hell. Cherry brings the noise of the end of the world in the invention of the earth. Though eschatology is understood to be a department, as it were, of theology, it has been both displaced by an administrative desire for the teleological and appropriated by a retributive desire for a kind of finality of and in sentencing, each in its commitment to sovereignty and the already existing structures that depend upon the very idea. But it’s not that I want to enclose things in the dialectical movement between beginning and end. Invention and passage denote an already existing alternative for which we are not constrained to wait. We are already down here on and under the ground, the water, as worked, unwrought nothingness working fleshly release in a privation of feasting, a fragility of healing. *Mu* is a practice of mysticism in the flesh; “Mutron,” the ritual Blackwell and Cherry perform, is their concentration meditation. It indexes the specific and material history of the drowned and burned, the shipped and held, as the condition for the release not just of the prevailing worldview but of the very idea of worldview, of transcendental standpoint and Pure Land. Cherry and Blackwell are initiates, who in turn initiate us, in what it is to abide in the social materiality of no place, of Having No Place, as a place for study.
This shows up as a radical displacement of binary logic, moving through negation, because the way of the hold is no \textit{via negativa}. Rather, the hold is distressed circuitry, an impedance or impediment of current, a placement of the self's or the settler's or the sovereign's dyadic currency in kentonic abandon. "Mutron" is a way out of no way given in and as the exhaustion of what it is to abide, where the first and the last are neither first nor last.

To remain in the hold is to remain in that set of practices of living together where antikinetic theorizing is both bracketed and mobilized by performative contemplation, as in the monastic sociality of Minton's, where the hermetic absence of and from home is given in and as a playhouse, a funnyhouse, a madhouse. The club, our subcenobitic thing, our block chapel, is a hard row of constant improvisational contact, a dispossessive intimacy of rubbing, whose mystic rehearsal is against the rules or, more precisely, is as opposed to rule, and is, therefore, a concrete social logic often misunderstood as nothing but foolishness, which is, on the other hand, exactly and absolutely what it is. Foucault's meditations point precisely in this direction:

The ship of fools was heavily loaded with meaning, and clearly carried a great social force. . . . The madman on his crazy boat sets sail for the other world, and it is from the other world that he comes when he disembarks. This enforced navigation is both rigorous division and absolute Passage, serving to underline in real and imaginary terms the \textit{liminal} situation of the mad in medieval society. It was a highly symbolic role, made clear by the mental geography involved, where the madman was \textit{confined at the gates of the cities}. His exclusion was his confinement, and if he had no \textit{prison} other than the \textit{threshold} itself he was still detained at this place of passage. . . .

A prisoner in the midst of the ultimate freedom, . . . he is the Passenger \textit{par excellence}, the prisoner of the passage. It is not known where he will land, and when he lands, he knows not whence he came. His truth and his home are the barren wasteland between two lands that can never be his own. . . . The link between water and madness is deeply rooted in the dream of the Western man. (Foucault 2006: 10–11)

Deleuze has seized on this dimension of Foucault's thought to probe how for him "the inside [functions] as an operation of the outside." Indeed, "in all his work Foucault seems haunted by this theme of an inside which is merely the fold of the outside, as if the ship were a folding of the sea. . . . Thought has no other being than this madman himself. As Blanchot says of Foucault: 'He encloses the outside, that is, constitutes it in an interiority of expectation or exception'" (Deleuze 1988: 8). Deleuze continues:
Forces always come from the outside, from an outside that is farther away than any form of exteriority. So there are not only particular features taken up by the relations between forces, but particular features of resistance that are apt to modify and overturn these relations and to change the unstable diagram. . . . [This is] “where one can live and in fact where Life exists par excellence.” . . . [This is] life within the folds. This is the central chamber, which one need no longer fear is empty since one fills it with oneself. Here one becomes a master of one’s speed and, relatively speaking, a master of one’s molecules and particular features, in this zone of subjectivation: the boat as interior of the exterior. (Deleuze 1988: 100–101)

Passage, which is to say this passage, which is to say the passage between these passages of Foucault and Deleuze, the passage between these and those of Wilderson and Mackey, is given in the hold that Cherry and Blackwell deconstructively reconstruct just so you’ll know that the music and its performance was never about transcendence unless transcendence is understood as immanence’s fugitive impurity. How would you recognize the antiphonal accompaniment to gratuitous violence—the sound that can be heard as if in response to that violence, the sound that must be heard as that to which such violence responds? Wilderson asks the question again so that it can be unasked; so that we can hear Cherry and Blackwell unask it in and as intimacy in dislocation. Unasking takes the form of a caesura, an arrhythmia of the iron system, that Blackwell presses into the interruptive, already interrupted New Orleans continuum of his role whose distended rearticulation stretches out so you can go down in it enough to think about what it means somewhere you’re only supposed to be going through, to be contained in the atropic atemporality that propels you, as the immanence of the transcendental hallway of our endless preparation, our experimental trial, given as our ongoing study of how to speak, the terrible beauty of our imprisonment in the passage, our life in the folds. Blackwell asks a question that Cherry anticipates, but by which Cherry is driven and to which Cherry responds in the bent, appositional reflection that unasks it. This drama is revived in Wilderson’s questioning; the question is a seizure that moves us to unask it. That unasking is not because the question’s terms and assumptions are incorrect; not because the implied opposition of nothing and something—where nothingness is too simply understood to veil (as if it were some epidermal livery) some higher being and is therefore relative as opposed to absolute—doesn’t signify; but because nothing (this paraontological interplay of blackness and nothingness, this aesthetic sociality)
remains to be explored; because we don’t know what we mean by it even when we recite or record its multiphonic swerve; because blackness is not a category for ontology or for phenomenological analysis. Wilderson’s question—“Would nothing ever be with nothing again”—precisely in its irreducible necessity, cannot be answered but can only be unasked in the lyricism of that ill logic that black monks incessantly, thelonially, perform, as difference without opposition, in “a black hole,” as Jay Wright says (Wright 2013: 56), “germ and terminal, expansive/in its nothingness.”

What would it be for this drama to be understood in its own terms, from its own standpoint, on its own ground? This is not simply a question of perspective awaiting its unasking, since what we speak of is this radical being beside itself of blackness, its appositionality. The standpoint, the home territory, chez lui—Charles Lam Markmann’s insightful mistranslation of Fanon illuminates something that Richard Philcox obscures by way of correction. Among one’s own, signifies a relationality that displaces the already displaced impossibility of home and the modes of relationality that home is supposed to afford (Fanon 1967). Can this sharing of a life in homelessness, this interplay of the refusal of what has been refused and consent, this undercommon appositionality, be a place from which to know, a place out of which emerges neither self-consciousness nor knowledge of the other but an improvisation that proceeds from somewhere on the other side of an unasked question? But not simply to be among one’s own; rather, also, to live among one’s own in dispossession, to live among the ones who cannot own, the ones who have nothing and who, in having nothing, have everything. To live, in other words, within the general commonness and openness of a life in Deleuze’s sense (hence the necessity of a philosophy of life; hence the necessity but also the rigor of a disbelief in social death, where social death is precisely understood as the imposition of the subject’s necessity rather than the refusal of the subject’s possibility, which, in any case, the imposition founds and enforces. At stake is the curve, the suppleness and sublety, not only of contemplation on social life but of contemplative social life; at stake is the force of an extra-phenomenological poetics of social life. And so we arrive, again and again, at a profound impulse in Fanon that—as Chandler indicates in his reading, which is the initial reading, of Du Bois—constitutes Du Bois’s horizon and which appears in the various forms of that question whose necessity is so fundamental that it must be unasked—the question of the meaning of (black) being, the question of the meaning of (black) things. We study in the sound of an unasked question. Our study is the sound of an unasked question. We study the sound of an unasked question. In the absence of the ame-
nity (some pleasantness or pleasantry of welcome or material comfort), what is borne in the emptiness or nothingness of the amenity (of which love or soul is born, in exhaustion, as a society of friends), what are the other elements of me? Chant and koan and moan and Sprechgesang, and babble and gobbledygook, le petit nègre, the little nigger, pidgin, baby talk, bird talk, Bird's talk, bard talk, bar talk, our locomotive bar walk and black chant, our pallet cries and shipped whispers, our black notes and black cant, the tenor's irruptive habitation of the vehicle, the monastic preparation of a more than three-dimensional transcript, an imaginal manuscript we touch upon the walls and one another, so we can enter into the hold we're in, where there is no way we were or are.

_Lysis and Le Petit Nègre_

Let's try to come at the central, centrifugal chamber of the open/ing again, this time by way of Linebaugh and Fanon.

"The most magnificent drama of the last thousand years of human history" was not enacted with its strophes and prosody ready-made. It created a new speech. A combination of, first, nautical English; second, the "sabir" of the Mediterranean; third, the hermetic-like cant talk of the "underworld"; and fourth, West African grammatical construction, produced the "pidgin English" that became in the tumultuous years of the slave trade the language of the African coast.

Linguists describe pidgin as a "go-between" language, the product of a "multiple-language situation," characterized by "radical simplification." "Il est même nè pour permettre une communication jusque-là impossible," Calvet has written. ... Where people had to understand each other, pidgin English was the lingua franca of the sea and the frontier. Inasmuch as all who came to the New World did so after months at sea, pidgin or its maritime and popular cognates became the medium of transmission for expressing the new social realities. ... Pidgin became an instrument, like the drum or the fiddle, of communication among the oppressed: scorned and not easily understood by polite society. (Linebaugh 1982: 100–11)

In the interest of a radical restaging of what Linebaugh calls, after Du Bois, this "magnificent drama," Fanon initiates a complex critical disavowal of the "new speech" it produces, beginning—but not paradoxically—with an assertion of language's irreducibly dramatic character. "We attach," Fanon writes, "a fundamental importance to the phenomenon of language.
and consequently consider the study of language essential for providing us with one element in understanding the black man’s dimension of being-for-others, it being understood that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other” (Fanon 2008: i). In a philosophical register cognate with that of Nishida, Fanon posits an “existence absolutely for the other,” in speech, that is given in and as “absolutely nothing.”

Our only hope of getting out of the situation is to pose the problem correctly, for all these findings and all this research have a single aim: to get man to admit he is nothing, absolutely nothing—and get him to eradicate this narcissism whereby he thinks he is different from the other “animals.”

This is nothing more nor less than the capitulation of man.

All in all, I grasp my narcissism with both hands and I reject the vileness of those who want to turn man into a machine. If the debate cannot be opened up on a philosophical level—i.e., the fundamental demands of human reality—I agree to place it on a psychological level: in other words, the “misfires,” just as we talk about an engine misfiring. (6–7)

But what if the situation we ought to hope to get out of is “that concrete place of the contradictory identity of objectivity and subjectivity” of which both Nishida and Fanon speak? What if the emergence of man is best understood as the obsessive restaging not of the magnificent drama that Linebaugh indexes but of an epiphenomenal burlesque in which self-determination is enacted with murderous indirection? In a way that is, again, similar to that of Nishida, Fanon’s gesture toward nothingness prepares our approach to these questions. It can be said, then, that Fanon moves to distinguish the language of farce from the language of tragedy; it remains for us both to learn from and to augment his analysis, which continues by way of (the) man’s casual and uninformed commentary on the social situation of the new speech.

It is said that the black man likes to palaver, and whenever I pronounce the word “palaver” I see a group of boisterous children raucously and bawdily calling out to the world: children at play. Insofar as play can be seen as an initiation to life. The black man likes to palaver, and it is only a short step to a new theory that the black man is just a child. Psychoanalysts have a field day, and the word “orality” is soon pronounced... [In this] we are interested in the black man confronted by the French language. We would like to understand why the Antillean is so fond of speaking good French. (10)

When Fanon proceeds to isolate the new speech from its disavowal it is because it is the disavowal in which he is interested. This is to say that the
new speech doesn’t yet show up for Fanon as an object of analysis; more precisely, the new speech doesn’t show up as speech. After all, “To speak means being able to use a certain syntax and possessing the morphology of such and such a language but it means above all assuming a culture and bearing the weight of a civilization” (1–2). And what’s at stake, in the very newness of pidgin, is precisely its improvisatory refusal, rather than use, of “a certain syntax” so that the given is given over to its poetic alternative; its construction, rather than assumption, of a culture; its burial under the weight of civilization and the unlikely, paradoxically animative, exhaustion of such interpellation. But while it can be said of Fanon that in this point in his text he neglects the new speech he offers a profound understanding of (the provenance of) a certain desire for the standard.

Monsieur Achille, a teacher at the Lycée du Parc in Lyon, cited a personal experience during his lecture. . . . As a Roman Catholic, he took part in a pilgrimage. Seeing a black face among his flock, the priest asked him: “Why have you left big savanna and why you come with us?” Achille answered most politely. . . . Everyone laughed at the exchange. . . . But if we stop to reflect, we realize that the priest’s usage of pidgin calls for several remarks.

1. . . . A white man talking to a person of color behaves exactly like a grown-up with a kid, simpering, murmuring, fussing, and coddling . . . . Speaking to black people in this way is an attempt to reach down to them, to make them feel at ease, to make oneself understood and reassure them. . . .

2. To speak gobbledygook to a black man is insulting, for it means he is the gook . . .

If the person who speaks to a man of color or an Arab in pidgin does not see that there is a flaw or a defect in his behavior, then he has never paused to reflect. (4–15)

The violence of insincere and unflattering imitation that materializes such absence of reflection is vividly portrayed in Fanon’s text. However, infantilization of the ones who utter the speech that, according to Fanon, cannot be spoken, does not mean that the new speech is merely infantile. The implication, here, that the new speech is also old is not a function of anything that it retains other than an essential and irreducible vehicularity. Fanon’s concern with the pathological desire to speak good French, seen in its relation to the normal desire to be spoken to in good faith, understands the speaker’s being absolutely for the other to imply reciprocity within the shared possession of a language. Speech in bad faith moves in the wake of not listening, of neither acknowledging nor recognizing the speaker’s capacity to be for or with the one to whom he or she speaks. Such being for can be spoken of in
terms of contemporaneity—implying not only joint ownership of a language but also a shared spatiotemporal frame, transcendental aesthetic, body schema, or home—but might be better elaborated in terms of the differentiation of any given spatiotemporal frame, the shared and social construction of an immanent aesthetic, within the constantly shifting schemata of a fleshly historicity in which language moves to connect a vast, differential range of unmoored unowning.

(This is why it's important to note that this tragic [or tragi-comic] homelessness of the new speech is something Fanon approaches in his analysis of exhaustion of return in Aimé Césaire's poetry—return is exhausted in descent, plunge, fall; a propulsive transport through the crush and density of an absolute singularity, in the interest of avoiding "this absurd drama that others have staged around me" [174]. What Fanon celebrates in Césaire, however, are instances of language whose emphasis on rising is seen by Fanon implicitly to assert the necessity of a departure from undercommon linguistic sociality that traverses the distance between pidgin and poetry. "Césaire went down. He agreed to see what was happening at the very bottom, and now he can come back up. He is ripe for the dawn. But he does not leave the black man down below. He carries him on his shoulders and lifts him up to the skies" [172]. Return, which had been reconfigured as descent, is now surrogate to an elevation in and of language that enacts the rediscovery of the meaning of the poet's identity [175]. But there is profound ambivalence in Fanon with regard to the mechanisms of uplift that he reads in Césaire. Lysis is meant to stave off the interplay—which lyric often induces—of narcissism and alienation that produces, and is grotesquely reproduced in, the black man. Fanon alerts us to a breaking brokenness in Césaire's work that moves against the grain of the lyrical, upwardly mobile self-determination that carries it. This is the ordinance and disorder that the new speech affords. Paralytic sociality has no place in the sun. The night holds fantasy, not identity. The new speech, which animates Césaire's poetry as well as Fanon's invocation of Césaire in the interest of disavowing the new speech, is where we discover, again and again, the various and unrecoverable natality that we share. Fanon recognizes that what can't be recovered becomes [sur]real in not being itself. This corrosive insistence on and in the new is where lyric and lysis converge in mutual submergence, but Fanon is constrained to avow the disavowal that is encrypted in the desire to speak good French. Later, I will return to the fallen poetics of return, its high and dissident fidelity; now it remains necessary to concentrate on Fanon's analytic of speech in bad faith, which begins with his concern
with the white usage of pidgin, its effects on “privileged” blacks interpolated by such speech, and, then, the ensuing commitment of those blacks to “speaking good French.”

Fanon takes great care to emphasize not just that the fact that there are whites who don’t talk down to blacks is irrelevant for the study of the effects produced by whites who do but that the purpose of his study of the Negro and language is to “eliminate a number of realities” that occur as a function of pathological behavior indexed to an inhuman psychology. He’s interested, finally, in how pathological white behavior breeds or fabricates a kind of pathological black behavior. Fanon is interested in acknowledging, isolating, studying, and eradicating what Frederick Douglass (2000: 115) calls our “plantation peculiarities.” Moreover, while this process may be initiated by way of a psychological or psychoanalytic discourse predicated on the notion of the inferiority complex, a discourse that might also be discussed as a kind of misfire, in language that anticipates that of J. L. Austin—an infelicitous speech act, one that fails, ultimately, to achieve an intention—ultimately, Fanon appeals to a different metaphorics, a different language, the language of the biochemistry and alchemy of nothingness, a language of and on the experiment’s double edge. What if we conceive of the sold, old-souled child who utters the new speech as having been submitted to the most brutal forms of violent investigation: placed on a kind of endless trial, given over to an interminable testing, the brutality of the biological market in which the self-possession of a body is interdicted by fleshly dispossession, marking that condition where to be grasped/held/owned is also to be studied? But what if we simultaneously conceive of the child as a scientist, one engaged in experiments, and in a metalexperimental undertaking of and in research predicated on the embrace of precisely that dispossession fleshliness that corresponds to the fullest possible understanding of what Fanon refers to as “absolutely nothing”—a nothingness without reserve, independent of the desire to show up in and for the conventional optics wherein somebody is delineated and identified? Then palaver would best be understood as the language of the playground if the playground is more accurately understood as a laboratory. This means considering “palaver” or “gobbledygook” not as degraded forms of the standard but rather as modes of linguistic experimentation, modes of linguistic theory given in experimental linguistic practice that have at least two possible effects: the calling into existence of a kind of carceral standard that will have been fabricated in the instance of a whole range of administrative, normative, and regulatory modes and desires and the equally problematic calling forth of certain acts of tone-deaf imitation,
equal parts condescension and brutality, the production of a sound meant to accompany an image/livery of subordination in the interest of self-determination's dumbshow.

What's at stake, here, is the priority of an originally insubordinate, jurisgenerative, as opposed to juridically systemic, linguistic experimentation. Speaking "gobbledygook" to a black man is insulting if it takes pidgin for gobbledygook, if such a sclerotic understanding, and the imprecision that follows from it, imagines pidgin to be something other than a language of study. Fanon bristles at the casualness of such a form of speech, the easy way in which the informal is understood to be the occasion for a kind of brutal informality on the part of the one who arrogantly deigns to understand it. The absence of any intention to give offense is no defense, in his estimation, for the absence of any intention not to give offense. One takes no care to avoid the incidental or accidental suffering of the thing. And this is, finally, evidence of a flaw, a moral defect; such lack of concern is rightly understood to be pathological. But what must be clearly understood is that it is not pidgin or le petit nègre that instantiates imprisonment at an uncivilized and primitive level: it is, rather, the inaccurate, imprecise, and, for all intents and purposes, absent reflection—wholly outside of any protocol of study, wholly outside of the experimental social, aesthetic, and intellectual modalities that determine the making of the language in the first place—of pidgin that constitutes this particular prison house of language. This means that we must then discuss the no less carceral effects that attend the disavowal of pidgin that often attends the righteous refusal of its less than vulgar imitation. Some might say that such imitation is merely an extension of pidgin's experimental force, but I would argue that it is more precisely understood as always in service, always enacting the exaltation, of the standard. In this instance imitation is the sincerest form of brutality. What remains is to consider what it is for Fanon to have felt himself lapsing.

When I meet a German or a Russian speaking bad French I try to indicate through gestures the information he is asking for, but in doing so I am careful not to forget that he has a language of his own, a country, and that perhaps he is a lawyer or an engineer back home. Whatever the case, he is a foreigner with different standards.

There is nothing comparable when it comes to the black man. He has no culture, no civilization, and no "long historical past." . . .

Whether he likes it or not, the black man has to wear the livery the white man has fabricated for him. (Fanon 2008: 17)
Fanon further elaborates:

The fact is that the European has a set idea of the black man, and there is nothing more exasperating than to hear: “How long have you lived in France? You speak such good French.”

It could be argued that this is due to the fact that a lot of black people speak pidgin. But that would be too easy. . . .

After everything that has . . . been said, it is easy to understand why the first reaction of the black man is to say no to those who endeavor to define him. It is understandable that the black man’s first action is a reaction, and since he is assessed with regard to his degree of assimilation, it is understandable that too why the returning Antillean speaks only French: because he is striving to underscore the rift that has occurred. He embodies a new type of man whom he imposes on his colleagues and family. His old mother no longer understands when he speaks of her pjs, her ramshackle dump, and her lousy joint. All that embellished with the proper accent. (Fanon 1967: 18–19)

What’s problematic in Fanon is the belief in the priority of the standard except for the special case of the black for whom there is no standard, where standard, in its priority, corresponds to patria and patrimony. This will reemerge in Patterson’s discourse as the assertion of the absence of a heritage (wherein a past is detached from or deprived of long historical duration) and natal alienation. At stake, in a way that must be understood with more precision than the phrase “black civilization” and whatever its impossibility might signify, is the relation, or in Wilderson’s more precise formulation, the antagonism between blackness and civilization. The famously mistranslated title of Foucault’s opus L’histoire de la folie a l’âge classique has a kind of relevance here in part because the ongoing and irrepressible event of the nonstandard, the antistandard, given now in the language of the standard as madness, as social psychosis, has blackness, also, for another name.

We might consider, here, the structural relation between name and livery, designation and uniform, precisely in order to think about what historical task their interinimative imposition, which takes the form of a sumptuary law, confers upon the ones who have been so burdened. At stake is the givenness of the given’s constant disruption, which is prior to its naming; the gift of a project whose conferral is prior to its venal imposition. This is a massive, immeasurable problematic of responsibility.

Meanwhile, the phonics of pidgin is an epiphenomenon, not only in that it is an effect of, but also in that it indicates, fabrication. Moreover, it entraps what it indicates. In this view, it’s not just that pidgin is prison
language but that being made to speak it imprisons. Imprisonment in pidgin, the imprisonment that is enacted in being made to speak pidgin, is, itself, an epiphenomenon of epidermalization, nothing more than its verbal accompaniment. Implicit here, again, is the assumed priority of the standard. One is made to speak pidgin in response to an imposition, in response to speech uttered in bad faith. The standard rises as a kind of background that pidgin fails pitifully and pitifully to represent. That failed representation is then burlesqued and parodied by the white whose utterance—whether in condescension or in a more direct kind of cruelty—is meant to do nothing other than impose the subordination and incarceration that is instantiated in the black man—as—good nigger’s speech.

In outlining a certain problematic of return, the problem of why upon his return to the Antilles the privileged one desires to speak good French, Fanon (2008: 18) describes one who sees himself as moving within a condition in which suspicion of the black student’s erudite and standard speech is confined only to the periphery of the university where “an army of fools” reside. But the point isn’t that life in the university undermines any such faith in the wisdom of its inhabitants; the point is that a set of assumptions about class now edge into clarity. That the capacity for standard speech, whether of another tongue or of one’s own, is aligned with the achievement of a certain interconnection of class status and educational accomplishment. One who recognizes that alignment, upon meeting the German who speaks bad French, politely assumes that he is an engineer or a lawyer, that he has a language, that he has standards, that he has a home. The black man is the living embodiment and visualization of the absence of the standard, however, and no such assumption can be made about him. But this lived experience of the nonstandard, of the standard’s absence, does not mean that one is unable either to see or to revere the standard and its idealized locale. The army, as opposed to the ship, of fools that surround and protect the inner sanctum of the metropole, the holy of holies, need neither know nor embody the standard that they protect. It is, in fact, nearest and clearest to the one who recognizes it as the site of “equal footing” (Fanon 2008: 19), where the weak assertion of one’s capacity for feeling and reason is replaced by emphatically proper linguistic performance.

Again, Fanon is concerned with the narcissism of the new returnee, the social climber, as he or she links up with Arendt’s own stringent analysis of the parvenu. That narcissism disallows a rigorous and requisite full inhabitation of the zone of nonbeing, an “extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an incline stripped bare of every essential from which a genuine new
departure can emerge” (Fanon 2008: xii). This incline, or declivity, or ramp, bespeaks, again, the bio(chemical) laboratory in which the black is made. What remains in question is whether or not he or she is present at his or her own making. How do we speak of that presence, of a real transsubstantial presence, in the same breath with which we describe sterility and aridity? What if we choose—while also choosing not to assume the barrenness of—the paraontic field? This incline, where experimentation in the interest of securing the normal requires the production and imposition of the pathological, where investigation in the interest of freedom demands incarceration, is, or ought to be, a site of study. To speak of pidgin, then, as the language of nothingness or of nonbeing, the language whose shadow delineates the territory of the nonexistent, is not to utter a decree that legitimizes skipping the question concerning the constitution of that language or paralanguage and moving straight to its reduction to the subordination it is supposed to indicate. Four questions emerge: What is pidgin? Who makes it? What pressure does it place on the very idea of the standard? Isn’t such pressure, in fact, the making of the standard? These questions open us onto another understanding of the experiment, which Fanon takes up both literally and figuratively: “We have just used the word ‘narcissism.’ We believe, in fact, that only a psychoanalytic interpretation of the black problem can reveal the affective disorders responsible for this network of complexes. We are aiming for a complete lysis of this morbid universe” (xiv).

In a paragraph that begins by asserting the necessity of psychoanalytic interpretation for revealing the black man’s affective disorders/anomalies we note this movement between consciousness and the unconscious, cut and augmented by commitment to the trajectory of self-consciousness, wherein “an individual must endeavor to assume the universalism inherent in the human condition” (Fanon 2008: xiv). Edmund Husserl, G. W. F. Hegel, and Sigmund Freud are present—but in a kind of Sartrean light, or frame—beginning with that fateful, fatal interplay between the miraculously self-positing individual and the uncut givenness of the standard. But analysis is then cut by something, a natural process if not attitude: corrosion, compromise of the cell’s integrity. “Nous travaillons à une lyse totale de cet univers morbide” (Fanon 1952: 8). “We are aiming for a complete lysis of this morbid universe” (Fanon 2008: xiv). “I shall attempt a complete lysis of this morbid body” (Fanon 1967: 10). The two translations, one in its literalness, the other in its avoidance of the literal in the interest of greater idiomatic precision, allow us to linger in and consider the relation between the universe and the body, between the transcendental aesthetic and the
body that it makes possible and that makes it possible. It is as if both are, in their morbidity, to be submitted to a radical breakdown.

The language of biochemistry permeates Fanon’s text, as it should. The language of biochemistry is all bound up with the language of friendship, the massive corollary problematic of like and unlike, rendering the distinction between friend and enemy that Plato gets to in “Lysis.” Lysis is to separate, to break down walls, to refute, but also to redeem. The pursuit of the meaning of friendship moves by way of bondage: “by the road which skirts the outside of the wall,” thinking on or over the edge of the city, there is “a palaestra that has lately been erected” (Plato 196c: 146). We made a space, we formed a pit, “here, where,” “there where,” in the very place of resistance (says Derrida [1998: 24]). There’s all this lunatic noise Hippothales is constantly emitting; Lysis is his means and his end, which is interminable. Lysis defies any according to Derrida (1998b: 19–20). Madness is the condition within which the question of friendship arises. Madness will have been the method—a resistance without meaning, lysis without origin or end—no friend, neither first nor last. Is “Lysis” the invisible bridge between Politics of Friendship and Resistances of Psychoanalysis? Between Black Skin, White Masks and The Wretched of the Earth? The body that questions, because it is a body that is in question, is an experiment. This degenerative materiality, this undying differentiation, bears Hippothales’s self-referential moan. Socrates autotunes it but always in the interest of this interplay of questioning and unmasking that is his sociodramatic method. The matter for thought, here, is the matter of thought, which is to say the madness of thought, fantasy in the hold, as Wilderson has it, the witch’s flight, as Deleuze and Guattari (1996: 41) offers it for Kara Keeling’s rigorous rematerialization.

For myself, I was rejoicing, with all a hunter’s delight, at just grasping the prey I had been so long in chase of, when presently there came into my mind, from what quarter I cannot tell, the strangest sort of suspicion. (Plato 196c: 162)

Can we possibly help, then, being weary of going on in this manner, and is it not necessary that we advance at once to a beginning which will not again refer us to friend upon friend, but arrive at that to which we are in the first instance friends, and for the sake of which we say we are friends to all the rest? (163)

Trane says that he plays multiple lines in the same head, plays the same head multiple times, because he doesn’t know the one path to the
essential. Trane’s questioning and unmasking, his experimental method—is it Socrates’s method, too? Trane’s fantasy. He dreamed his treasure. Maybe he knew there was no single way. Maybe he didn’t want there to be one way. He didn’t want it to be one way; there were the other ways. Trane’s mysticism, the polyvalent collectivity of his constant worrying of beginning, instantiates the problem of ana-lysis, of improvisation as self-ana-lysis. Derrida (1998b: 19–20) speaks of this nonpresence, which is insofar as it is copresence, the real presence, interdicted and interpenetrative, of archetypic return and philolysis nonarrival, where means and end, object and aim, converge, Tao-like, in their mutual incompleteness within a social field, as ensemblic consent, where the first is displaced by the last, by what is supposed to have been relegated to the presupposed, already posited emptiness of a vessel filled with nothing. A jug or a cup of earthenware or my son, their otherworldly interventions, the otherworldly intervention of servants and bearers, their thought of the outside, their disruption of closure, their suspension of pursuit is dismissed, in common, as already (de)valued commonness’s underside, which is animated by that whose form it takes: “mere idle talk put together after the fashion of a lengthy poem” (Plato 1961: 166). Phenomenology’s variously public and private debts to the transcendental subject and to transcendental intersubjectivity are often manifest as impatience with idle talk, idle chatter, even when such chatter is understood to be the subhuman insignificance of those who are relegated to the fullest possible employment, which evokes not only the wordlessness of the work song but also the expropriated linguistic underlabor, expropriated within the general project of exclusionary, self-possessive subjectivation, that is given in the form of an implied response to the bad faith speech of antiblackness. This is to say, and I think this is what Fanon is most pissed off about, and rightly, is that the doctor’s impertinent questions to his black patients already imply an answer that would be given in the gestures that accompany mute, impossible positionality. And so Fanon performs, in thought, such questioning’s appositional unmasking. This is the character of his complete lysis. It is complete, but, as Wallace Stevens would say, in an unexplained completion. This is the interminable as opposed to the last analysis, the interminable analysis of the last, the anaeschatalogical sounding of the unfathomable alternative. We still have to discover, we have to keep discovering, what that sounding sounds like, in the ongoing refusal of a standpoint, of a jurisdiction, for such hearing, in the ongoing critique of the critique of a certain notion of judgment. The absence and refusal of the standpoint is given in the sound of that sounding, which Fanon leads us to but to which he
didn't always listen. Here's where the problematic of lyric disturbs and augments lysis. Here's where whatever it is that the pathologist means to examine, in its own degenerative and regenerative differentiation, moves in disruption of the pathologist's standpoint. This is to say that the tools and protocols and methods of the pathologist, however much they have made possible an approach, cannot, shall we say, manage entrance into the zone of nonbeing. From outside that zone, from the ruins of a standpoint, from one of the numberless husks of an inhabitable possibility, lysis morphs into autopsy so that nonbeing's generativity—as it is manifest in noise, chatter, gobbledygook, pidgin's social refusal of imposed and impossible intersubjectivity—is taken for sterility, its flow taken for aridity. But we will note the beauty and insistence of Fanon's animating claim, his animated dameur. "There is a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an inclined stripped bare of every essential from which a genuine new departure can emerge. In most cases, the black man cannot take advantage of this descent into a veritable hell" (Fanon 2008: xii).

Naked declivity? Gradient centrifugation, as Mackey would have it. The zone of nonbeing is experimental, a kind of experiment, this double edge of the experiment, this theater of like and unlike in which friendship's sociality overflows its political regulation. Destination down and out, whence springs the difference that earthly beauty brings. Lysis, lyse, lycée—Socrates and Lysis, Cesaire and Fanon, somewhere between the lyceum and the academy, a recitation of unrequited love.

Society, unlike biochemical processes, does not escape human influence. Man is what brings society into being. The prognosis is in the hands of those who are prepared to shake the worm-eaten foundations of the edifice. (Fanon 2008: xv)

It is considered appropriate to preface a work on psychology with a methodology. We shall break with tradition. We leave methods to the botanists and mathematicians. There is a point where methods are resorbed. (xvi)

To absorb again, to dissolve and assimilate. "That is where we would like to position ourselves" (Fanon 2008: xvi). This appeal to resorption, another biochemical term/process that is free of human influence. Fanon deploys biochemical metaphors for the analysis of sociogenic products by way of sociogenic means. And here's the crux, making explicit what would emerge from this overlay of social and biochemical processes, sociopsychoanalytic and experimental practices. Is the laboratory, the encounter, the experimental zone of nonbeing, the parontic or anontic zone? The other-
wise-than-being-ness of the experiment, which turns out to be ante-ethical as well if ethics is even as Emmanuel Lévinas understands it, neither illness nor death. This internal sociality of the experiment, a sociality and sociology of the anonic, a social biopoetics of and in the experiment, is given in the ongoing disturbance of language that is language's anoriginal condition. The experiment is poetic; pidgin is a poetics.

Consider the constraint of black poetry—of fantasy in the hole or whole or hold or over the side. If it's a constraint, how is it a constraint? It is, first of all, a conceptual field, as Spillers would allow. A field in which, more precisely, the concept of the object is a kind of imperative at the level of both study and performance, in zones where neither the presumption nor the disavowal of self—each in its own obsessive self-regard—are the limits of poetic possibility, which is, itself, animated by both lyric and lysis, continually driven toward new fields of exhaustion. We have to continually work—where aridity is only insofar as it is inseparable from hyperhydration; where thirst and submergence converge; in the hold on the open sea—through this interplay of the establishment and the breakdown of the cell if we are ever to attend the birth of an insurgency that Fanon prophecies and enacts. The splitting of the cell is inseparable from the splitting of the ego that could be said to impose narcissism while also constituting narcissism's closure. There is a hydropique phono-optics of the general balm and it's the general bomb!

It is as if Fanon is providing commentary on the unpublished notebook of his own return, precisely in order to tell slant the experimental slant. This powerful sociolinguistic self-analysis is a kind of jumping-off point, but what I want to do is slow down and linger, for a little while, over the question of the little Negro, which is a monument to the mind of the little Negro dockworkers and fieldworkers, and work shirkers, and so on. The black man's relegation to pidgin understood as prison, as imprisonment in passage, or as naked, experimental inclined, or both, begs the question of the relationship between blackness and the black man, the paraontological distinction that is everywhere implicit in Fanon's text, precisely at or as the point in which self-analysis becomes possible, that space Sexton talks about in which we discern the distinction between vantage and view. But in neither Fanon nor Sexton nor Wilderson, even in texts that we are constrained to call autobiographical, and, moreover, nowhere in the cramped and capacious nowhere from which the vast ante- and antiautobiographical field from and within which black thought and black literature plots its escape and fantasizes its flight, can the brutally unauthorized author be said simply to be talking about him- or herself. He or she's talking about the self, precisely in the service of a complete
lysis of that morbid body and in its morbid universe. Fanon says, "We are aiming at nothing less than to liberate the black man from himself" (Fanon 2008: xii) which is to say the self that he cannot have and cannot be, but against which he is posed as the occupant of no position. Is this liberation complete in Fanon? Can self-analysis, which is the name Cecil Taylor gives to improvisation, liberate us from the self, or does it only further secure our incarceration? Again, this is a question that emerges not only in relation to Fanon but also in relation to Olaudah Equiano and Mary Prince, Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, Du Bois and Anna Julia Cooper, Wilderson and Hartman, permeating through and in an autobiographical trace that continues to animate the black radical tradition. On the other hand, the new black music is this: find the self, then kill it, as Philip's work instantiates. But, to echo Ralph Ellison again and again, so few people really listen to this music. It is, moreover, seldom that even the ones who make this music listen to it, hence the ongoing challenge, the ongoing construction of the intramural.

I'm not sure that Fanon really listens or that, more generally, he really senses the symposium he prepares for us. This preparation could be said to take the form of a sacrifice in which he takes on the unpleasant task of rigorously describing what's so hateful in the way antiblackness mishears what it overhears. Faulty recordings can't help but trigger violent disavowal. The distance between "I don't sound like that" and "I'm not like that" is infinitesimal in its immeasurable vastness. Does black speech, does the little Negro, assume a culture or bear a civilization? If not, then how could it be speech? What does it mean to consider that black speech is the sound of natal alienation, the sound of being without a heritage, without a patrimony? It means, first of all, that all these terms must be revalued, precisely from the already exhausted perspective of the ones who are both (de)value and invaluable. When Fanon (2008: 2) speaks of "local cultural originality," who or what is speaking? Who speaks the possession of a language, of a culture, of (a) civilization? Who speaks the necessity of a heritage such that its absence is understood as relative nothingness? Fanon moves by way of a model of the subject that is evacuated even as he writes. This is a James Snead formulation in a sense; a Gordon formulation in another. Derrida speaks, too, out of Algeria, of a problematic of accent, correspondent in its way to the Martinican swallow- ing of r's of which Fanon speaks. The dispossessive force of black speech confirms, in one sense, and obliterates, in another, the "monolingualism of the Other" (Derrida 1998a). My language is not mine, also, because its undercommonness cuts me and mine. The trouble is that Fanon leaps from an analysis of the social situation of pidgin in France, its force as a verbal
adjunct, to a visual imposition, without investigating the social situation of the making of pidgin and without raising the question of its structure, its syntax, its logic. It is simply assumed to be both subsequent and subordinate to the standard in its givenness. Is it possible for the new returnee actually to think about pidgin? Another way to put it is that Fanon prepares us for Glissant in hisysis of the morbid body, which begins with an attention to language that is then carried through in his investigation of the structure of epidermalization, of which the supposed imposition of pidgin and the imposition of the desire for French, in their interanimation, form a kind of verbal supplement and servant.

“Dirty nigger!” or simply “Look! A Negro!”
I came into this world anxious to uncover the meaning of things, my soul distressed to be at the origin of the world, and here I am an object among other objects.

Locked in this suffocating reification, I appealed to the Other so that his liberating gaze . . . would give me back the lightness of being I thought I had lost. . . . Nothing doing. I explode. Here are the fragments put together by another me . . .

We were given the occasion to confront the white gaze. An unusual weight descended on us. The real world robbed us of our share. In the white world, the man of color encounters difficulties in elaborating his body schema. The image of one's body is solely negating . . .

“Look! A Negro!” . . .
“Look! A Negro!” . . .
“Look! A Negro!” . . .

"Maman, look, a Negro; I'm scared!" Scared! Scared! Now they were beginning to be scared of me. I wanted to kill myself laughing, but laughter had become out of the question. (Fanon 2008: 89–90)

Fanon investigates what it is to be eager to grasp, to uncover, while having been robbed of the capacity to have a share. No past, no future, nonexistent, “my originality had been snatched from me” (2008: 108). The failed natality of the fabricated explodes so that the mechanism (the instrument, the toy) can, at the very least, piece itself together. This is the itinerary of Fanon's black deconstruction, which ends in an image of inquisitive reassembly, as if the futural project of blackness that he forecloses was always meant to live on only in and through him. The reification he decries suffocates in the absence of other aspiration. This attends the bodily schema's collapse into an epidermal-racial schema. In the aftermath of this interplay
of implosion and explosion, Fanon's lesson takes the form of a postmortem reconstruction. This is forensic phenomenology: autopsy, eyewitness, unflinching determination of the cause of our sociality, which is taken for our death, given in or initiated by a metaphors of biochemistry and supplemented by figures of text and textile. The pigmentation alluded to at the beginning will now be applied to newly woven cloth so that livery can be made in the service of a strict visual determination. Fanon sees it all so clearly, now, and the irony, of course, is that the eyes he sees with are not his. One sees only from the Other's perspective, with the other's instruments, that which is of the other's fabrication. How do we account for this forced borrowing of normative sense, normative senses, and the forms they take? Moreover, what remains silent in this ocular field? Does Fanon step out of the brutal structural adjustment this regime of credit enforces? The forensic knowledge that underwrites this postmortem is an imposition/gift conferred on "the occasion to confront the white gaze." What if consciousness of double consciousness is an effect of paraontological considerations? What if this auspicious Du Boisian beginning is thrown offtrack in Fanon, but precisely in the service of its placement in and on multiple tracks? Here, I think, is how the distinction between sociology and sociogeny turns toward a socio-poetic cognizance of the real presence of the people in and at their making, where that retrospective ascription of absence that Fanon's inhabitation of the problematic of damnation, which is activated in his return to his native land, is given in and to a lyrical, analytic poetics of the process of revolutionary transubstantiation that begins with the experience of the nonnative's nonreturn to the village and to the consensual expanse of its social speech, where and by way of which we study what it is to live in what is called dispossession. This is a problematic that shows up in relation to me, to nothingness, as well as in relation to the question of being, its unmasking, (and the unmasking of the one who frames it).

John Donne (1977: 73) says, "If I an ordinary nothing were, / As shadow, a light, and body must be here. // But I am none; nor will my sun renew." In the absence of what is taken for light, in the absence of the thought, the scheme, that is called a body, how do we describe extraordinary, or absolute, nothing? Is this certain uncertainty, an inability to distinguish oneself from one's things that implies, more precisely and more urgently, that disruption of the distinction between self and thing that makes possession possible? The body schema manifests itself as (a breakdown in) the relay between (knowledge of) the necessity of grasping and the capacity to grasp where necessity and capacity each denote, in turn, a relay between
knowing and acting. No ontological reach, no epistemological grasp. Meanwhile, it is precisely this implicit knowledge (of the difference between self and thing) that enforces questions. Linebaugh speaks of this nonsense, the extrasensorial assertion, which must have emerged in the ship's hold, which was a language lab, a zone of experimental, audiovisual intonation but also—and it is Omise'ke Natasha Tinsley (2008) who approaches this almost complete unapproachability—a scene, an erotic vestibule, a prison house of violent pleasure, where flesh is rendered in the absolute exposure of a terrible open secret. Linebaugh's critics, some in their best old-fashioned Marxist ways, anticipatory of Patterson's dismissive relegation of lore in the interest of data, say no, nothing could ever come of such formal deprivation (other than the poverty of the informal, which they have neither the capacity nor the desire to think in its in calculable rhythm). To which I would answer yes. Only nothing. Only that less and more than subjective and subjected sociality. Fantasy in the hold. And this is to say, basically, at the level of Sexton's real intellectual and social aims, if not at the level of the specific critical objects of our work, I am totally with him in locating my optimism in oppositional proximity to his pessimism even if I would tend not to talk about the inside/outside relationality of social death and social life while speaking in terms of apposition and permeation rather than in terms of opposition and surrounding. Perhaps this difference turns out to bear and make some greater difference if it is accompanied by another kind of attunement to some other, broader notions of enjoyment and abandonment; perhaps the difference can be made clearer by way of the brilliance of Sexton's interpellation of Gordon's brilliance.

And yet, this is precisely what Gordon argues is the value and insight of Fanon: he [Fanon] fully accepts the definition of himself as pathological as it is imposed by a world that knows itself through that imposition, rather than remaining in a reactive stance that insists on the . . . heterogeneity [or difference] between a self and an imago originating in culture. Though it may appear counterintuitive, or rather because it is counterintuitive, this . . . affirmation [of the pathological] is active; it is a willing or willingness, in other words, to pay whatever social costs accrue to being black, to inhabiting blackness, to living a black social life under the shadow of social death. This is not an accommodation to the dictates of the antiblack world. The affirmation of blackness, which is to say an affirmation of pathological being, is a refusal to distance oneself from blackness in a valorization of minor differences that bring one closer to health, to life, or to sociality. (Sexton 2011: 27)
A complete, which is to say a lyric, 
ysis of our living flesh and earthly sociality, which is often taken for a morbid body or a morbid universe, requires us to recognize that blackness is not reducible to its social costs; it is also manifest in a set of benefits and responsibilities. And if I said that the serially epigraphic positing of our wretchedness doesn’t come close to getting at how bad it has been and how bad it is, thereby extending, rather than foreclosing, the overseeing and overlooking of slavery and its afterlife, I would do so by indexing not only the imposition of cost but the interdiction of benefit. Paying implies capacities to have and to relinquish that are irreducible to expropriation. Choosing to be black implies paying the cost; it is a kind of ethical gesture to claim this dispossession, this nothingness, this radical poverty-in-spirit. This is what Afro-pessimism performs, in and as theory—an affirmative gesture toward nothingness, an affirmation of negation and its destructive force. It implies and demands a negative political ontology that is manifest as a kind of affirmative nihilism.

Nevertheless, my first impulse in reading Wilderson’s long, Trane-like recitation in Incognito of his exchange with his friend and colleague Naima was to ask, in a kind of Quinean rebuttal, why are we something rather than nothing? But the real task, and I follow in the footsteps of Sexton in taking it up, is to think about the relation between something and nothing or, if you’d rather, life and death. Is life surrounded by death, or does each move in and as the constant permutation of the other? But this is not even precise enough. The question is, Where would one go or how would one go about studying nothing’s real presence, the thingy presence, the facticity, of the nothing that is? What stance, what attitude, what comportment? If pessimism allows us to discern that we are nothing, then optimism is the condition of possibility of the study of nothing as well as what derives from that study. We are the ones who engage in and derive from that study: blackness as black study as black radicalism. In the end, precisely as the end of an analysis, the payment of a set of social costs will have coalesced into the inability properly to assess the nothingness that one claims. Blackness is more than exacted cost. Nothing is not absence. Blackness is more and less than one in nothing. This, informal, informal, insolvent insovereignty is the real presence of the nothing we come from, and bear, and make.

Consider the relation between nothingness and exhaustion as Deleuze (1997) describes it by way of Samuel Beckett: the real presence, the presence of the thing in exhaustion, its differential ecology, its “echo-muse-ecology,” to quote Stephen Feld (1994), its clamor, its clamour, its clamour, its claim, its demand, its plaint, its complaint, its working and layering and folding, as in Jacques
Coursil's an(p)thetic inclination, which also trumpets a movement from the subject of politics to the subject of life. To be subject to life might be understood as a kind of being enthralled by generativity. What the biopolitical continuum (the trajectory of sovereignty's illegitimate, speculative dissemination) attempts to regulate, suppress, and consume is the social poetics, the aesthetic sociality of this generativity. The care of the self, which can be figured as a kind of dissident member of the set of the self's various technologies, is part of the history of sovereignty as surely as the biopolitical deconstruction of sovereignty is an extension of that history. Another way to put it might be that biopolitics is already given in the figure of the political animal; that the move from natural history to biology is a held trajectory; that the regulation of generativity is already given in the idea of a natural kind. Teleological principle, which is meant to disrupt and disable the catalogy that accompanies biopolitics, reestablishes its ground and impetus, which is sovereignty. This asserts something that has to be worked through: the relationship between teleological principle and sovereignty, which will be established not by way of recourse to God as sovereign creator but by way of an appeal to transcendental subjectivity as a kind of manager (of anoriginal creativity or generativity). What's interesting and implicit here, what Immanuel Kant is always working toward and through, is the political subject as a natural kind, the political subject as the subject of natural history, natural history as a field that is presided over by the political animal. The mobile hold and block chapel of pidgin, the little Negro's church and logos and gathering, this gathering in and against the word, alongside and through the word and the world as hold, manger, wilderness, tomb, upper room, and cell: there is fantasy in all of these, which makes you wonder what happens when you put your fantasy on hold, when what is seen and sung of being-uheld is, at once, not held onto and not passed on.

Just Friends, Encore

Insofar as I am concerned, by way of a certain example to which Sexton appeals in order to explain (away) the difference that lies between us, with what surrounds, with what the nature is of surrounding and enclosure, I am also, of necessity, concerned with the relation between the inside and the outside, the intramural and the world. The difference that is not one is, for Sexton, a matter of "ontological reach." Perhaps he thinks of that difference as set-theoretic, a matter of calculating over infinities with the understanding that the infinity of social death is larger, as it were, than that of social life;
that the world is bigger than the other world, the underworld, the outer world of the inside song, the radical extension and exteriority that animates the enclosed, imprisoned inner world of the ones, shall we say, who are not poor in world but who are, to be more precise, poor-in-the-world. Black people are poor in the world. We are deprived in, and somehow both more and less than deprived of, the world. The question is how to attend to that poverty, that damnation, that wretchedness. I invoke Martin Heidegger’s formulation regarding the animal, that it is poor in world, up against the buried contour of his question concerning the way that technology tends toward the displacement of world with a world-picture, in order to make the distinction between the animal’s status and our own, which some might call even more distressing. What is it to be poor in the world? What is this worldly poverty, and what is its relation to the otherworldliness that we desire and enact, precisely insofar as it is present to us and present in us? Sexton characterizes this worldly poverty as attenuated ontological reach, but to say this is tricky and requires care. Poverty in this world is manifest in a kind of poetic access to what it is of the other world that remains unheard, unnoted, unrecognized in this one. Whether you call those resources tremendous life or social life in social death or fatal life or raw life, it remains to consider precisely what it is that the ones who have nothing have. What is this nothing that they have or to which they have access? What comes from it? And how does having it operate in relation to poverty?

At the same time, for Sexton, recognition of this attenuation (which marks that fact that the tone world is, as it were, surrounded by the deaf world) is already understood to indicate possession, as it were, of ontological reach. Maybe there’s another implicit distinction between ontic extension and ontological grasp. But who but the transcendental subject can have that grasp or attain the position and perspective that corresponds to it? Husserl, at the end of his career, when his own attainment of it is radically called into question, speaks of this exalted hand-eye coordination as the phenomenological attitude; a few years earlier, when his career was much nearer to its fullest height and he could claim to be master of all he surveyed—modestly, on the outer edges of his work, under the breath of his work in a way that demands a more general attunement to the phenomenological whisper—Husserl spoke of it in these terms: “I can see spread out before me the endlessly open plains of true philosophy, the ‘promised land,’ though its thorough cultivation will come after me” (Husserl 1982: 429). Marianne Sawicki is especially helpful, here, because she so precisely teases out the implications of his imagery. “By means of this spatial, geographical metaphor of
crossing over into the ‘new land,’ Husserl conveys something of the adventure and pioneer courage that should accompany phenomenological work. This science is related to ‘a new field of experience, exclusively its own, the field of “transcendental subjectivity,”’ and it offers ‘a method of access to the transcendental-phenomenological sphere.’ Husserl is the ‘first explorer’ of this marvelous place’ (Sawicki n.d.).

We should be no less forthright in recognizing that such positionality is the desire that Fanon admits, if only, perhaps, to disavow, when he conducts his philosophical investigations of the lived experience of the black. Two questions arise: Does he disavow it? Or is it, in its necessity, the very essence of what Wilderson calls “our black capacity to desire”? Certain things about the first few paragraphs of Fanon’s phenomenological analysis seem clearer to me now than when I was composing “The Case of Blackness” (Moten 2008). The desire to attain transcendental subjectivity’s self-regard is emphatic even if it is there primarily to mark an interdiction, an antagonism, a declivity, a fall into the deadly experiment that will have been productive of “a genuine new departure” (Fanon 2008: xii), the end of the world and the start of the general dispossession that will have been understood as cost and benefit. But that desire returns, as something like the residual self-image of the phenomenologist that he wants to but cannot be, to enunciate the (political) ontology he says is outlawed, in what he would characterize as the neurotic language of the demand, called, as he is, to be a witness in a court in which he has no standing, thereby requiring us to reconsider, by way of and beyond a certain Boalian turn, what it is to be a specta(c)tor. Elsewhere, I misleadingly assert, Fanon is saying that there is no and can be no black social life. I now believe he says that is all there can be (Moten 2008: 177). The antephilosophy of spirit that constitutes Black Skin, White Masks prepares our approach to sociological or, more precisely, sociopoetic grounding, as Du Bois, say, or later Walter Rodney would have it, by way of the description of the impossibility of political life, which is, nevertheless, at this moment and for much of his career, Fanon’s chief concern. The social life of the black, or of the colonized, is, to be sure, given to us in or through Fanon, often in his case studies, sometimes in verse, or in his narrative of the career of the revolutionary cadre. It is as if Fanon is there to remind us that the lunatic, the (revolutionary) lover, and the poet are of imagination all compact. They occupy and are preoccupied with a zone of the alternative, the zone of nonbeing (antic disposition’s tendency to cut and displace organic position) that asks and requires us to consider whether it is possible to differentiate a place in the sun, a promised land, a home—or merely a place and time—in this world, from the position of the
settler. Is it possible to desire the something other than transcendental sub-
jectivity that is called nothing? What if blackness is the name that has been
given to the social field and social life of an illicit alternative capacity to desire?
Basically, that is precisely what I think blackness is. I want it to be my con-
stant study. I listen for it everywhere. Or, at least, I try to. If I read Sexton cor-
rectly, after trying to get underneath the generous severity of his lesson, he
objects, rightly and legitimately, to the fact that in the texts he cites I have not
sufficiently looked for it in the Afro-pessimistic texts toward which I have
sometimes gestured. In the gestures I have made here I hope I have shown
what it is that I have been so happy to find, that projection or relay or amplifi-
cation carried out by the paraontological imagination that animates and agi-
tates Afro-pessimism's antiregulatory force.

Black optimism and Afro-pessimism are asymptotic. Which one is the
curve and which one is the line? Which is the kernel and which is the shell?
Which one is rational, which one is mystical? It doesn't matter. Let's just say
that their nonmeeting is part of an ongoing manic depressive episode called
black radicalism / black social life. Is it just a minor internal conflict, this
intimate nonmeeting, this impossibility of touching in mutual radiation and
permeation? Can pessimists and optimists be friends? I hope so. Maybe
that's what friendship is, this bipolarity, which is to say, more precisely, the
commitment to it. To say that we are friends is to say that we want to be
friends. I want to try to talk about the nature and importance of the friend-
ship I want, that I would like us to have, that we are about to have, that in the
deepest sense we already more than have, which is grounded in and enabled
by that commitment even as it is continually rethought and replayed by way
of our differences from one another, which is held within and holds together
our commonness. The difference has to do with the proper calibration of
this bipolarity. Sexton is right to suggest that the far too simple opposition
between pessimism and optimism is off, and that I was off in forwarding it,
or off in forwarding an imprecision that made it seem as if I were, having
been seduced by a certain heuristic and its sound, thereby perhaps inadvert-
ently seducing others into mistaking an alternating current for a direct one.
The bipolarity in question is, at every instance, way too complicated for that,
and I really want you to hear what we've been working on, this under-riff we've been trying to play, to study, to improvise, to compose in the hyperreal
time of our thinking and that thinking's desire. There is an ethics of the cut,
of contestation, that I have tried to honor and illuminate because it instanti-
ates and articulates another way of living in the world, a black way of living
together in the other world we are constantly making in and out of this
world, in the alternative planetarity that the intramural, internally differenti-
ated presence—the (sur)real presence—of blackness serially brings online as persistent aeration, the incessant turning over of the ground beneath our feet that is the indispensable preparation for the radical overturning of the ground that we are under.

Notes

This essay has its genesis in a three-part miniseminar given at the University of California, Irvine, under the auspices of the Critical Theory Institute. I would like to thank all the members of the institute and all of those who attended the seminar. As an opening invocation, I played a version of the song "Just Friends" recorded by Coleman Hawkins and Sonny Rollins in 1953 (Sonny Meets Hawk!, BMG France 74317458002, 2000).

1. This sentence gestures towards a convergence I keep imagining between Fanon's analysis of le Petit Nègre and Thornton Dial's sculptural Monument to the Minds of the Little Negro Steelworkers. At stake is the possibility of another reinitialization of the interplay of critique and celebration in black life and thought.

2. I have been thinking of Jacques Coursil's (2007) Clameurs, in which his "solo" trumpet is accompanied by Fanon's percussive disturbance of the very logic of the question in a way that can be heard in its proximity to Cherry's and Blackwell's duet.

References


Coursil, Jacques. 2007. Clameurs. Universal Music (France) 984 748 2. CD.


