Aboard the *Hudibras* in 1786, in the course of a harrowing journey from Africa to America, a popular woman died in slavery. Although she was “universally esteemed” among her fellow captives as an “oracle of literature,” an “orator,” and a “songstress,” she is anonymous to historians because the sailor on the slave ship who described her death, the young William Butterworth, did not record her name. Yet he did note that her passing caused a minor political tumult when the crew herded the other enslaved women below decks before they could see the body of their fallen shipmate consigned to the water. This woman was no alienated isolate to be hurled over the side of the ship without ceremony. She had been, according to Butterworth, the “soul of sociality” when the women were on the quarterdeck. There she had knelt “nearly prostrate, with hands stretched forth and placed upon the deck, and her head resting on her hands.” Then, “In order to render more easy the hours of her sisters in exile,” the woman “would sing slow airs, of a pathetic nature, and recite such pieces as moved the passions; exciting joy or grief, pleasure or pain, as fancy or inclination led.”1 Around her the other women were arranged in concentric circles, with the innermost ring comprising the youngest girls, and the elderly on the perimeter—a fleeting, makeshift community amid the chaos of the slave trade.

The first to die on that particular voyage, the woman was laid out on the deck while the sailors awaited flood tide to heave her overboard. The other women commenced a “loud, deep, and impressive” rite of mourning, often speaking softly to the corpse in the belief that the woman’s spirit would hear and acknowledge their wish “to be remembered to their friends in the other country, when they should meet again.” Before the ceremonies could reach a conclusion, the women and girls were ordered below, with the body left on the deck. Convinced that whites were cannibals and that the sailors “might begin to eat their dead favourite,” the Africans began a vehement protest. Fearing a general insurrection, the captain let several of the women out of the hold and had the corpse lowered into the water in their presence, “with the observance of rather more decency in the manner of doing it, than generally appeared in the funeral of a slave.” The protest subsided, the slaver eventually de-

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livered its captives on the American side of the Atlantic Ocean at Grenada, and it is likely that the remaining passengers lived and died as slaves.\textsuperscript{2}

What happened aboard the \textit{Hudibras} was an uncommon but not unimportant event. If slave funerals occasionally occurred on slave ships, they were hardly ever mentioned. Bodies were usually dumped unceremoniously into the ocean, cast to the sharks that followed the slavers with anticipation. Generally, there was no recognized ritual at all, no closure, only the continuation of disorientation on a cosmic scale. As historian Stephanie Smallwood has observed, captives on slave ships "confronted a dual crisis: the trauma of death, and the inability to respond appropriately to death."\textsuperscript{3} Partly because they were uncommon, episodes such as the one aboard the \textit{Hudibras} have been viewed as unlikely stories. Yet stories about slave ship funerals are unlikely not only because such ceremonies occurred infrequently, but because discussions of them have been seen as unpromising, likely to fail as explanations for any significant developments within the history of slavery. In other words, scholars are not well prepared to understand such funerals, because they do not really suit the prevailing ways we write about slavery's past—and its presence in our concerns.

Certainly, the popular woman's rite of passage could be seen as evidence of African cultural retention, following the interpretive path hewn by Melville J. Herskovits and his admirers; or one might see it as an act of resistance against dehumanization, especially if one takes the view of scholars such as David Brion Davis, who sees dehumanization or "animalization" as the key characteristic of enslavement. In this sense, one could see the event as an example of the agency of the enslaved. The protest leading up to the burial at sea could also be interpreted as an act of resistance against the constraints of enslavement, or at least of claim-making; but this was not a claim that threatened slavery as such, and so it rests uncomfortably within the terms that have traditionally governed the analysis of political activity on the part of the enslaved.\textsuperscript{4}

In fact, the funeral was an attempt to withstand the encroachment of oblivion and to make social meaning from the threat of anomie. As a final rite of passage and a ritual goodbye, the ceremony provided an outlet for anguish and an opportunity for commiseration. Yet it also allowed the women to publicly contemplate what it meant to be alive and enslaved. The death rite thus enabled them to express and enact their social values, to articulate their visions of what it was that bound them together, made individuals among them unique, and separated this group of people from others. The scene thus typifies the way that people who have been pronounced socially dead, that is, utterly alienated and with no social ties recognized as legitimate or

\textsuperscript{2} Butterworth, \textit{Three Years Adventures}, 95–96.


binding, have often made a social world out of death itself. The funeral was an act of accounting, of reckoning, and therefore one among the multitude of acts that made up the political history of Atlantic slavery. This was politics conceived not as a conventional battle between partisans, but as a struggle to define a social being that connected the past and present. It could even be said that the event exemplified a politics of history, which connects the politics of the enslaved to the politics of their descendants.

Although the deaths of slaves could inspire such active and dynamic practices of social reconnection, scholars in recent years have made too little of events like the funeral aboard the Hudibras and have too often followed Orlando Patterson's monumental Slavery and Social Death (1982) in positing a metaphorical “social death” as the basic condition of slavery. In a comparative study of sixty-six slaveholding societies ranging from ancient Greece and Rome to medieval Europe, precolonial Africa, and Asia, Patterson combined statistical analysis and voluminous research with brilliant theoretical insights drawn from Marxist theory, symbolic anthropology, law, philosophy, and literature in order to offer what he called a “preliminary definition of slavery on the level of personal relations.” Recognizing violence, violations of personhood, dishonor, and namelessness as the fundamental constituent elements of slavery, Patterson distilled a transhistorical characterization of slavery as “the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons.” In this way the institution of slavery was and is a “relation of domination,” in which slaveholders annihilated people socially by first extracting them from meaningful relationships that defined personal status and belonging, communal memory, and collective aspiration and then incorporating these socially dead persons into the masters’ world. As a work of historical sociology concerned primarily with the comparative analysis of institutions, the book illuminated the dynamics of a process whereby the “desocialized new slave” was subsumed within slave society.5

Slavery and Social Death was widely reviewed and lavishly praised for its erudition and conceptual rigor. As a result of its success, social death has become a handy general definition of slavery, for many historians and non-historians alike. But it is often forgotten that the concept of social death is a distillation from Patterson’s breathtaking survey—a theoretical abstraction that is meant not to describe the lived experiences of the enslaved so much as to reduce them to a least common denominator that could reveal the essence of slavery in an ideal-type slave, shorn of meaningful heritage.6 As a concept, it is what Frederick Cooper has called an “agentless abstraction” that provides a neat cultural logic but ultimately does little to illuminate the social and political experience of enslavement and the struggles that produce historic transformations.7 Indeed, it is difficult to use such a distillation to explain

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5 Orlando Patterson, Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), 13.
6 As the historian Herman Bennett has observed, “As the narrative of the slave experience, social death assumes a uniform African, slave, and ultimately black subject rooted in a static New World history whose logic originated in being property and remains confined to slavery. It absorbs and renders exceptional evidence that underscores the contingent nature of experience and consciousness. Thus, normative assumptions about the experiences of peoples of African descent assert a timeless, ahistorical, epiphenomenal ‘black’ cultural experience.” Bennett, “Genealogies to a Past: Africa, Ethnicity, and Marriage in Seventeenth-Century Mexico,” in Edward E. Baptist and Stephanie M. H. Camp, eds., New Studies in the History of American Slavery (Athens, Ga., 2006), 127–147, quotation from 142.
7 Frederick Cooper, Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History (Berkeley, Calif., 2005), 17.
the actual behavior of slaves, and yet in much of the scholarship that followed in the wake of *Slavery and Social Death*, Patterson's abstract distillates have been used to explain the existential condition of the enslaved.

Having emerged from the discipline of sociology, "social death" fit comfortably within a scholarly tradition that had generally been more alert to deviations in patterns of black life from prevailing social norms than to the worldviews, strategies, and social tactics of people in black communities. Together with Patterson's work on the distortions wrought by slavery on black families, "social death" reflected sociology's abiding concern with "social pathology"; the "pathological condition" of twentieth-century black life could be seen as an outcome of the damage that black people had suffered during slavery. University of Chicago professor Robert Park, the *grand-père* of the social pathologists, set the terms in 1919: "the Negro, when he landed in the United States, left behind almost everything but his dark complexion and his tropical temperament."[^8] Patterson's distillation also conformed to the nomothetic imperative of social science, which has traditionally aimed to discover universal laws of operation that would be true regardless of time and place, making the synchronic study of social phenomena more tempting than more descriptive studies of historical transformation. *Slavery and Social Death* took shape during a period when largely synchronic studies of antebellum slavery in the United States dominated the scholarship on human bondage, and Patterson's expansive view was meant to situate U.S. slavery in a broad context rather than to discuss changes as the institution developed through time. Thus one might see "social death" as an obsolete product of its time and tradition, an academic artifact with limited purchase for contemporary scholarship, were it not for the concept's reemergence in some important new studies of slavery.[^9]

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[^9]: Reacting to the static nature of the historiography of slavery in the United States during these years, studies of colonial slavery by Peter Wood and Ira Berlin, among others, drew attention to variation over time and space and successfully shifted the main focus of slavery studies toward the era of the transatlantic slave trade, making it easier to see slavery in Atlantic perspective and as a phenomenon that changed markedly over time. Thereafter it became as important to describe historic transformations in slavery as it had been to define the essential nature of slavery. At the same time, as mainstream historians became increasingly aware of the black freedom struggles in the U.S. and elsewhere, they took greater note of anti-slavery activities among the enslaved. See especially Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York, 1974); Ira Berlin, "Time, Space, and the Evolution of Afro-American Society on British Mainland North America," *American Historical Review* 85, no. 1 (February 1980): 44–78. The year 1998 represented a kind of watershed in U.S. academe for studies of slavery, which witnessed the publication of several very important works: Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998); Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1998); Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1998); and John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1998).
capacity for collective agency among subjugated people. As a result, trends in the study of slavery, as with the study of dominance more generally, often divide between works that emphasize the overwhelming power of the institution and scholarship that focuses on the resistant efforts of the enslaved. In turn, this division frames a problem in the general understanding of political life, especially for the descendants of the powerless. It might even be said that these kinds of studies form different and opposing genres—hopeful stories of heroic subalterns versus anatomies of doom—that compete for ascendance. In recent years, if the invocation of Patterson’s “social death” is any indication, the pendulum seems to have swung decidedly toward despair.

A fascinating book by Ian Baucom has illuminated the persistence of slavery’s forms of being in our own time. *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* excavates the history of the massacre aboard the slave ship *Zong* in 1781, which came to light as a dispute over an insurance claim for lost cargo, and the reactions to that event in subsequent legal trials, social movements, and literary and artistic discourses. Writing against the view that would see the massacre as an isolated tragedy, Baucom situates the story of the *Zong* within a logic of violence that underpins a long Atlantic cycle of speculative capital accumulation that began in the eighteenth century and continues today. Indeed, the logic that governed the transformation of slaughtered human beings into modern abstract forms of property derives in part from social death, which Baucom glosses as the state of being permanently subject to death by the master’s hand. Human life is still a commodity—as a brief glimpse at a life insurance policy or a credit score will instantly show—and the abolition of chattel slavery has not solved the problem Baucom has identified. It is therefore within reason for him to identify the *Zong* as a tragic part of our present and future.

*Specters of the Atlantic* is a compellingly sophisticated study of the relation between the epistemologies underwriting both modern slavery and modern capitalism, but the book’s discussion of the politics of anti-slavery is fundamentally incomplete. While Baucom brilliantly traces the development of “melancholy realism” as an oppositional discourse that ran counter to the logic of slavery and finance capital, he has very little to say about the enslaved themselves. Social death, so well suited to the tragic perspective, stands in for the experience of enslavement. While this heightens the reader’s sense of the way Atlantic slavery haunts the present, Baucom largely fails to acknowledge that the enslaved performed melancholy acts of accounting not unlike those that he shows to be a fundamental component of abolitionist and human rights discourses, or that those acts could be a basic element of slaves’ oppositional activities. In many ways, the effectiveness of his text depends upon the silence of slaves—it is easier to describe the continuity of structures of power when one downplays countervailing forces such as the political activity of the weak. So Baucom’s deep insights into the structural features of Atlantic slave trading and its afterlife come with a cost. Without engagement with the politics of the enslaved, slavery’s history serves as an effective charge leveled against modernity and capitalism, but

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not as an uneven and evolving process of human interaction, and certainly not as a locus of conflict in which the enslaved sometimes won small but important victories.\textsuperscript{11} 

*Specers of the Atlantic* is self-consciously a work of theory (despite Baucum's prodigious archival research), and social death may be largely unproblematic as a matter of theory, or even law. In these areas, as David Brion Davis has argued, "the slave has no legitimate, independent being, no place in the cosmos except as an instrument of her or his master's will."\textsuperscript{12} But the concept often becomes a general description of actual social life in slavery. Vincent Carretta, for example, in his authoritative biography of the abolitionist writer and former slave Olaudah Equiano, agrees with Patterson that because enslaved Africans and their descendants were "stripped of their personal identities and history, [they] were forced to suffer what has been aptly called 'social death.'" The self-fashioning enabled by writing and print "allowed Equiano to resurrect himself publicly" from the condition that had been imposed by his enslavement.\textsuperscript{13} The living conditions of slavery in eighteenth-century Jamaica, one slave society with which Equiano had experience, are described in rich detail in Trevor Burnard's unflinching examination of the career of Thomas Thistlewood, an English migrant who became an overseer and landholder in Jamaica, and who kept a diary there from 1750 to 1786. Through Thistlewood's descriptions of his life among slaves, Burnard glimpses a "world of uncertainty," where the enslaved were always vulnerable to repeated deprivations that actually led to "significant slave dehumanization as masters sought, with considerable success, to obliterateslaves' personal histories." Burnard consequently concurs with Patterson: "slavery completely stripped slaves of their cultural heritage, brutalized them, and rendered ordinary life and normal relationships extremely difficult."\textsuperscript{14} This was slavery, after all, and much more than a transfer of migrants from Africa to America.\textsuperscript{15} Yet one wonders, after reading Burnard's indispensable account, how slaves in Jamaica organized some of British America's greatest political events during Thistlewood's time and after, including the Coromantee Wars of the 1760s, the 1776 Hanover conspiracy, and the Baptist War of 1831-1832. Surely they must have found some way to turn the "disorganization, instability, and chaos" of slavery into collective forms of belonging and striving, making connections when confronted with alienation and finding dignity in the face of dishonor. Rather than pathologizing slaves by allowing the condition of social death to stand for the experience of life in slavery, then, it might be more helpful to focus on what the enslaved actually made of their situation.

\textsuperscript{11} Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 26-32.


\textsuperscript{15} As Alexander X. Byrd has shown in *Captives and Voyagers*, the multi-staged process of migration was itself crucial to the formation of "ethnic" categories of belonging.
Among the most insightful texts to explore the experiential meaning of Afro-Atlantic slavery (for both the slaves and their descendants) are two recent books by Saidiya Hartman and Stephanie Smallwood. Rather than eschewing the concept of social death, as might be expected from writing that begins by considering the perspective of the enslaved, these two authors use the idea in penetrating ways. Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* and Smallwood’s *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* extend social death beyond a general description of slavery as a condition and imagine it as an experience of self. Here both the promise and the problem with the concept are most fully apparent.16

Both authors seek a deeper understanding of the experience of enslavement and its consequences for the past, present, and future of black life than we generally find in histories of slavery. In Hartman’s account especially, slavery is not only an object of study, but also the focus of a personal memoir. She travels along a slave route in Ghana, from its coastal forts to the backcountry hinterlands, symbolically reversing the first stage of the trek now commonly called the Middle Passage. In searching prose, she meditates on the history of slavery in Africa to explore the precarious nature of belonging to the social category “African American.” Rendering her remarkable facility with social theory in elegant and affective terms, Hartman asks the question that nags all identities, but especially those forged by the descendants of slaves: What identifications, imagined affinities, mythical narratives, and acts of remembering and forgetting hold the category together? Confronting her own alienation from any story that would yield a knowable genealogy or a comfortable identity, Hartman wrestles with what it means to be a stranger in one’s putative motherland, to be denied country, kin, and identity, and to forget one’s past—to be an orphan.17 Ultimately, as the title suggests, *Lose Your Mother* is an injunction to accept dispossession as the basis of black self-definition.

Such a judgment is warranted, in Hartman’s account, by the implications of social death both for the experience of enslavement and for slavery’s afterlife in the present. As Patterson delineated in sociological terms the death of social personhood and the reincorporation of individuals into slavery, Hartman sets out on a personal quest to “retrace the process by which lives were destroyed and slaves born.”18 When she contends with what it meant to be a slave, she frequently invokes Patterson’s idiom: “Seized from home, sold in the market, and severed from kin, the slave was for all intents and purposes dead, no less so than had he been killed in combat. No less so than had she never belonged to the world.” By making men, women, and children into commodities, enslavement destroyed lineages, tethering people to owners rather than families, and in this way it “annulled lives, transforming men and women into dead matter, and then resuscitated them for servitude.” Admittedly, the enslaved “lived and breathed, but they were dead in the social world of men.”19 As it turns out, this kind of alienation is also part of what it presently means to be African

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18 Ibid., 6.

19 Ibid., 57–68.
American. “The transience of the slave’s existence,” for example, still leaves its traces in how black people imagine and speak of home:

We never tire of dreaming of a place that we can call home, a place better than here, wherever here might be . . . We stay there, but we don’t live there . . . Staying is living in a country without exercising any claims on its resources. It is the perilous condition of existing in a world in which you have no investments. It is having never resided in a place that you can say is yours. It is being “of the house” but not having a stake in it. Staying implies transient quarters, a makeshift domicile, a temporary shelter, but no attachment or affiliation. This sense of not belonging and of being an extraneous element is at the heart of slavery.20

“We may have forgotten our country,” Hartman writes, “but we haven’t forgotten our dispossession.”21

Like Baucom, Hartman sees the history of slavery as a constituent part of a tragic present. Atlantic slavery continues to be manifested in black people’s skewed life chances, poor education and health, and high rates of incarceration, poverty, and premature death. Disregarding the commonplace temporalities of professional historians, whose literary conventions are generally predicated on a formal distinction between past, present, and future, Hartman addresses slavery as a problem that spans all three. The afterlife of slavery inhabits the nature of belonging, which in turn guides the “freedom dreams” that shape prospects for change. “If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America,” she writes, “it is not because of an antiquated obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago.”22

A professor of English and comparative literature, Hartman is in many respects in a better position than most historians to understand events such as the funeral aboard the Hudibras. This is because for all of her evident erudition, her scholarship is harnessed not so much to a performance of mastery over the facts of what happened, which might substitute precision for understanding, as to an act of mourning, even yearning. She writes with a depth of introspection and personal anguish that is transgressive of professional boundaries but absolutely appropriate to the task. Reading Hartman, one wonders how a historian could ever write dispassionately about slavery without feeling complicit and ashamed. For dispassionate accounting—exemplified by the ledgers of slave traders—has been a great weapon of the powerful, an episteme that made the grossest violations of personhood acceptable, even necessary. This is the kind of bookkeeping that bore fruit upon the Zong. “It made it easier for a trader to countenance yet another dead black body or for a captain to dump a shipload of captives into the sea in order to collect the insurance, since it wasn’t possible to kill cargo or to murder a thing already denied life. Death was simply part of the workings of the trade.” The archive of slavery, then, is “a mortuary.” Not content to total up the body count, Hartman offers elegy, echoing in her own way the lamentations of the women aboard the Hudibras. Like them, she is concerned with the dead and what they mean to the living. “I was desperate to

20 Ibid., 87-88.
21 Ibid., 87.
22 Ibid., 6.
reclaim the dead," she writes, "to reckon with the lives undone and obliterated in the making of human commodities."

It is this mournful quality of Lose Your Mother that elevates it above so many histories of slavery, but the same sense of lament seems to require that Hartman overlook small but significant political victories like the one described by Butterworth. Even as Hartman seems to agree with Paul Gilroy on the "value of seeing the consciousness of the slave as involving an extended act of mourning," she remains so focused on her own commemorations that her text makes little space for a consideration of how the enslaved struggled with alienation and the fragility of belonging, or of the mourning rites they used to confront their condition. All of the questions she raises about the meaning of slavery in the present—both highly personal and insistently political—might as well be asked about the meaning of slavery to slaves themselves, that is, if one begins by closely examining their social and political lives rather than assuming their lack of social being. Here Hartman is undone by her reliance on Orlando Patterson's totalizing definition of slavery. She asserts that "no solace can be found in the death of the slave, no higher ground can be located, no perspective can be found from which death serves a greater good or becomes anything other than what it is." If she is correct, the events on the Hudibras were of negligible importance. And indeed, Hartman's understandable emphasis on the personal damage wrought by slavery encourages her to disavow two generations of social history that have demonstrated slaves' remarkable capacity to forge fragile communities, preserve cultural inheritance, and resist the predations of slaveholders. This in turn precludes her from describing the ways that violence, dislocation, and death actually generate culture, politics, and consequential action by the enslaved.

This limitation is particularly evident in a stunning chapter that Hartman calls "The Dead Book." Here she creatively reimagines the events that occurred on the voyage of the slave ship Recovery, bound, like the Hudibras, from the Bight of Biafra to Grenada, when Captain John Kimber hung an enslaved girl naked from the mizzen stay and beat her, ultimately to her death, for being "sulky": she was sick and could not dance when so ordered. As Hartman notes, the event would have been unremarkable had not Captain Kimber been tried for murder on the testimony of the ship's surgeon, a brief transcript of the trial been published, and the woman's death been offered up as allegory by the abolitionist William Wilberforce and the graphic satirist Isaac Cruikshank. Hartman re-creates the murder and the surge of words it inspired, representing the perspectives of the captain, the surgeon, and the aboli-

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23 Ibid., quotations from 31, 17, 6.
26 In Hartman's earlier work, she calls for precisely the kind of approach to the history of slavery that might illuminate the politics of the enslaved. She has argued persuasively that memory in black cultural practice "incessantly reiterates and enacts the contradictions and antagonisms of enslavement, the ruptures of history, and the disassociated and dispersed networks of affiliation." But even here she remains focused on slavery as social death: "the quotidian articulates the wounds of history and the enormity of the breach instituted by the transatlantic crossing of black captives and the consequent processes of enslavement: violent domination, dishonor, natal alienation, and chattel status." Her insight would suggest that such quotidian practices constitute the most elemental dimensions of slaves' collective politics, and not just slavery's forms of subjectivity. See Saidiya V. Hartman, Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America (New York, 1997), 72.
tionist, for each of whom the girl was a cipher "outfitted in a different guise," and then she puts herself in the position of the victim, substituting her own voice for the unknowable thoughts of the girl. Imagining the experience as her own and wistfully representing her demise as a suicide—a final act of agency—Hartman hopes, by this bold device, to save the girl from oblivion. Or perhaps her hope is to prove the impossibility of ever doing so, because by failing, she concedes that the girl cannot be put to rest. It is a compelling move, but there is something missing. Hartman discerns a convincing subject position for all of the participants in the events surrounding the death of the girl, except for the other slaves who watched the woman die and carried the memory with them to the Americas, presumably to tell others, plausibly even survivors of the *Hudibras*, who must have drawn from such stories a basic perspective on the history of the Atlantic world. For the enslaved spectators, Hartman imagines only a fatalistic detachment: "The women were assembled a few feet away, but it might well have been a thousand. They held back from the girl, steering clear of her bad luck, pestilence, and recklessness. Some said she had lost her mind. What could they do, anyway? The women danced and sang as she lay dying."

Hartman ends her odyssey among the Gwolu, descendants of peoples who fled the slave raids and who, as communities of refugees, shared her sense of dispossession. "Newcomers were welcome. It didn't matter that they weren't kin because genealogy didn't matter"; rather, "building community did." *Lose Your Mother* concludes with a moving description of a particular one of their songs, a lament for those who were lost, which resonated deeply with her sense of slavery's meaning in the present. And yet Hartman has more difficulty hearing similar cries intoned in the past by slaves who managed to find themselves.  

*Saltwater Slavery* has much in common with *Lose Your Mother*. Smallwood's study of the slave trade from the Gold Coast to the British Americas in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries likewise redeems the experience of the people traded like so many bolts of cloth, "who were represented merely as ciphers in the political arithmetic," and therefore "feature in the documentary record not as subjects of a social history but as objects or quantities." Each text offers a penetrating analysis of the market logic that turned people into goods. Both books work with the concept of social death. However, Smallwood examines the problem of social death for the enslaved even more closely than Hartman does.

Like Hartman, Smallwood sees social death as a by-product of commodification. "If in the regime of the market Africans' most socially relevant feature was their exchangeability," she argues, "for Africans as immigrants the most socially relevant feature was their isolation, their desperate need to restore some measure of social life to counterbalance the alienation engendered by their social death." But Smallwood's approach is different in a subtle way. Whereas for Hartman, as for others, social death is an accomplished state of being, Smallwood veers between a notion of social death as an actual condition produced by violent dislocation and social death as a compelling threat. On the one hand, she argues, captivity on the Atlantic littoral was a social death. Exchangeable persons "inhabited a new category of mar-

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29 Ibid., 58–60.
ginalization, one not of extreme alienation within the community, but rather of absolute exclusion from any community.” She seems to accept the idea of enslaved commodities as finished products for whom there could be no socially relevant relationships: “the slave cargo constituted the antithesis of community.” Yet elsewhere she contends that captives were only “menaced” with social death. “At every point along the passage from African to New World markets,” she writes, “we find a stark contest between slave traders and slaves, between the traders’ will to commodify people and the captives’ will to remain fully recognizable as human subjects.”

Here, I think, Smallwood captures the truth of the idea: social death was a receding horizon—the farther slaveholders moved toward the goal of complete mastery, the more they found that struggles with their human property would continue, even into the most elemental realms: birth, hunger, health, fellowship, sex, death, and time.

If social death did not define the slaves’ condition, it did frame their vision of apocalypse. In a harrowing chapter on the meaning of death (that is, physical death) during the Atlantic passage, Smallwood is clear that the captives could have no frame of reference for the experience aboard the slave ships, but she also shows how desperate they were to make one. If they could not reassemble some meaningful way to map their social worlds, “slaves could foresee only further descent into an endless purgatory.” The women aboard the Hudibras were not in fact the living dead; they were the mothers of gasping new societies. Their view of the danger that confronted them made their mourning rites vitally important, putting these at the center of the women’s emerging lives as slaves—and as a result at the heart of the struggles that would define them. As Smallwood argues, this was first and foremost a battle over their presence in time, to define their place among ancestors, kin, friends, and future progeny. “The connection Africans needed was a narrative continuity between past and present—an epistemological means of connecting the dots between there and here, then and now, to craft a coherent story out of incoherent experience.” That is precisely what the women on the Hudibras fought to accomplish.

The premise of Orlando Patterson’s major work, that enslaved Africans were natally alienated and culturally isolated, was challenged even before he published his influential thesis, primarily by scholars concerned with “survivals” or “retentions” of African culture and by historians of slave resistance. In the early to mid-twentieth century, when Robert Park’s view of “the Negro” predominated among scholars, it was generally assumed that the slave trade and slavery had denuded black people of any ancestral heritage from Africa. The historians Carter G. Woodson and W. E. B. Du Bois and the anthropologist Melville I. Herskovits argued the opposite. Their research supported the conclusion that while enslaved Africans could not have brought intact social, political, and religious institutions with them to the Americas, they did maintain significant aspects of their cultural backgrounds. Herskovits ex-

30 Ibid., quotations from 189, 30, 101, 56, 5.
31 Ibid., quotations from 189, 191.
examined "Africanisms"—any practices that seemed to be identifiably African—as useful symbols of cultural survival that would help him to analyze change and continuity in African American culture.\textsuperscript{33} He engaged in one of his most heated scholarly disputes with the sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, a student of Park's, who emphasized the damage wrought by slavery on black families and folkways.\textsuperscript{34} More recently, a number of scholars have built on Herskovits's line of thought, enhancing our understanding of African history during the era of the slave trade. Their studies have evolved productively from assertions about general cultural heritage into more precise demonstrations of the continuity of worldviews, categories of belonging, and social practices from Africa to America. For these scholars, the preservation of distinctive cultural forms has served as an index both of a resilient social personhood, or identity, and of resistance to slavery itself.\textsuperscript{35}

Scholars of slave resistance have never had much use for the concept of social death. The early efforts of writers such as Herbert Aptheker aimed to derail the popular notion that American slavery had been a civilizing institution threatened by "slave crime."\textsuperscript{36} Soon after, studies of slave revolts and conspiracies advocated the idea that resistance demonstrated the basic humanity and intractable will of the enslaved—indeed, they often equated acts of will with humanity itself. As these writers turned toward more detailed analyses of the causes, strategies, and tactics of slave revolts in the context of the social relations of slavery, they had trouble squaring abstract characterizations of "the slave" with what they were learning about the enslaved.\textsuperscript{37} Michael Craton, who authored \textit{Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in

the British West Indies, was an early critic of *Slavery and Social Death*, protesting that what was known about chattel bondage in the Americas did not confirm Patterson’s definition of slavery. “If slaves were in fact ‘generally dishonored,’” Craton asked, “how does he explain the degrees of rank found among all groups of slaves—that is, the scale of ‘reputation’ and authority accorded, or at least acknowledged, by slave and master alike?” How could they have formed the fragile families documented by social historians if they had been “naturally alienated” by definition? Finally, and perhaps most tellingly, if slaves had been uniformly subjected to “permanent violent domination,” they could not have revolted as often as they did or shown the “varied manifestations of their resistance” that so frustrated masters and compromised their power, sometimes “fatal.”38 The dynamics of social control and slave resistance falsified Patterson’s description of slavery even as the tenacity of African culture showed that enslaved men, women, and children had arrived in the Americas bearing much more than their “tropical temperament.”

The cultural continuity and resistance schools of thought come together powerfully in an important book by Walter C. Rucker, *The River Flows On: Black Resistance, Culture, and Identity Formation in Early America*. In Rucker’s analysis of slave revolts, conspiracies, and daily recalcitrance, African concepts, values, and cultural metaphors play the central role. Unlike Smallwood and Hartman, for whom “the rupture was the story” of slavery, Rucker aims to reveal the “perseverance of African culture even among second, third, and fourth generation creoles.”39 He looks again at some familiar events in North America—New York City’s 1712 Coromantee revolt and 1741 conspiracy, the 1739 Stono rebellion in South Carolina, as well as the plots, schemes, and insurgencies of Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner—deftly teasing out the African origins of many of the attitudes and actions of the black rebels. Rucker outlines how the transformation of a “shared cultural heritage” that shaped collective action against slavery corresponded to the “various steps Africans made in the process of becoming ‘African American’ in culture, orientation, and identity.”40

Like scholars of resistance before him, Rucker effectively refutes any contention that the enslaved were socially dead. At the same time, his focus on the making of African American culture obscures a crucial dimension of the politics of slavery. In *The River Flows On*, resistance is the expression of culture, and peoplehood is the outcome of resistance, but Rucker places much less emphasis on the kinds of existential problems highlighted by Hartman and Smallwood. He does not ignore the

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violence of slavery, but he invokes bondage and its depredations as the antithesis of black self-making, rather than as a constitutive part of it. If for Hartman dispossession "had made us an us," Rucker believes that resistance was the crucible in which black people forged identity from a vital inheritance. How might his approach account for the dislocations, physical violations, and cosmic crises that pre-occupy Hartman and Smallwood? Here is where scholars of retention and resistance may yet have something to learn from the concept of social death, viewed properly as a compelling metaphysical threat.

African American history has grown from the kinds of people's histories that emphasize a progressive struggle toward an ultimate victory over the tyranny of the powerful. Consequently, studies that privilege the perspectives of the enslaved depend in some measure on the chronicling of heroic achievement, and historians of slave culture and resistance have recently been accused of romanticizing their subject of study. Because these scholars have done so much to enhance our understanding of slave life beyond what was imaginable a scant few generations ago, the allegation may seem unfair. Nevertheless, some of the criticisms are helpful. As the historian Walter Johnson has argued, studies of slavery conducted within the terms of social history have often taken "agency," or the self-willed activity of choice-making subjects, to be their starting point. Perhaps it was inevitable, then, that many historians would find themselves charged with depicting slave communities and cultures that were so resistant and so vibrant that the social relations of slavery must not have done much damage at all. Even if this particular accusation is a form of caricature, it contains an important insight, that the agency of the weak and the power of the strong have too often been viewed as simple opposites. The anthropologist David Scott is probably correct to suggest that for most scholars, the power of slaveholders and the damage wrought by slavery have been "pictured principally as a negative or limiting force" that "restricted, blocked, paralyzed, or deformed the transformative agency of the slave." In this sense, scholars who have emphasized slavery's corrosive power and those who stress resistance and resilience share the same assumption. However, the violent domination of slavery generated political action; it was not antithetical to it. If one sees power as productive and the fear of social death not as incapacity but as a generative force—a peril that motivated enslaved activity—a different image of slavery slides into view, one in which the object of slave politics is not simply the power of slaveholders, but the very terms and conditions of social existence.

Writing the history of slavery in a way that emphasizes struggles against social alienation requires some readjustment in commonplace understandings of culture

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41 Hartman, Lose Your Mother, 74. One of Rucker's likely inspirations here is Sterling Stuckey, Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America (New York, 1987).


44 David Scott, Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment (Durham, N.C., 2004), 111.
and politics. Historians and social scientists have often debated the question of slave cultures and the cultures of slavery through residual Victorian understandings of culture as the civilization of achievements of "the West," "Africa," or various other groups, to be attained, lost, or re-created. The meanings attributed to things are often taken to indicate complete and integrated systems of belief and behavior, even identities, that corresponded to distinct population groups. This approach has been subjected to critical scrutiny in a number of disciplines. While culture may still refer to what William Sewell, Jr. has called "the particular shapes and consistencies of worlds of meaning in different places and times" that somehow fit together despite tension and conflict, the fluidity of this definition would suggest that practices of meaning are better seen as tools to be used than as possessions to be lost. And though culture is still sometimes portrayed as a holistic set of worldviews or attitudes commensurate with circumscribed populations, historical writers should begin from a different point of departure, highlighting instead particular meanings as situational guides to consequential action—motivations, sometimes temporary, that are best evaluated in terms of how they are publicly enacted, shared, and reproduced. The focus would be less on finding an integrated and coherent ethos among slaves and more on the particular acts of communication that allowed enslaved people to articulate idioms of belonging, similarity, and distinction. The virtues of this method are on display in James Sidbury's Becoming African in America: Race and Nation in the Early Black Atlantic, which shows how Anglophone black people expressed their sense of being African "in tension with, and in partial opposition to, memories and experiences of the indigenous cultures of Africa, rather than directly out of them." The meaning of the category "African" was not merely a reflection of cultural tenacity but the consequence of repeated acts of political imagination.

Slaves needed such acts of imagination to do much more than conserve cultures or create identities. They had to make the threat of social chaos meaningful. On this point, Smallwood is especially helpful. The cultures produced by enslaved Africans in the Americas did not reflect a "simple transfer and continuation" but were based rather on the "elaboration of specific cultural content and its transformation to meet the particular needs of slave life." Most important was "their need to reassert some kind of healthy relationship to ancestors; to manage death; to produce social networks, communities, and relations of kinship; to address the imbalance of power between black and white; to stake a claim to their bodies to counter the plantation economy's claim to ownership." To do these things, slaves undoubtedly drew upon what they had experienced in Africa, along their Atlantic journey, and under the particular conditions of their enslavement in America. But what is more important here is the emphasis on the contextual needs of the enslaved, which compelled them

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48 Smallwood, Saltwater Slavery, 190.
to make their cultural practices from the stuff of death and dissolution. As Alexander Byrd has urged, scholars must recognize 'how central violence and disaster, and emigrants' responses to duress and catastrophe, were to the formation and articulation of black migrant society.'

This view of the cultural challenges facing the enslaved certainly has implications for the way we think about slaves' resistance, or better yet, politics. Scholars have commonly treated retention of African cultural forms as an index of black agency, which could in turn be cited to prove the retention of basic humanity in an inhuman system. What if instead, as Walter Johnson has suggested, we treated agency not as a thing to be discovered or assigned by historians hoping to redeem the humanity of slaves, but as an aspect of existence to be assumed even under conditions of 'bare life'? It might be even clearer then that the struggles of slaves were not simply beset by the depredations of slavery but were shaped and directed by them. The activities of slaves could be more easily understood as having been compelled by the very conditions that slaves have been described as resisting. This would imply a politics of survival, existential struggle transcending resistance against enslavement.

This is an admittedly capacious conception of the political, encompassing efforts to make the kinds of self-definition that concern Hartman, to maneuver socially by using the cultural practices considered by Rucker, as well as the elemental struggles to maintain bodily and cognitive integrity depicted by Smallwood. Such an expansive definition might be accused of trivializing politics by stretching the meaning of the term too far—if everything is political, then nothing is. Yet surely in slavery, where the nature and terms of social being were at stake, these kinds of struggles composed the immediate political life of the unfree. The danger of broadening the political to include efforts to abate the pervasive threat of social death is countermanded by the greater danger that we will fail to fully understand how conflicts over the most elemental aspects of social life informed even the most elevated artifacts of political history.

For example, few serious scholars now doubt the political significance of the Haitian Revolution. Over the course of nearly fifteen years of deadly turmoil in the French Atlantic culminating in genocidal warfare, a hardened country of former slaves emerged as the first nation in the Americas to conclusively abolish slavery and white supremacy. Although the legacy of the revolution is much debated, its initial

49 An influential call for such an approach can be found in Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 64–81. Following the anthropologist Michael Ralph, one might imagine, for example, how the high mortality rates afflicting black populations have created an experience of "surplus time" among the living, "the sense that, according to perceived life expectancies, [the survivors] should already be dead. This phenomenon may partly explain behavioral patterns that conform to our expectations of neither continuity nor disruption, but rather arise from people's estimations of their predicament. Michael Ralph, "'Flirt[ing]' with Death' but 'Still Alive': The Sexual Dimension of Surplus Time in Hip Hop Fantasy," *Cultural Dynamics* 18, no. 1 (2006): 61–88.


success is incontrovertible evidence that the political acts of the enslaved helped to shape the evolution of slavery, the metropolitan antislavery movements in Europe, and the intellectual history of "the West." If the American Revolution was the pivotal event in the world of imperial reform, the Haitian Revolution has emerged as the catalyst for important transformations in the larger world of Atlantic slavery and anticolonial nationalism. The Haitian Declaration of Independence should therefore be of general interest to all students of history.

The author of that declaration was Louis Boisrond-Tonnerre, a wealthy free man of color from a well-established creole family who had received his education in France. So the momentous announcement would not at first glance seem to represent the priorities of former slaves. Yet Boisrond-Tonnerre was chosen for the task and overseen by Jean-Jacques Dessalines, who had risen from the lower ranks of the enslaved into the command of the new nation-state, and who read the declaration publicly on January 1, 1804. At its heart is a remembrance of the death and suffering caused by the former colonial masters: "Native citizens, men, women, girls, and children, let your gaze extend on all parts of this island: look there for your spouses, your husbands, your brothers, your sisters. Indeed! Look there for your children, your suckling infants, what have they become?... I shudder to say it... the prey of these vultures." The declaration then calls for vengeance, but in such a way as to appeal strongly to the particular sensibilities of the former slaves. "What are you waiting for before appeasing their spirits?" Dessalines asked. "Remember that you had wanted your remains to rest next to those of your father after you defeated tyranny; will you descend into their tombs without having avenged them? No! Their bones would reject yours." Seen in the light of their preoccupation with the threat of social death, this passage looks like something more than a simple call for revenge, and quite different from a proclamation of national autonomy and enlightened self-government. Rather, it would seem to enshrine the political importance of ancestry, mourning, and commemoration in the slaves' struggle against social alienation. In this way, the Haitian Declaration of Independence hints that the events aboard the Hudibras in 1786 may tell us as much about political life among the enslaved as what happened on the Zong in 1781 or the Recovery in 1791.


Orlando Patterson described social death in its broadest sense as the absence of meaningful links to the past. "Formally isolated in his social relations with those who lived," Patterson wrote of the archetypal slave, "he also was culturally isolated from the social heritage of his ancestors." Slavery and Social Death focused on the relative inability of slaves to "reclaim the past" as against the standard set by their owners. There can be no doubt that the power of slaveholders and the disadvantages heaped on the enslaved stacked the odds in favor of masters, and that they did not believe themselves to be bound by any obligation to recognize the social and cultural genealogies of the enslaved. So Patterson was certainly correct to argue that the enslaved "were not allowed freely to integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lives, to inform their understanding of social reality with the inherited meanings of their natural forebears, or to anchor the living present in any conscious community of memory." But everything in this assertion hangs on the word "freely," a fatal qualification for a theory of the social relations of slavery. As the Haitian Declaration of Independence teaches us, social connections and communities of memory had to be created in struggle, and alienation had to be overcome by political action. This is a truism that Patterson did indeed recognize: "Because [a slave's] kin relations were illegitimate, they were all the more cherished. Because he was considered degraded, he was all the more infused with the yearning for dignity. Because of his formal isolation and liminality, he was acutely sensitive to the realities of community."

But this was not the emphasis of Patterson's argument. As a result, those he has inspired have often conflated his exposition of slaveholding ideology with a description of the actual condition of the enslaved. Seen as a state of being, the concept of social death is ultimately out of place in the political history of slavery. If studies of slavery would account for the outlooks and maneuvers of the enslaved as an important part of that history, scholars would do better to keep in view the struggle against alienation rather than alienation itself. To see social death as a productive peril entails a subtle but significant shift in perspective, from seeing slavery as a condition to viewing enslavement as a predicament, in which enslaved Africans and their descendants never ceased to pursue a politics of belonging, mourning, accounting, and regeneration.

In part, the usefulness of social death as a concept depends on what scholars of slavery seek to explain—black pathology or black politics, resistance or attempts to remake social life? For too long, debates about whether there were black families took precedence over discussions of how such families were formed; disputes about whether African culture had "survived" in the Americas overwhelmed discussions of how particular practices mediated slaves' attempts to survive; and scholars felt compelled to prioritize the documentation of resistance over the examination of political strife in its myriad forms. But of course, because slaves' social and political life grew directly out of the violence and dislocation of Atlantic slavery, these are false choices. And we may not even have to choose between tragic and romantic modes of storytelling, for history tinged with romance may offer the truest acknowledgment of the tragedy confronted by the enslaved: it took heroic effort for them

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57 Patterson, Slavery and Social Death, 5–6; emphasis added.
58 Ibid., 337.
to make social lives. There is romance, too, in the tragic fact that although scholars may never be able to give a satisfactory account of the human experience in slavery, they nevertheless continue to try. If scholars were to emphasize the efforts of the enslaved more than the condition of slavery, we might at least tell richer stories about how the endeavors of the weakest and most abject have at times reshaped the world. The history of their social and political lives lies between resistance and oblivion, not in the nature of their condition but in their continuous struggles to remake it. Those struggles are slavery’s bequest to us.

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Fugitive Justice

The Appeal of the Slave

By 1787, it was already too late. It was not too late to imagine an end to slavery, but it was too late to imagine the repair of its injury.

Abolition was perhaps all that those who sought redress for slavery could reasonably expect. No one expressed this more eloquently than Ottobah Cugoano who, in his *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* (1787), admonished: “The whole of that base traffic is an enormous evil and wicked thing, which cries aloud for redress, and that an immediate end and stop should be put to it.” Great Britain, the “criminal nation” that led this “base traffic,” has “sin[ced] and rebel[led] against God, and against the laws of nature and nations” (117). The slave trade has engendered destruction of a nature that proved irreparable. The devaluation of black life had been, in Cugoano’s assessment, that extensive: “Our lives are accounted of no value, we are hunted after as the prey in the desert, and doomed to destruction as the beasts that perish” (112). For sure, the “noble Britons” must adopt a “plan” to “relieve the grievances and oppression of the Africans,” they must “extend their philanthropy to abolish the slavery and oppression of Africans;” but in so doing, they would merely provide “a just commutation for what cannot be fully restored, in order to make a restoration, as far as could be, for the injuries already done to [enslaved Africans]” (134–36).

Cugoano isn’t at all confused here. A “just commutation” is not opposed to remedies “unjust.” Any remedy would have been welcome and deserved, for the slaves were certainly in need of remedy, it simply would not have exhausted their claims for “justice.” A “plan” for the redress of slavery is what is urgently needed, but any plan, any legal remedy, would inevitably be too narrow, and as such it would also prove necessarily inadequate. In his plan for the abolition of slavery and the reform of the three continents shaped by it, Cugoano operates within the governing logic of law and commerce; yet he recognizes that pragmatic solutions, which would be beneficial to the commerce and interests of Great Britain, fall far short of justice. He insists that the injury of slavery must be borne, since it cannot be reversed. In his account, justice is beyond the scope of the law, and redress necessarily inadequate. If what has been done cannot be undone, then the forms of legal and social compensation available are less a matter of wiping the slate clean than of embracing the limited scope of the possible in face of the irreparable, and calling attention to the
incommensurability between pain and compensation. How does one compensate for centuries of violence that have as their consequence the impossibility of restoring a prior existence, of giving back what was taken, of repairing what was broken?

A decade earlier, four men who identified themselves as the Boston Committee of Slaves and petitioned the Massachusetts legislature for their freedom struck a similar chord. Their petition underlined the disparity between what was theirs by right and the legal paths of remedy, the difference between “the sublime ideal of freedom” and the limited justice availed to blacks in America. The only avenue beyond this constitutive impasse that they could imagine was emigration to Africa; for Cugoano, grief was the only transit possible.²

Of his own captivity, Cugoano writes: “all my help was cries and tears, and these could not avail; nor suffered long, till one succeeding woe, and dread, swelled up another” (10). If cries and tears were of no avail then, they are essential now in creating a public space for black grief, and sounding our collective plaint. In giving voice to the lamentations of the captive, “those crying and groaning under the heavy yoke of slavery and bondage” (75), Cugoano shuttles between grief and grievance.³ That is, he demands justice in light of that which he cannot describe or convey, fully cognizant that what has been destroyed cannot be restored.

Despite his effort to make visible black suffering and audible the cries of his “countrymen in complexion,” Cugoano fears that his efforts may be of no practical value for those abandoned before the law: “The cries of some and the sight of their misery, may be seen and heard afar; but the deep sounding groans of thousands, and the great sadness of their misery and woe, under the heavy load of oppressions and calamities inflicted upon them, are such as can only be distinctly known to the ears of Jehovah Saboath” (11).

Cugoano inhabits the discourse of redress as a Christian mourner, with his gaze directed toward a world destroyed by the violence and brutality of the slave trade. Mourning is for Cugoano not a way of atoning for what has been done, but of living with the devastation and loss that has occurred as a consequence of the trade. If “our lives are accounted of no value, we are hunted after as the prey in the desert, and doomed to destruction as the beasts that perish,” then what forms of recompense can make life inhabitable?

In Thoughts and Sentiments, Cugoano connects the possibilities of habitation to the act of lamentation—the enactment of black grief. Restitution for the crimes of slavery depends upon the expression of grief and the working through of the “melancholy instances,” which, like the stations of the cross, are tableaus of loss, suffering, and death that point toward redemption. As Veena Das notes, in the process of mourning, “the transactions between body and language lead to an articulation of the world in which the strangeness of the world revealed by death, by its non-inhabitability, can be transformed into a world in which one can dwell again, in full awareness of a life that has to be lived in loss.”⁴ A life lived in loss—this perhaps is the great gift of Cugoano’s harsh words and laments, the recognition
that abolition could not redress the crime of slavery but could only commute its death sentence. In this regard, he was perhaps more hopeful than Henry Highland Garnet, who believed slavery was a condition that was not terminated even by death, since the progeny of the enslaved inherited the wretched condition of their predecessors. Cugoano's plan for reform entailed working through "the injuries already done" and operating within the limited scope of the possible, rather than making right a wrong, restoring what has been destroyed, or giving back what has been taken. By 1787, it had already become too late for that.

What we find of interest in Cugoano's text is its nuanced conceptualization of redress discourse, a sophisticated understanding captured in the rhetorical distinctions between grievance and grief; between the necessity of legal remedy and the impossibility of redress ("these could not avail"); between the unavoidable form of the "appeal" and its ultimate illegibility and insufficiency (it "can only be... known to the ears of Jehovah"); between the complaint that is audible to "noble Britons" and the extralinguistic mode of black noise that exists outside the parameters of any strategy or plan for remedy. We find in this loophole between hope and resignation (Cugoano's differend) a deeper significance, a sign of the political interval in which all captives find themselves—the interval between the no longer and the not yet, between the destruction of the old world and the awaited hour of deliverance. That interval is the hour of the captive's redemption, it is not only the governing trope of the captive's complaint but also, viewed from the retrospective glance of our political present, the master trope of black political discourse. In this interval we find the mutual imbrication of pragmatic political advance with a long history of failure; in it, too, we find a representation in miniature of fugitive justice.

These concerns have animated the Redress Project, a group of scholars and activists devoted to questions of slavery, fugitive forms of justice, and the role of history in the political present. Among these questions are:

- Why is justice fugitive? Why, for a captive such as Cugoano, does justice appear elusive and perceptually dubious from within the crucible of slavery and at the height of the slave trade—when the time of injury and the time of repair would have been coeval? Cugoano and his comrades in arms could not have been accused, as many are today, of "sleeping on their rights." Is this elusiveness then an index of the incommensurability between grief and grievance, pain and compensation?

- What is justice for the slave? What is justice for the slave's descendants? Does the slave even have descendants? Who are the slave's many descendants?

- What is slavery? What is the violence particular to slavery? It is not possible to think about reparations for slavery without thinking seriously about what the constituent elements of slavery are. In "The Slavery of Emancipation," Guyora

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Binder asks, “What was the essential feature of the slavery that the Thirteenth Amendment commands us to disestablish”: (1) property in human beings, (2) physical compulsion and corporal correction of the laborer, (3) involuntary servitude, (4) restrictions on mobility or opportunity or personal liberty, (5) restrictions of liberty of contract, (6) the expropriation of the material fruits of the slave’s labor, (7) absence of collective self-governance or noncitizenship, (8) dishonor and social death, (9) racism? What is crucial for us (and for Binder as well) is the incompletion of abolition. We understand the particular character of slavery’s violence to be ongoing and constitutive of the unfinished project of freedom.

- What is the slave—property, commodity, or disposable life? The slave, according to Anthony Farley, “is the apogee of the commodity. It is the point—in time as well as in space—at which the commodity becomes flesh.” For Farley, remedying the injuries of slavery would entail the abolition of capitalism. In his estimation, “the somnambulant path of law leads to the question of reparations because the law promises a remedy for every wrong.” Prayers for relief are “acts of state worship” that can only reproduce extant structures of powerlessness and dispossession. “The state will not grant the prayer for reparations; it cannot without destroying itself.”

- What is the time of slavery? Is it the time of the present, as Hortense Spillers suggests, a death sentence reenacted and transmitted across generations? “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 originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography or its topics, show 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.”

- Is it a time that we can all remember? As George Jackson wrote from his prison cell in Soledad: “My recall is nearly perfect, time has faded nothing. I recall the first kidnap, I lived through the passage, died on the passage, lain in the unmarked shallow graves of the millions who fertilized the American soil with their corpses; cotton and corn growing out of my chest ‘until the third and fourth generation,’ the tenth, the hundredth.”

- Why is the history of reparations for slavery, to paraphrase Robert Westley in this volume, a history of a non-event, a history of events either too recent to deserve the name of history or events that reverse contemporary expectations about reparations? And extending from this last question, why is the appeal for redress one that seems always to arrive too late, and to be marked by a note of belatedness and insufficiency?
This is not a volume on reparations (on that discourse’s structural account of slavery and certain knowledge of what the slave is); nor is it a volume on remembering and working through historical trauma. Rather, what this volume represents is the attempt to interrogate rigorously the kinds of political claims that can be mobilized on behalf of the slave (the stateless, the socially dead, and the disposable) in the political present. In posing the question of slavery in terms of the incomplete nature of abolition, we are concerned neither with “what happened then” nor with “what is owed because of what happened then,” but rather with the contemporary predicament of freedom, with the melancholy recognition of foreseeable futures still tethered to this past. In this effort we are very much guided by the work of David Scott, particularly his recent book *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*, which encourages us to think about the epistemological and political dilemmas entailed in writing histories of the present, and invites us to write histories of the present that squarely engage the problem of “futures.” Scott cautions us to tread carefully when writing histories of dispossession in the space of the interval, in “a time ... in which old horizons have collapsed or evaporated and new ones have not yet taken shape.” In other words, to paraphrase Scott, what is the story about the slave that we ought to tell out of the present we ourselves inhabit—a present in which torture isn’t really torture, a present in which persons have been stripped of rights heretofore deemed inalienable?12

The Appeal of the Ex-Slave

In 1896, Callie House, a Tennessee seamstress become activist, founded with a number of compatriots the National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty and Pension Association, an organization that stood at the forefront of the movement to pass a federal ex-slave pension bill on the model of those provided to Civil War veterans. House had hoped that a pension for ex-slaves would remedy “wrongs this Government allowed to be suffered by us without redress.” As she elaborates in a letter written in her defense:

Four & half million slave[s] who was [were] turn[ed] loose ignorant bare footed and naked without a dollar in their pockets without a shelter to go under out of the falling rain but was force[d] to look the man in the face for something to eat who once had the power to whip them to death but now have the power to starve them to death. We the ex-slave[sic] feel that if the government had a right to free us she had a right to make some provision for us as she did not make it soon after our Emancipation she ought to make it now.15

Like Cugoano, House struggled to negotiate the interval between the “black noise” of her own utterance and a claim for redress that would be legible to the state. House wanted every ex-slave to exercise their nascent constitutional rights to “gather and petition there [their] grievances” (*My Face Is Black Is True*, 128), and to sign their
names to a petition to support a pension bill then circulating before Congress. The petition read:

To the Senators and Representatives of the Congress of the United States of America:

Whereas, Generation after generation of Colored people served this country as slaves for two hundred and forty-four years or more, and

Whereas, This government owes the unknown and deceased Colored Soldiers a large sum of money which is unclaimed, and

Whereas, Many of those soldiers have brothers, fathers, mothers and sisters among us, who are destitute and starving, and

Whereas, It is a precedent established by the patriots of this country to relieve its distressed citizens, both on land and sea, and millions of our deceased people, besides those who still survive, worked as slaves for the development of the great resources and wealth of this country, and

Whereas, We believe it is just and right to grant the ex-slave a petition:

Therefore, We, the undersigned, citizens of the United States of America, appeal to your Honorable Body to pass Senate Bill, No. 4718, introduced June 6, 1898, by Senator Mason, of Illinois, providing pension for Freedmen, etc. 19

Six ex-slave pension bills in total went before Congress between 1890 and 1903. All of the bills were identical, according to Walter Hill, “each providing a pension to ex-slave[s] based on a scale. Ex-slaves 70 years and older were to receive an initial payment of $500 and $15 a month; ex-slaves 60–70 years would receive $300 and $12 a month; ex-slaves 50–60 years would receive $100 and $8 a month; and those ex-slaves less than 50 years old would not receive an initial payment, but a $4 a month pension.” 15 All were finally defeated.

Frustrated by these legislative defeats (and encouraged by House to pursue a new path), Cornelius J. Jones in 1915 filed a lawsuit against the United States Department of Treasury on behalf of H. N. Johnson, C. B. Williams, Rebecca Bowers, Minnie Thompson, and “others similarly interested.” 16 They alleged that between the years 1859 and 1868 they and their ancestors “were subject to a system of involuntary servitude” in the states of the South, and that as a result of such servitude “many million bales of cotton were produced.” In their attempt to recover the monetary value of their unpaid labor and that of their ancestors, they argued that the federal government had benefited financially from slave labor in the form of the “Internal Revenue Tax on Raw Cotton.” In Jones’s estimate, the unpaid labor of the slaves amounted to $68,072,388.99. The U.S. government was a state in debt and the plaintiffs injured creditors. Assessing debt and calculating injury was itself a formula for justice.

The federal appeals court did not agree and dismissed the appellants’ case on the grounds that there was no proper defendant. The government, unlike an individual defendant, could not be sued without its consent. The government possessed “sovereign immunity,” which was a defense against legal action. The rationale that undergirded the government’s “sovereign immunity” was protecting the “public fisc.” In this case, the protection of the public fisc had as its cost the perpetuity of
unremunerated slave labor and the continued failure by the government to return funds it had obtained through unjust means. The decision by the court of appeals nullified not only the specifics of the litigants' plea but also, and more important, the very conception of the government as culpable or obligated. Redress could only obtain when the state recognized itself as negligent, when it acknowledged its unjust enrichment. The redress Jones sought was possible only if the state assumed a sense of continuity between itself and its predecessor—a continuity made visible by the accusation of "involuntary servitude" in "the years 1859 to 1868," a charge that denied the barricade between the slave past and the emancipated present.

The state, in addition, had its own designs for House, Jones, and their compatriots. The Justice Department and the U.S. Postal Service, acting at the behest of the Pension Bureau, charged the backers of the various ex-slave pension bills with using the mails to defraud "poor negroes" of their "hard-earned money" and making promises the postmaster considered impossible to perform—the outlandish promise that the state would redress slavery. As the Office of the Attorney General explained, the ex-slave petitioners knew that "there had 'never been the remotest prospect' that Congress would appropriate pensions for African Americans." For sure, the state too was concerned with the stolen wages of poor negroes; but the culpable agent brought before the bar was not the U.S. government; rather, it was the very petitioners who appealed on the ex-slaves' behalf. House served eight months in a Missouri penitentiary for this fraud.

Sovereign immunity protected the government from all charges of culpability as regards the institution of slavery. This seems to be the lesson learned by those who currently argue for reparations. Today, it is too late to invoke the crimes of the U.S. nation state. Few dare to speak of a "slaveholders' Constitution" (as abolitionists had a century and a half ago), to charge the government with ultimate responsibility for slavery. The injuries suffered were not at the hand of the U.S. government, but at the hands of Aetna Life & Casualty, R.J. Reynolds Tobacco, FleetBoston Financial, Lloyds of London, and other corporations. In cases recently filed in U.S. civil courts, the "crime" of slavery involves "unjust enrichment," the loan of monies to "planters, merchants, and cotton brokers throughout the South," the collection of "custom duties and fees on ships engaged in the slave trade," the garnishing of premiums through the "sale of life insurance to slave owners" and the insuring of ships utilized for the Trans-Atlantic slave trade," and the construction of railroad lines and harvesting of tobacco "in part by slave labor." These most recent reparations cases are unable to name the state as an agent in the perpetuation of injury; they foreclose the possibility of a discussion of the racial state, and as such they reinscribe the neutrality of the state. What is more, in all these cases, which "demand . . . a just and fair accounting of profits earned from slave labor," the injury of slavery amounts in essence to the withholding (certainly violent, certainly coerced) of the slave's wages. The plan for redress, in turn, amounts to a demand for back wages. What better illustrates Cugoano's pragmatic resignation and the
insufficiency of redress—"a just commutation for what cannot be fully restored"—than a demand for back wages?

Recent cases for reparations have focused on figuring out formulas for "just commutation," on how to create a case for a "cause of action," on how to advance and pursue claims for redress before the bar. Judicial models of redress often require that claims fit a legal paradigm of individual rights, that a group seeking a court's remedy for harms done to it translate its claims into forms synonymous with the rights and privileges, duties and liabilities that the Constitution ascribes to the agents of contractual liberty (for example, the Constitution's "due process" protections of citizens against deprivation of life, liberty, or property by the state, and its guarantee of "equal protection of the laws"). In line with this emphasis on the individual, appeals for judicial redress must satisfy the demand for identifiable victims and perpetrators, unambiguous causation, limited and certain damage, and the acceptance that the agreed remuneration shall be final. This reduction of collective appeal to the forms of grievance common to the paradigm of individual rights is often claimed as the principal reason why the case for Japanese-American reparations succeeded. It is also claimed as the principal reason why the claims for African-American reparations have failed. The paradigm of individual rights presents African Americans with particular obstacles. First, this paradigm's standard of accountability renders all claims for black reparations null and void, as the victims and perpetrators of slavery have been long dead. Second, the focus on the individual in liberal legal formulas for remedy makes difficult an account of group oppression and structural inequalities. Third, and finally, the focus on identifiable victims and perpetrators foregrounds the law's indifference to tangled and complicated webs of causation.

African Americans' attempts to establish the authority of the past have been made difficult if not impossible by the temporal limits placed upon the duration and finality of a wrong. Or, in other words, one means of dismissing a claim for redress is to charge the plaintiff with unreasonable delay or negligence in pursuing a right or claim. African Americans are guilty of their own wrong—of sleeping on their own rights, failing to act in a timely fashion, or what the law would describe as laches (F. lachesse, negligence, slackness). If African Americans fail in their attempt to achieve redress, it will be due not to the nation's failure to recognize historical wrongs, but, curiously, to their own negligence. Dismissals of African American claims for reparations oscillate between competing senses that one either has no ground for a legitimate claim or that the claim has come too late. Temporal relations, as Westley points out, "determine the existence or nonexistence of standing." He identifies two opposing views. In the eyes of the court, the passage of time eviscerates standing for those who claim redress for race-based injuries; but from the perspective of the petitioners, it is this very passage of time that augments and intensifies these injuries. Westley proposes a legal path beyond this impasse, which arises in large part from the doctrinal constraints of tort law and contract law. The most
viable path for future reparations claims, he suggests, is to be found in the law of restitution, which gives courts “the equitable powers . . . to undo the unjust enrichment brought about by a defendant’s misappropriation of labor through violence, coercion, fraud, and duress.”

Although Westley does not make this point, recent slave redress cases have given much less thought to what “cannot be fully restored.” The shuffling between grief and grievance has been lost in pursuit of what is possible within a liberal legal conception of law and property. What is sacrificed in this approach, what cannot be heard, is the black noise that animated Cugoano’s earlier polemic. It is to this sound that the remaining essays in this volume are attuned. Black noise represents the kinds of political aspirations that are inaudible and illegible within the prevailing formulas of political rationality; these yearnings are illegible because they are so wildly utopian and derelict to capitalism (for example, “forty acres and a mule,” the end of commodity production and restoration of the commons, the realization of “the sublime ideal of freedom,” the resuscitation of the socially dead). Black noise is always already barred from the court.

For Bryan Wagner, black noise is defined primarily by virtue of its negative relation to the law. His essay, “Disarmed and Dangerous: The Strange Career of Bras-Coupé,” locates the origins of jazz in a slave who had been maimed by the police—Bras-Coupé, an escaped slave and reputed commander of the fugitives who resided outside the city of New Orleans. Wagner seizes upon the figure of Bras-Coupé in order to write against mainstream jazz historiography’s narrative of cultural continuity and transmission, which he contends is premised upon the repression of the fugitive. The fugitive “must vanish from the scene of the music’s origin before that music can be integrated into the time frame of liberal nationalism” (think here of Ken Burns’s Jazz, in which bebop serves as the background music and motive cultural force behind a U.S. liberal project, rather than the music existing in an antagonistic relation to it, as bebop may have “sounded” for many of the black soldiers who returned home after World War II). Instead, Wagner locates the music’s origins in the state of exception (the negative relation to law) that defines the slave’s existence.

Looking at the legend of Bras-Coupé, Wagner traces two competing narratives of the fugitive’s identity. In one, the propagandistic account of the dangerous fugitive, the purpose of the narrative is to justify the police power, to justify the exercise of the power to kill. Bras-Coupé is presented as the outlaw and paradigm case in local police history that affirms the state’s right to use deadly force. In the other—the oral and counterhistorical narrative—police violence and brutality create the identity of the fugitive.

The oral tradition places police violence at the origin of the story, inverting the very propaganda that brought the legend into being. “Once this violence is shown not only to precede but to produce the outlaw, a new kind of inquiry is begun that reads blackness as the signature of violence.” For Wagner, then, the outlaw legiti-
mates the state of exception, the fugitive's abandonment before criminal and civil law. In order to exercise the sovereign right to kill, the state had first to create a person entirely stripped of all rights, a person outside the reach of civil law, criminal law, even slave statute. To do so, the state invoked the ancient precedent of outlawry.

For Colin Dayan as for Wagner, the genealogical inscription of race can be traced to an old language of criminality, monstrousity, and heredity—that taint through which the criminal is “exterminated as a monster.” For them, blackness is the consequence of violence, the residue of an exercise of power. As William Blackstone describes the outlaw’s utter abandonment before the law: “[F]or when it is now clear beyond all dispute, that the criminal is no longer fit to live upon the earth, but is to be exterminated as a monster and a bane to human society, the law sets a note of infamy upon him, puts him out of its protection, and takes no further care of him than barely to see him executed. He is then called attainted, attinxus, stained, or blackened.” In “Legal Terrors,” Dayan points to this history of taint, to “the stigma that ordinates deprivation” and produces a class of citizens “who are dead in life.” For her, the slave exemplifies the condition of civil death, a long project of civil incapacitation that condemns certain entities—for example, the prisoner, “security detainee,” “enemy combatant”—to be “dead in law,” to have “lost the right to have rights.” Dayan, tracing the long history of radical depersonalization, moves between the ethereal musings of St. Paul, the recent Torture Memos of the Bush Administration, and the opinions of Justice Antonin Scalia in cases involving “cruel and unusual punishment.” She notes that, to the degree that the wantonness and intentions of the guards, interrogators, and prison administrators supplant the physical and psychic experiences of the prisoners as the basis for the definition of “cruel and unusual punishment,” the state eviscerates all prohibitions against torture. “Once states of mind such as indifference or malicious are applied to those who harm without actual liability to legal punishment, something vicious is being done to the object of harm, now reduced to a mere body controlled by administrative power.” Dayan describes this as a “second death,” a return to the state-sanctioned bondage of slavery. What does it mean to kill that which is already dead? How do you kill the spirit of the person already considered “dead in law”? The achievement of “second death” is the very business of cruel and unusual punishment, she argues, one that does not have a history so much as a kind of compulsive repetition: “the insistence on the already done that must be redone,” the very ritual practice that is law itself. This brutal reduction of life is a condition from which there is no return, for which no redress is possible.

As in the case for both Herman Bennett’s and Bryan Wagner’s essays, in Dayan’s “Legal Terrors” the slave designates a relation to law, state, and sovereign power, a condition of disfigured personhood, civil incapacitation, and bare life that long outlives slavery itself. Dayan writes: “The substance of slavery is preserved in the person of the prisoner by confronting what it is to be a person, or the limits of personal identity.” This genealogy of the slave is in tension with the case put for-
ward by Westley, where the slave designates a long history of the devaluation of the African. This tension is productive for us because it opens up a set of questions concerning the competing genealogies of racism, the identity of the slave, the role of the state, and the possibility or impossibility of redress. For Westley, every living African American is a legitimate heir of the slave. For Dayan, it is the prisoner, the stateless, and the enemy combatant who can claim the slave as progenitor. In many of the essays we’ve gathered in this volume (Dayan, Wagner, Bennett, and Lloyd) racism and the figure of the black recede, even as the essays extend a line of thinking on the state of exception and lives lived in a negative relation to law that others (Michel Foucault, Achille Mbembe, Hannah Arendt) mark specifically as the work of “racism.”

In David Lloyd’s “The Indigent Sublime: Specters of Irish Hunger,” the Famine Irish—like the slave and the prisoner—occupy the threshold that divides the human and the nonhuman. The Famine, he contends, was the price of converting the Irish into wage laborers, and to achieve that end what had to be destroyed was the clachan (an older Gaelic system of communal landholding and collective labor recalcitrant to capitalist modes of production). The clachan, or rundale, preserved an Irish vernacular culture in which labor and recreation were integrated. For Lloyd, the clachan represents “a countermodern effect of modernity” and “an alternative track of human unfolding that is at once there and not there, of the present and of another time.” What does it mean to write a history of the present that pivots upon a destroyed cultural formation? The clachan is not for him a nostalgic figure of times past, but rather an occasion to think about eclipsed and alternative futures. For Lloyd, what is at stake in this social formation are “the outlines of a communal life whose redemption and transformation present[t] a still to be realized alternative to capitalist colonialism.”

Lloyd, like others in this volume, explores the violence of discursive formations that produce classes of disposable people. For him, “the spectacle of the skeletal, starving human reveals [much] about the very minimum of humanity itself.” This state, in which rightlessness is so total, in which life has been reduced to matter, illuminates “the deep connection between the rightless, politically unrepresented status of bare life and the process of a primitive accumulation that denies the dispossessed of even the right to subsistence.” This is akin to what Wagner in his essay describes as the slave’s “abandonment before the law” or Dayan describes as the process by which persons are made “dead in law.”

But the Famine Irish are, for Lloyd, “the contemporaries of every unfinished struggle against domination.” Contrary to historicism, which refuses a relationship to loss, Lloyd’s historical materialism, echoing the work of Walter Benjamin, conceives the work of history as that which attempts “to grasp the record of both [the dead’s] recalcitrance and their defeats as the record of an unfinished collective struggle to live on.”

For Herman Bennett, received narratives of the early modern period have pro-
duced a “savage-to-slave” plot that makes it impossible to engage the vicissitudes of the encounter between Europeans and Africans, the determining role of historical representation in shaping the encounter, and the role of sovereign power in the production of different classes of Africans. A central target of Bennett’s critique is an account of the making of the African diaspora that privileges the slave as its “charter subject.” To the contrary, Bennett reveals the ways in which categories of personhood and taxonomies of difference were the product of an imagined “Africa,” “Egypt,” “Ethiopia,” and “Libya,” which was then transposed onto Guinea. Bennett attends to the juridical differences wrought among Africa’s inhabitants, to the conflicts in early modern politics between natural law, customary law, and canon law that gave rise to discrete classes of infidels and pagans, Africans and blacks, sovereigns and sovereignless, free persons and slaves.

Viewing Guinea through the conceptual grid of narratives forged two hundred years earlier, the Portuguese gaze “elicited little wonder and even fewer marvels.” “This phenomenon, a product of reconquista historiography, positioned Guinea’s inhabitants as knowable objects whose customs, habits, and practices could be apprehended.” Guinea’s inhabitants were defined, by the terms of this grid, in relation to the threatening and defeated, yet nonetheless sovereign, Moors. Guinea’s black inhabitants were ascribed a “corporate place as the sovereignless,” and this designation is what legitimated their enslavement. Bennett suggests that it is sovereignlessness, both in the eyes of Africans and Europeans, rather than blackness, that determines who is vulnerable to enslavement in the early modern period. This focus on sovereignlessness and statelessness heralds a new direction in studies of slavery, one that takes a keen interest in the state and its designation of dispensable subjects. Although Bennett doesn’t make the point, his essay would seem to suggest the constitutive role of expendable lives in the project of state building. Bennett’s essay invites us to consider two important questions: How does the recognition of heterogeneity better enable us to chart the relation between pasts and presents, to think about the relation between capitalism and slavery and the dilemmas of the present? What happens, as he asks, both to our understanding of black identity and the politics of redress when their foundational trope, the slave, is no longer conceived of as a stable subject?

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1. Ottobah Cugoano, Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery (1787), (London, 1969), 97. Subsequent page references to this work appear parenthetically in the text.
2. The 1773 petitioners were Peter Beates, Sambo Freeman, Felix Holbrook, and Chester Joie. See Dorothy Porter, ed., Early Negro Writing, 1760–1837 (Boston, 1971), 254–55.
6. We use the language of “descendants” here, not to indicate the slave’s potential heirs, but to indicate the actual recipients of the slave’s negative inheritance—the ongoing production of lives lived in intimate relation to premature death (whether civil, social, or literal). In her work on “civil death,” Colin Dayan argues that the slave and the prisoner are subject to a sorcery of law—a “being dead in law” that sustains “the image of the servile body necessary for the public endorsement of dispossession”; see Joan Dayan (Colin Dayan), “Legal Slaves and Civil Bodies,” in Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics, ed. Russ Castronovo and Dana Nelson (Durham, N.C., 2002), 53–94, 87. For Ruthie Gilmore, this is the very definition of “racism”: “The state-sanctioned production and exploitation of group vulnerabilities toward premature death”; Ruthie Gilmore, “Profiling Alienated Labor,” talk delivered at Mellon Foundation Sawyer Seminar on Redress in Law, Literature, and Social Thought, 24 February 2003.
11. The arguments against reparations and descent either question any relationship between authoritative narratives of the past and advancing political claims in the present, or assert that there is no practical importance now of a judgment that injustice occurred.


13. Callie House to Harrison J. Barrett, acting assistant attorney general for the Post Office Department, September 29, 1899, Record Group 28, Records of the Postmaster General, Office of the Solicitor; Fraud Order Case Files 1894–1951 (brackets in original); cited in Mary Frances Berry, My Face Is Black Is True: Callie House and the Struggle for Ex-Slave Reparations (New York, 2005), 88–89.


17. Berry, My Face Is Black Is True, 84.


19. For an account of the capaciousness of the political movement for reparations see Robin Kelley, “A Day of Reckoning: Dreams of Reparations,” in Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination (Boston, 2002), 110–34. Kelly writes: “The reparations campaign, despite its potential contribution to eliminating racism and remaking the world, can never be an end in itself. . . . And without at least a rudimentary critique of the capitalist culture that consumes us, even reparations can have disastrous consequences.” He closes his essay on reparations with a quote from Grace Boggs: “Instead of seeing ourselves only as victims, we begin to see ourselves as part of a continuing struggle of human beings, not only to survive but to evolve into more human human beings.”

20. Seyla Benhabib and Paul Gilroy would term this noise “the politics of transfiguration,” by which they mean a notion of utopian politics that exceeds the frame of prevailing conceptions of political rationality. See Gilroy, The Black Atlantic (Cambridge, 1993), 37; and Seyla Benhabib, Critique, Norm, and Utopia (New York, 1986), 13, 41. On “black mo’nin’,” see Fred Moten, In the Break (Minneapolis, 2003), 192–211.

21. What we call “black noise” Robin Kelley would describe as a “freedom dream,” or Fred Moten would describe as “the surreal utopian ‘nonsense’ of a utopian vision, the freedom we know outside of the opposition of sense and intellection”; see Robin D.G. Kelley, Freedom Dreams, and Fred Moten, “Uplift and Criminality,” unpublished manuscript, 23.

22. Achille Mbembe begins his account of the rise of modern terror with slavery, which he defines as one of the first instances of biopolitical experimentation. The plantation sys-
tem and its aftermath manifest the emblematic and paradoxical figure of the state of exception, a state that is less "a temporal suspension of the state of law" (as it was understood by Carl Schmitt) and more the achievement of "a permanent spatial arrangement that remains continually outside the normal state of law"; see Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," Public Culture 15, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 11–40.

The Political Life of Fungibility

Abstract

This essay argues that the killing of Trayvon Martin illuminates how the criminalization of blackness operates as a political institution of the post-enslavement liberal order and how black vulnerability to injury and death constitute a distinctive structure of political antagonism.

In “My Dungeon Shook,” the fictionalized correspondence between a black elder and a black youth that opens The Fire Next Time, James Baldwin counsels his nephew that he must “strive to become tough and philosophical towards death and destruction.” As Baldwin notes, fortitude and theoretical acumen are equally survival skills and political virtues in an “innocent country” that “spells out with brutal clarity that [black life] is worthless”, has “destroyed and [continues] to destroy hundreds of thousands of lives” and “in fact, intends that [blacks] should perish.” Limning the contours of racialization of black life in the US, Baldwin solicits an investigation of blackness as a peculiar proximity to death and invites an examination of the atrocity at Sanford Florida as a crisis for both thought and action. Baldwin’s reflections about innocence, intentional destruction, and the political virtue of black theoretical engagement with death, frame this examination as a vital question for political theory. Opening a window into what Black Studies scholars have begun to delineate as a
hidden but crucial institution of post slavery US liberal democracy, a Baldwininan angle of vision on the atrocity also opens a unique opportunity for political theorists to engage a lively debate in Black Studies about the racialization of bare life and its politics.

By racialization of bare life I want to bring two things into focus: firstly, the way race facilitates the production and occlusion of discrepant valuations of human life in the US and throughout the black diaspora or, as Judith Butler explains, “derealizes” black life from prevailing “established ontolog[ies].” Because certain racialized others have “fallen outside the ‘human’ as it has been naturalized in its western mold”, Butler notes, “our cultural frames for thinking the human set limits on the kind of losses we can avow as loss.”

And secondly, I reference blackness as a distinctive precariousness of life engendered on the one hand by structured and unequal vulnerabilities to dishonor, state violence, and racial terror and on the other by the persistence of what Saidiya Hartman describes as the “opacity of black pain”. Class, gender, and sexuality differentially position the black body to varying forms of racialized injury. However, as Hartman notes, “black suffering is elusive” in the context of a “racist optics in which black flesh is itself identified as the source of opacity, the denial of black humanity, and the effacement of sentience.” George Shulman employs “the racial state of exception” as a term to describe how the elusive suffering and illegible violation of blacks is the predicate for the subjectivization of sovereign whiteness. To make explicit the political constitution and existential implications of this relation, I employ the term, “racialization of bare life.”

Paradigmatic of this ghastly transnational predicament is public sanction of or disinterest in black’s acute vulnerabilities to mass incarceration, homicide, police brutality, HIV infection, infant mortality, and under-education, among other things. The killing of Trayvon Martin bears particularly eloquent witness. Martin, an unarmed 17 year old was shot dead at intermediate range by a self-appointed neighborhood watch captain and dispatched without dignity to the morgue as a John Doe where he would lay for over 24 hours. Five hours after the shooting, Martin’s assailant would be released by the Sanford police department uncharged and under no suspicion. Presumed guilty by his shooter and the police, Martin would have been added to the staggering list of forgotten victims of violent death at the hands of law enforcement or their auxiliaries were it not for the heroic discipline, political savvy, and tireless efforts of his parents Sybrina Fulton and Tracy Martin and their supporters in print and electronic media.

Presumed guilt constituted Martin’s peculiar vulnerability and this presumption has a political constitution. When Zimmerman saw Martin he saw criminality, understood as the commission of crime, an intension to commit crime, an escape from prior crime, or some combination of the three. Tempting as it may be to look to the War on Drugs during the Reagan era as the seedbed for state practices of racialized surveillance, interdiction, and incarceration, both the Reagan era’s escalation of these practices and the presumption of Martin’s guilt are
bound up with the criminalization of blackness that emerges in the context of US slavery. This is a history of racialization in which black agency is figured as criminality. Although the US Constitution artfully evades the word slavery and refuses express enumeration of the racial attributes of citizenship, it articulates the figure of black criminality as fundamental law and affirms practices of racialized surveillance and interdiction as civic virtue. Answering to lingering Jeffersonian questions about black humanity engendered by the 3/5 clause of Article I, Section II, Article IV defines national citizenship by setting it in an antagonistic relation to the crime of black fugitivity. Opposing the “immunities and privileges” of citizenship to the culpable derelictions of treason, felony, and escape from slavery, the framers yoke blackness to crime, legislate the intelligibility of black agency in the figure of the fugitive slave, and inscribe the “immunities and privileges” of citizenship as both a freedom from the presumption of criminal alterity and a duty to interdict the fugitive. Noting the fragility of constitutions and the indispensable constitutional scaffolding provided by criminal alterity and norms of interdiction, Alexis de Tocqueville writes, “the genuine sanction of political laws is to be found in the penal laws, and if the sanction is lacking, the law sooner or later loses its force. Therefore, the man who judges the criminal is really the master of society.”

By expressly granting blacks entitlement to “immunities and privileges” of citizenship, the 14th Amendment (1868) sought to abolish black fugitivity and dissipate the antagonism between it and US citizenship. Grand as was the effort, such a revolution proved impossible. With commercial exchange of black bodies prohibited except as punishment for crime, Historian Kali Gross notes how Northern white newspapers invent the figure of the “Colored Amazon” to allege the growing menace of black women’s criminality and “supply a new and growing commercial trade in blackness.” Concurrently, white southerners rehabilitate black fugitivity in the more menacing figure of the black rapist and re-found the old antagonism upon the violent hatred patriarchal societies cultivate against sexual predators who assail the women it values.

At the turn of the century, southern intellectual’s leading role in propagating selective census data which reflected repressive criminalization of southern black life helped to give birth to modern crime statistics as well as make the case that northern blacks were also unfit for citizenship. As Kalil Muhammad notes, one of the crucial legacies of “race conscious laws, discriminatory punishments, and new forms of everyday surveillance” is its contribution to a “statistical rhetoric of black criminality” that operates as “a proxy for a national discourse on black inferiority.” When the figures of the welfare queen and drug warlord were vibrantly recirculated in the 1980s in connection with the southern strategy of the Republican Party, they neither inaugurated the criminalization of blackness nor simply revived a disreputable national tradition of racial animus. Recovering constitutional principle that posits an antagonism between the citizen and the fugitive slave, the party refashioned black fugitivity in order to restore American citizenship in the post-civil rights Era.
To make sense of black vulnerability as a transnational and postcolonial political crisis, Achille Mbembe employs the term necropolitics. A formation of terror, Mbembe explains, necropolitics constitutes the political spaces of postcoloniality as "repressed topographies of cruelty." This is a topography founded upon racial slavery according to Mbembe, where slavery is an inaugural modern instance of "biopolitical experimentation" which founds and institutionalizes colonial sovereignty as a permanent state of exception. Principally concerned to pursue his thesis about the specificities of postcoloniality however, Mbembe averts his gaze from the juridical and libidinal economies of the middle passage and the plantation. In doing so he not only fails to clarify what is distinctive about the politics of Atlantic slavery he also severs the affective and discursive continuities between these two formations of terror—notwithstanding his very apt characterization of racial slavery as a form of biopolitical experimentation.

Lingering with slavery as social and political formation, Saidiya Hartman explains that the juridical structure of slavery is founded not in the exploitation of slave labor but rather in the fungibility and ease of accumulation of the slave’s body as a commodity. As she notes, the replaceability and interchangeability endemic to the commodity makes the black body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others feelings, ideas, desires, and values, inaugurating a political and libidinal economy of black subjection and vulnerability. Carefully tracking the myriad ways in which the fungibility of black bodies augment slave masters’ wealth, enable abolitionist imaginaries, and facilitate the constitution of the Jim Crow regime, Hartman not only fleshes out politically Toni Morrison’s insights about the “figurative capacities” of the “Africanist presence in American literature,” she invites us to conceive the fungibility of black bodies and hence black vulnerability as both a libidinal economy of enjoyment and a structure of political antagonism.

Libidinal economy of enjoyment refers to Hartman’s account of the systemic circulation of the “desire to don, occupy, or possess [blackness] as a sentimental resource” and the “comfort, consolation, pleasure,… and ease” which accompany its “use and possession”. By structure of political antagonism, I refer to fungibility as a system of political cleavage, one which persists and remains occluded if and precisely when we examine black vulnerability through the liberal conceptual lens of injustice, the Marxist lens of exploitation, and even the more expansive if generic lens of domination. For Hartman, relations of chattel slavery inaugurate a distinctive structure of violence and vulnerability and the task for political thought is to try to think with and from the subject position it engenders.

Within black studies, Hartman’s work has engendered a lively debate between scholars who describe themselves as afro-pessimists and those I will describe as afro-optimists. Because of space requirements I will only preface the main line of the dispute. On the one side are Fanonian inspired writers like Frank Wilderson and Jared Sexton who argue that the vulnerability of black life is best grasped through a reformulation of Orlando Patterson’s
theory of slavery as social death. “The application of slave law among the free,” Sexton writes, has outlived in the post-emancipation world a certain form of its prior operations,” however “the reconfiguration of its operations” reconstitutes anti-blackness “from slavery to mass imprisonment.”\textsuperscript{13} Highlighting Patterson’s insistence that slavery is a social death constituted essentially by subjection to dishonor, violence, and alienation rather than coerced labor, these writers contend that the fungibility of black bodies continues as a decisive structure of antagonism and argue that liberation from social death requires a politics of destruction in the service of heretofore unthinkable possibilities. “The world is unethical due to its subsumption by the slave relation,” Wilderson writes, a relation “not between the worker and the boss but between the Human and the Black.”\textsuperscript{16} For the black to become human, relationality itself, as defined and constituted by the march of Modernity, would have to be destroyed.\textsuperscript{17}

If afro-pessimism engages black vulnerability by tracking the proliferation of death throughout black social life, afro-optimism engages it by mining the discordant sounds of racial injury for traces of life stolen away.\textsuperscript{18} Skeptical about what he takes to be an implicit pathologization of black life that circulates in afro-pessimist accounts of social death, Fred Moten advances the notion of “stolen life” to describe and embrace blackness as a “fugitive movement” of “the stolen” in and out of the law of slavery and indeed “every enclosure”. Characterized by an “originally criminal refusal of the interplay of framing and grasping [and] taking and keeping” as well as a “reluctance that disrupts” these practices, Moten explains, stolen life grounds the black radical tradition and the cultural production of the black avant garde.\textsuperscript{19} Rather than contesting the criminal alterity of blackness, Moten embraces it “as a cause for optimism” and aligns fugitive movement with freedom’s possibility.

Despite their quarrel, there are three crucial moments of convergence between afro-pessimism and afro-optimism. Both positions affirm black vulnerability as an effect of fungibility. Each claim that vulnerability and fungibility are achievements won through the reconstitution of slave law. And, both positions strive to formulate, in theoretical terms, the subjective and intersubjective dimensions of fungibility as a structure of political antagonism. We might ask a further question: how might the subjective and intersubjective experience of fungibility articulate itself if formulated in the ordinary language of lived experience?

To make articulate the experiential registers of fungibility, Cornel West has described the conditions of black self-making as a crisis of invisibility and namelessness. According to West, this crisis is “a fundamental condition” produced by “America’s unrelenting assault on black humanity.”\textsuperscript{20} It is a condition which, according to West, produced “the guttural cry and wrenching moan as both a cry for recognition and [an] ur-text of black culture,” and fostered the development of disciplines “aimed at warding off madness and discrediting suicide as creditable options.” West’s exegesis of “cries” and “moans” as the ordinary language of
fungibility illuminates the peculiar eloquence of Trayvon Martin’s last appeal. West’s elucidation of discipline as therapy of namelessness helps to shed light on the extraordinary comportment of Martin’s parents.

As important as the reflexive criminalization of Martin by his shooter and law enforcement is as a register of fungibility, a more revealing one may be the ease with which Martin’s cries and moans were appropriated from him and gifted to his shooter. If not the most important register, the ease of this appropriation reveals at least as much as the continuing commodification of Martin’s death by the news and entertainment industries and the articulation of Martin’s death as a test for measuring whether American legal institutions can deliver justice.

The discipline of Sybrina Fulton and Tracy Martin managed to wrench Trayvon’s cries back from Zimmerman, but when we call it a response to and therapy against fungibility, we are making a further claim. An important dimension of Fulton and Martin’s discipline is the labor required of both parents to contain their grief within the boundaries of respectability and articulate their grievance as a claim for legal justice. The restraint exercised by both is nothing less than heroic and ought to elicit our admiration as a model of liberal civic virtue. Still, respectability is a discipline that frames black abjection for sympathetic engagement by non-blacks. It is a filter that subtracts racialized excess and mutes the “guttural cries” and “wrenching moans” which constitute the ordinary language of fungibility. Hence, the very parameters which constitute grief’s conditions of legibility all but ensure that Fulton and Martin’s grief will never get a genuine public hearing.

To arrest fear and transform despair, Baldwin counseled his nephew to conceive black birth as an interruption of racial violence and oppose this conception to knowledge of his country’s intentions. Your “countrymen caused you to be born under conditions” which gave your parents “every reason to be heavy hearted,” Baldwin explains of his nephew’s birth, and “yet they were not.” Construing black natality as an opportunity for recirculation of love acts and conceiving this recirculation as an interruption to racial violence, Baldwin identifies a space of “stolen life” expansive enough to engender optimism about the future. Nine years later, both grieving loved ones and the death of the political project outlined in Fire, and meditating on political assassinations and escalating violence of the US racial state, Baldwin jettisons talk of natality and lingers with social death. “To be born Black in America is an immediate mortal challenge,” Baldwin writes in No Name in the Street, for “blacks are the despised children of the great western house—nameless and unnamable bastards.” Fugitive too, has become futurity for Baldwin, when he indicates that what formerly appeared to him as the destructive intentionality of disavowed racial injury now appears to be a “massive and hostile incomprehension that increases the danger in which all black people live.” Here Baldwin labors in anger and sorrow to communicate how escalations of racial terror and expansions in the carceral operations of the US racial state make a mockery of the quest to redeem white
supremacist violence. How then, are we to understand this equivocation? Does Baldwin indicate a fundamental revision of his thinking or simply mark a crucial ambivalence within his thought?

In an important sense, it doesn’t matter what Baldwin’s final position is. If Baldwin revises his position in a way favoring afro-pessimism, we would still interrogate him and afro-pessimism with a view to establishing the persuasive force of their respective arguments. However, interpreting Baldwin’s equivocation as a marker of ambivalence opens a door to other interpretive possibilities. Baldwin’s ambivalence may be taken as the mirror of an intramural debate on the margins of the academy in the same way the shooting of Trayvon Martin may be dismissed as a malfunction of the liberal political order. Alternatively, Baldwin’s ambivalence may be taken as an invitation to political theorists to engage the political afterlife of slavery in roughly the same way the Sanford atrocity may be taken as a provocation to engage the antagonism of black fungibility as a genuine political crisis. The remaining question, then, is whether we theorists are prepared to look squarely into this abyss and able to faithfully describe what we see.

Stephen H. Marshall

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Notes

5. As thoroughly American as is the vulnerability produced by these discourses of black criminality, black susceptibility to violence and violation is supranational in scope. As Joao Costa Vargas notes of another post-slavery liberal democracy, Afro-Brazilians suffer twice the national rate of infant mortalities, are disproportionately victims of preventable diseases, malnutrition, joblessness, and HIV infection, and are 75% of all the deaths that result from police shootings. Joao Costa Vargas, "The Black Diaspora as Genocide: Brazil and the United States," State of White Supremacy: Racism, Governance, and the United States, ed. Moon-Kle Jung, Joao Costa Vargas, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 20011), 264.
Footnotes

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Thoughts on Afropessimism

"Afropessimism" came out of "Afro-pessimism." The elimination of the hyphen is an important development, since it dispels ambiguity and in effect announces a specific mode of thought. Should the hyphen remain, the ambiguity would be between pessimistic people of African descent and theoretical pessimism. The conjoined, theoretical term is what proponents often have in mind in their diagnosis of what I shall call "the black condition." The appeal to a black condition is peculiarly existential. Existentialists reject notions of human "nature" on the grounds that human beings live in worlds they also construct; they produce their so-called essence. That does not mean, however, human beings lack anchorage. Everyone has to start from somewhere. Existentialists call that somewhere a condition or conditions for these reasons, and the world human beings produce or through which we live is sometimes called "human reality."

Critics of existentialism often reject its human formulation. Heidegger, for instance, in his "Letter on Humanism," lambasted Sartre for supposedly in effect subordinating Being to a philosophical anthropology with dangers of anthropocentrism (Heidegger, 1971). Yet a philosophical understanding of culture raises the problem of the conditions through which philosophical reflections could emerge as meaningful. Although a human activity, a more radical understanding of culture
beyond the singularity of the body. I bring this up because proponents of Afro-pessimism might object to this analysis because of its appeal to a human world. If that world is abrogated, the site of struggle becomes that which is patently not human. It is not accidental that popular race discourse refers today to “black bodies,” for instance, instead of “black people.” As the human world is discursive, social, and relational, this abandonment amounts to an appeal to the non-relational, the incommunicability of singularity, and appeals to the body and its reach. At that point, it’s perhaps the psychologist, psychiatrist, or psychoanalyst who would be helpful, as turning radically inward offers the promise of despair, narcissistic delusions of godliness, and, as Fanon also observed, madness. Even if that slippery slope were rejected, the performative contradiction of attempting to communicate such singularity or absence thereof requires, at least for consistency, the appropriate course of action: silence.

The remaining question for Afro-pessimism, especially those who are primarily academics, becomes this: Why write? It’s a question for which, in both existential and political terms, I don’t see how an answer could be given from an Afro-pessimistic perspective without the unfortunate revelation of cynicism. The marketability of Afro-pessimism is no doubt in the immediate and paradoxical satisfaction it offers. We are at this point on familiar terrain. As with ancient logical paradoxes denying the viability of time and motion, the best option, after a moment of immobilized reflection, is, eventually, to move on, even where the pause is itself significant as an encomium of thought.

Lewis R. Gordon

Maternal Generativity in the Afterlife of Slavery

In the range of recent work theorizing the “afterlife of slavery” (Hartman, 2007, p. 6), perhaps no other text is as foundational as Hortense Spillers’ essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (1987, 2003).\(^1\) Notably, Spillers’ analysis appears equally prismatic for both Frank Wilderson III and Fred Moten, two of the thinkers in this literature identified most closely with the positions designated Afro-Pessimism and black optimism, respectively. Their respective citations of Spillers, however, issue in quite different patterns of refraction. While recent work has argued for the closeness of the two positions (e.g., Sexton, 2011), I argue that these patterns reveal a persistent dissension that hinges on Spillers’ core figuration of the maternal. Wilderson powerfully elaborates the essay’s account of the violent abjection of Black maternity, but he effaces her accompanying gesture toward its insurgent possibilities. I suggest that this reading is linked to a broader suppression of the maternal in his Red, White, and Black
ontology. Moten, in contrast, broadly amplifies Spillers' gesture toward the maternal's insurrectionary potentials.²

Mama's Baby: Flesh and Power

In "Mama's Baby," Spillers argues that the ontological paradox of human chattel hinges on the reproductive capacity of enslaved females, via a rupture between bodies and flesh. As Tiffany King (2016) notes, Spillers (2003, p. 206) asserts that the "the sociopolitical order of the New World" rendered both Indigenous and captive African peoples flesh: that is to say, violently excluded them from the dominant order of gender and kinship roles that – through this very exclusion – came to define the European body.³ The majority of the essay, however, homes in on the specific conundrums of Black maternal flesh. White heteropatriarchal capitalism relied on the Black female's maternity and reproductive labors while expelling her from proper "motherhood"; it also obviated any gender distinction in its brutalization of her productive labors. At once "mother and mother-dispossessed," this is a female subject "out of the traditional symbolics of female gender" (p. 228). Spillers emphasizes the durative force of this ungendering violence, discerning the same monstrously "kinless" (p. 217) figures in present pathologizations of the Black maternal function.

She also discerns in this unbearable legacy, however, potential praxes of gender and kinship that do not recapitulate "Family" as practiced and understood 'in the West' – the vertical transfer of a bloodline, of a patrionic, of titles and entitlements, of real estate" (pp. 218–219). The fact that the "prevailing social fiction of the Father's name, the Father's law" excludes Black males makes possible a masculine subjectivity able to claim "the heritage of the mother," untethered from the constitutive disavowals of patriarchal manhood (p. 228). Insurgent Black female subjectivities, too, could emerge from reading (and rewriting) ascriptions of matriarchal pathology against the grain. As Spillers concludes, "[a]ctually claiming the monstrosity (of a female with the potential to "name"), which her culture imposes in blindness, "Sapphire" might write after all a radically different text for a female empowerment" (p. 229). The essay is thus at once an intricate catalogue of the ongoing violence of "the sociopolitical order of the New World" and incitement to claim and rename the vital and disavowed entailments of that violence.

Wilderson: Maternal Suppressions in Black and Red

Wilderson is one of Spillers' most alacritous interlocutors. In a recent interview, he names her first (alongside Fanon) in a list of resources on political ontology of race (2014, p. 8). And she receives the first citation in his Red, White, and Black (2010). Throughout the book, however, his citations prioritize Spillers' essay as catalogue
of violence—objectification of the enslaved female body (2010, pp. 67, 136), expulsion from gender categories (p. 137) and Human history (p. 38) – while minimizing its incitement.

His gloss on a passage from the essay (reading “the African,” simpliciter, for her “African women” (p. 17)) signals, moreover, a deprioritization of the catachrestic specificity of Spillers’ “female flesh ungendered” (Spillers, 2003, p. 207). Relatedly, it is notable that Wilderson cites (and sites) Orlando Patterson side by side with Spillers more than once as co-exemplars of an ontological approach to anti-Blackness (e.g., pp. 9, 31), without noting any tension between their accounts. Sharon Holland argues (2000) that “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” implicitly responds to Orlando Patterson’s masculinism in Slavery and Social Death (1982).

Spillers does not cite Patterson’s text, published only five years earlier, even as she draws on some of the same scholarship. For Holland, Spillers “seems to purposefully ghost [Patterson’s] narrative... [b]y focusing on the situation of black female bodies and by reading ‘kinship’ in terms of the female,” (2000, p. 48)\(^4\): maternal paradox rather than paternal contradiction. Wilderson’s deployment of Patterson’s assertion that, that slaves have “a past... but not a heritage” (2010, p. 51, quoting Patterson, 1982, p. 5) sits uneasily with Spillers’ incitement to avow the maternal heritage – arguably replicating Patterson’s erasure of maternal potentialities.

Wilderson’s staging of the master/slave relation does not share in Patterson’s inattention to maternity. Wilderson vividly thematizes the pervasive targeting of Black women’s reproductive bodies, focusing in particular on imprisoned freedom fighter Safiya Buhari-Alston (2010, pp. 132–137). And his cinematic examples of structural antagonism in fact work through multiple figurations of Black maternity, from the projection of white fears and desires in Antwone Fisher and Monster’s Ball to Dorothy, the pregnant protagonist of L.A. Rebellion filmmaker Haile Gerima’s Bush Mama. Dorothy temporarily reverses the violence that – for Wilderson – founds the Black’s ontological condition by stabbing her young daughter’s rapist, a cop, to death – but at the cost of a brutal police beating that kills Dorothy’s unborn child.

Spillers’ incitement to a “radically different text,” however, is on Wilderson’s reading insufficient on its own. “Only when real violence is coupled with ‘representational monstrosity’,” he writes, “can Blacks move from the status of things to the status of... of what, we’ll just have to wait and see” (p. 66). Rather potentiating new modes of gendered being and relation, even militant Black maternity in Red, White, and Black is a site of unmitigated suffering. In essence, Wilderson tacitly refuses Spillers’ incitement as incommensurate with the ontological stakes of her diagnosis. Because, in his schema, Blackness comprises the absolute incommunicability that underpins the reigning symbolic regime, anything short of violent insurrection will literally fail to signify.
This suppression of the maternal begins to appear broadly systematic, however, as Wilderson turns to Red ontology. For Wilderson, the Native is a split ontological mode. Defined by subjection to genocide, it is authentically antagonistic to Settler existence. But insofar as it presents itself as legible to the Settler through claims (however violated) to sovereignty, it is a mere conflict; on Wilderson’s reading, the lure of sovereignty largely undercuts Native antagonism. Wilderson elaborates his account of Red ontology’s dual modes through the two main characters in Chris Eyre’s film *Skins* (2002). Mogie, a terminally ill alcoholic, stands as both manifestation of and comment on an ongoing genocidal history. For Wilderson, Mogie’s defiant corporeal disintegration threatens the very possibility of sovereignty as Native aspiration, embodied by his respectable brother, Rudy.

Wilderson thus partly develops Spillers’ claim that Indigenous Americans were also rendered flesh. Yet this cinematic choice brackets reproductive violence out of Native genocide almost entirely (cf. Bruyneel, 2016, pp. 30–33). Iyko Day argues that, in formulating sovereignty as a mere claim to state recognition, Wilderson (along with Jared Sexton) “willfully evacuates any Indigenous refusal of a colonial politics of recognition” (2015, p. 11; see Coulthard, 2014; Simpson, 2014). Wilderson’s account of genocide likewise evacuates it of a core site of violence and endurance, namely the Indigenous reproductive – particularly maternal – body. Its sole – horrific – mention in the book is a quote describing US Cavalry troops’ wearing of Native women’s genitals as trophies (2010, p. 215). Wilderson might have commented that the incident reflects the centrality of sexual and reproductive violence to White Settler conquest (Smith, 2005; Rand, 2008; Deer, 2015; Simpson, 2016). It also foreshadows the atrocities of 20th century medicine, culminating in the massive sterilization campaign of the 1970s (Jarvis, 1977; Jaimas, 1992, p. 326; Lawrence, 2000). In their routinized violence, justificatory rationalities, and scale, the sterilization of Native women parallels – without being assimilable to – the atrocities suffered by Bukhari-Alston, the fictional Dorothy, and masses of Black women sterilized during the same time period (Roberts, 1999, pp. 91–96; Stillman *et al*., 2004). Even as the logics are distinct (Wolfe, 2006), maternal flesh is at the center of each. Yet Wilderson just tersely comments that this atrocity manifested Whites’ “sense of affilial inclusion and filial longevity” (2010, p. 216). Wilderson thus ultimately refuses both Spillers’ explicit incitement to claim the power of Black maternal flesh to generate a different order of things, and her implicit assertion that ungendering violence is at the center of both Native genocide and anti-Blackness.

**Moten’s Maternal Avowals**

Moten, in sharp contrast to this first refusal, takes up abjected Black maternity as a site of dangerous generativity in close dialogue with Spillers. Far from endorsing the Pattersonian denial of “heritage,” the opening chapter of his *In the Break*
quotes her injunction: “it is the heritage of the mother that the African American male must regain as an aspect of this own personhood – the power of “yes” to the “female” within” (2003, p. 12). And the book’s analysis of Black radical aesthetics, the labors of sound, breath, vibration, can be read as an extended response to that injunction, identifying an often-suppressed maternal presence at the core of this tradition’s “freedom drive.” He argues that the masculinism of this tradition itself emerges from the enduring maternal dispossession that Spillers tracks, as at once “response to and repudiation and repetition of the violation of black maternity…the aesthetic and political assertion of motherless children and impossible motherhood.” Echoing her injunction, he asserts that “the black masculinist radicalism…is itself in need of the reassertion of the materiality and maternity that lies at its core” (p. 215). Moreover, Nathaniel Mackey’s phrase, “an insistent previousness evading each and every natal occasion,” as epigraph and motif, levels a challenge to the disappeared maternal function in Patterson’s formulation of natal alienation – as well as in Hannah Arendt’s theorization of natality. Explicitly developing this dual challenge in a later article, he argues that both thinkers posit as the sine qua non of the human a ruptural leap out of the social into a state of disavowal called the political (2013, p. 740). Moten thus extends Spillers’ insistence on the potentialities of kinless life, over the patriarchal referents of social death (or political birth).

In The Undercommons (2013), Moten, with Stefano Harney, explicitly develops the notion of this freedom drive as Blackness itself, an “anoriginary” field of unmanageable outsideness. For them, it is hence something ontologically distinct from Black people, though the latter, they write, “are, nevertheless, (under)privileged insofar as they are given (to) an understanding of it” (2013, p. 47; cf. Moten, 2008a). This distinction allows Moten in fact to generalize his initial reading of Spillers’ challenge to Black men as a directive for all who aim to overturn the current Human order. If Moten’s prescriptive moments tend to be allusive, the maternal threads through them explicitly. He argues for the “destabil[ation] of the very social form or idea of “one another” …what I am implying is…the possibility of a general socialization of the maternal” (Harney and Moten, 2013, p. 155). The maternal: the primary scene of internal differentiation, singular in its ontological non-singularity and in the intensity, variation, and violence of the regulation it incites, an originary in its reliance on previous maternities, the uncountable labors through which life has endured.

Moten reads expansiveness into key Afro-Pessimist terms of enclosure, and the socialization of the maternal is central to the work that he does with the concept of the hold. He “uses and abuses” a line from Wilderson (2010, p. xi) to get to the notion of “fantasy in the hold” (2013, p. 743), and, similarly: “[H]old, holding…a maternal ecology of laid hands, of being handled, handed, handed down” (Harney and Moten, 2015, p. 83). Indebted to Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley’s work on the queerness of the ship’s hold (2008), this formulation also suggests something like
Donald Winnicott’s hold, the environment that originates with the maternal function but that we may also make for one another, “inherited potential...becoming...a continuity of being” (Winnicott, 2011, p. 160). Spillers contrasts the Black male’s “handed”-ness with the “fatherly reprieve” that enables the white male’s disavowal of his own maternal debts and potentials (and, correspondingly, the white woman’s predatory bad faith (Broeck, 2014)). She also implicitly juxtaposes “vertical transfer” of white patriarchal privilege with the forced “horizontal relatedness of [captive’s] language groups, discourse formations, bloodlines, names, and properties” (p. 219). This handedness and horizontality anchor Moten’s discernment of “the other world we are constantly making in and out of this world” (Moten, 2013, pp. 778–779): communal existence that refuses political standing, avowals that dissolve reprieve.

**Mothering Insurgency**

“To say we must be free of air, while admitting to knowing no other source of breath, is what I have tried to do here,” Wilderson (2010, p. 338) writes in the conclusion of *Red, White, and Black*. Here as elsewhere, he claims Spillers’ heritage of bracing paradox. Yet even as he invokes the womb in terming the structure of US antagonisms a “matrix of violence” (pp. 26, 78, 251), his account relies on the partial or complete disavowal of aborted maternity in its power as well as its suffering. For his part, Moten does not extensively attend to Native genocide or survival. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang nevertheless cite him as articulating abolitionist practices of “Black fugitivity, undercommons, and radical dispossession” that antagonize the White Settler world (2012, p. 30). Yet we might ask if Moten, in his discernment of a Black maternal potential everywhere, may at times lose sight of its fleshly basis in maternity lived “out of the traditional symbols of female gender.”

The reproductive body constitutes a key “entanglement of settler colonialism and slavery” (Leroy, 2016), and both Wilderson and Moten are best read alongside decolonial and abolitionist thinkers’ rich thematicizations of mothering bodies and practices that defy these mutually constitutive regimes of violence. Audra Simpson writes that “an Indian woman’s body in settler regimes...is loaded with meaning—signifying...the dangerous possibility of reproducing Indian life and most dangerously, other political orders” (2016). Saidiya Hartman, citing Spillers’ essay, similarly locates in Black maternity the work that enables Black life’s antagonistic persistence:

Those of us who have been “touched by the mother” need acknowledge that...This brilliant and formidable labor of care, paradoxically, has been produced through violent structures of slavery, anti-black racism, virulent sexism, and disposability...This care, which is coerced and freely given, is the black heart of our social poesis, of making and relation (Hartman, 2016, p. 171).
Alexis Pauline Gumbs draws on Spillers’ essay to oppose white heteropatriarchal “motherhood” to the work of Black “mothering” – a non-gender-specific practice that “enables the co-production of a radically different future” (2008, n.p.; 2016, pp. 22–23; cf. Weheliye, 2014). And Zakiyyah Jackson contends that “the black mater(nal) holds the potential to transform the terms of reality and feeling” tout court: “if an essential feature of your existence is that the norm is not able to take hold, what mode of being becomes available, and what mode might you invent?” (2016, p. 11; cf. Carter, 2013). Articulating unspeakable violence with insurgent horizon, Spillers’ legacy both comprehends and reaches far beyond a pessimism/optimism divide.

Annie Menzel

Theorizing Life Against Death

My goal in these reflections is to assess the characteristic arguments of scholars associated under the sign of “Afro-Pessimism.” They are typically identified as Saidiya Hartman, Frank Wilderson, and Jared Sexton. In my view, this work tells an essential, dark truth about race and Euro-Atlantic modernity, but by a problematic form of argument and affect; the work is a profound explanation of our current racial impasse but in troubling ways it also is a symptom of that impasse and risks reifying it. To explore these ambiguities, I will situate this work in several contexts.

The first, obvious, context is the canon of Black political thought and literature. Using the idea of “problem-space” I take from David Scott (2004) and the idea of “argumentative tradition” I take from Alisdair MacIntyre (1977), I would ask: what constitutive questions (and answers) do these thinkers inherit, but also revise? First, by what concepts and narratives do we understand and represent our condition? (We thus contrast arguments about slavery and its after-life, race and race-making, as well as white supremacy, anti-blackness, “social death,” and “political ontology.”) A second question concerns political subjectivity: how should a racially marked people conceive the “we” shape themselves into a collective political subject? (Are we a “minority” needing allies to democratize the civic identity [and civil society] of a nation professing universalism, a “nation” based in ethnicity or common interest, a “colony” seeking transnational affiliations against empire?) Relatedly, third, how do we understand (say diagnose) those who constitute themselves as white? (Answers to this question signal if or how their identity, conduct, and norms of citizenship can be changed decisively.) Implicit in these is a fourth question: how do we narrate the relation between present and past, to dramatize the after-life of slavery and what is damaging and valuable in a legacy of domination and struggle? Hartman thus asks Nietzsche’s question: “what is the
story about the slave we ought to tell out of the present we ourselves inhabit?” (Hartman and Best, 2005) That story must also judge if, as Hannah Arendt argued, the concepts we inherit can (not) illuminate what is novel or unprecedented in our circumstances.

Because I situate “Afro-pessimism” in the argumentative tradition of black political thought, I will foreground Sexton’s and Wilderson’s view that modern/ western/liberal (Euro-Atlantic) society is founded on a “political ontology” of “anti-blackness,” by which the “social death” of those racially marked as “non-beings” is the condition of human being and life for others. By making anti-blackness and social death foundational to liberal modernity, Afro-Pessimist work depicts the persistence of gross inequality, segregation, and gratuitous violence as the undying “after-life” of slavery, which liberal society never consigned to the past.

As this argument explains the failures of civil rights reform and narratives of progress, though, a second obvious context becomes visible: Afro-Pessimism is not only a theory to juxtapose to a canon of theories, but a speech-act that bespeaks the impasse it would address and enter. It intervenes intentionally in a problem-space of questions and answers, but is also symptomatic of the context it claims to explain. Its rhetoric manifests what Raymond Williams called a structure of feeling, whose character and impact requires interpretation.

On the one hand, I am inclined to say of Afro-Pessimism what Adorno said of psychoanalysis — only its exaggerations are true — because otherwise we readily disavow a truth about our history and circumstances that is hard to acknowledge let alone bear. Theorizing — bearing witness to — “structural positionality” is crucial to explaining persisting racial domination. But on the other hand, their rhetoric is a symptom of impasse. The work of Sexton and Wilderson, in particular, sustains the critical, systemic, and internationalist frame of Fanon and American advocates of black power, but it lacks their animating sense of possibility. It sustains the black radical tradition by identifying what is distinctive in black positionality in liberal modernity, but in the way it claims exceptionality in relation to other forms of oppression, Afro-Pessimism also enacts a defensive status politics. In turn, this articulation of blackness in terms of death and life suggest a third context, at once theological and psychoanalytical.

First Context: Black Political Thought and Intractability

Afro-Pessimists draw their central — both diagnostic and generative — claim from Orlando Patterson (1982): slavery is distinguished not by intensified exploitation of labor, but by a “social death” he defines as natal alienation, generalized dishonor, and violent domination. Modernity emerges in the equation of slavery as social death with blackness, whereby only those marked as black are consigned to these conditions. Hartman has condensed and updated the idea of social death by the
concept of “fungibility,” to denote how slavery has an after-life because blacks do not become human subjects, but remain objects of (material, accumulative, sexual, symbolic) use, including subjection to gratuitous violence and disposability (Patterson, 1982). At the same time, the production of this social death for those marked black is the disavowed condition of possibility for the economy and culture of those defining themselves as human, or non-black. As Hartman (1997, 2003) showed in *Scenes of Subjection* and interviews, even though chattel slavery was officially ended, a racializing regime instantiating devaluation has remained foundational to the material life and symbolic order of liberal civil society. These arguments thus explain—and make meaningful—the intractability of racialized inequality and violence despite the purported displacement of overt white supremacy by civil rights and multi-culturalism.

Wilderson and Sexton, building on Fanon and Hartman, thus argue that “Blackness” denotes a position not an identity. Wilderson says, “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 sutured by anti-black solidarity...Afro-pessimism explores the meaning of Blackness not—in the first instance—as a variously interpelated identity or conscious social actor, but as a structural position of non-communicability in the face of all other positions.” A position of “absolute dereliction” marks the non-being that cannot signify but can be made to signify, as well as accumulated, exploited, killed (Wilderson, 2010, pp. 58–59).

In Wilderson’s narrative, then, “modernity marks the emergence of a new ontology because it is an era in which an entire race appears, people who, prior to any transgressive act or losing a war, stand as socially dead in relation to the rest of the world” (Wilderson, 2010, p. 18). Modern liberal “civil society is held together by a structural prohibition against recognizing and incorporating a being that is dead, despite the fact that this being is sentient and appears very much alive.” Civil society, wage relations, and constitutionalism among rights-bearing subjects are underwritten by generalized dishonor and violent domination of those marked black, but also by “a libidinal economy of enjoyment,” because “fantasies of murderous hatred and unlimited destruction, of sexual consumption and social availability animate” such violence and “the psychic life of culture as well” (Wilderson, 2010, p. 27).

Jared Sexton (2008, 2016) calls Afro-pessimism a “critique” of “political ontology,” but why use this location? The middle passage inaugurated a “condition of ontology and not just an event of experience” because chattel slavery founded (conditions of) non-being and being (Wilderson, 2010, p. 14). If ontology is the study of how we define the general conditions of possibility for human being, then political ontology denotes how politics founds what Fred Moten calls “the non-relationality that structures all relationality,” the denial of being that structures symbolic order and material reality in modernity (Moten, 2013). “Anti-blackness”
is “ontological” as an unthought, foundational (and so intractable) condition framing human being, but “political” because conventional, historical, potentially changeable. In turn, to theorize “structural positionality” “is to be Afro-Pessimist, not Afrocentric,” because “blackness” denotes a condition (of non-being) to refuse, and neither a (prior, African) identity to retrieve, nor a “cultural identity” to assert (Wilderson, 2010, p. 58).

Wilderson thus posits “the inaugural difference” that instituted the modern and its defining “genre of the human” as Sylvia Wynter (2003) puts it. Marxian and Lacanian structuralism also originate human society and culture in the structure of (class or gender) positions into which people are interpellated. But Wilderson depicts “gender or economic oppression” as “contingent riders” limiting “the freedom of human subjects”; “exploited humans in conflict with unexploited humans,” or women dominated by men, remain within human being, not set off ontologically from it. He insists on this “unbridgeable gap” between the “suffering dynamics of the ontologically alive,” and black positionality. “Deep within civil society’s collective unconscious is the knowledge that the black position is indeed a position, not an identity, and...inextricably bound to the constituent elements of social death.” By this categorical difference “gratuitous violence” and “exchange” can “mark everyone experientially” but “mark blacks ontologically” (Wilderson, 2003).

This structuralism parallels Althusser and Lacan, but it posits black positionality as exceptional, both in its equation with non-being, and as the inaugurating foundation of modernity. In turn, Sexton draws two implications. “Whatever else there may be in black culture or cultures — in the most capacious, differentiated, global sense — a narrative of antagonism is inscribed there, powerfully and profoundly. To “inhabit” the “destruction” mandated by an “anti-black world that shapes and structures every aspect of black existence” is to face the challenge of “how to stay within the anxiety of antagonism...to be guided by it, and again, even to will it?” (Sexton, 2016, p. 4). As if to disarm any reduction of militancy to masculinism, Sexton quotes the martial language of Hortense Spillers: “My anxiety was finding a way to actually be in battle...to go to war.” He credits black feminism with linking “rage to hope” and forging “a non-compliant but non-violent alloy” to oppose what Spillers calls “long centuries of unregulated violence” (Spillers et al., 2007; Sexton, 2016, pp. 9–10).

But he asks: “is there such a thing as black feminist violence?” Not “to elevate violence to the level of principle,” he avers, but “to include it as one tactic among others” in a structure of antagonism. As if to disarm critics he quotes Spillers again: “the day that the enslaved decides to act out the threat of death that hangs over her, by risking her life, is the first day of wisdom. And whether or not one survives is perhaps less important than the recognition that, unless one is free, love cannot and will not matter” (Spillers et al., 2007; Sexton, 2016, p. 10).
In this passage, we hear Antigone and Audre Lorde, who would risk their own lives but not another’s life, but also Frederick Douglass’ Nietzschean violence as well as Huey Newton’s “revolutionary suicide,” when risking life and taking life entwine. If Sexton’s first conclusion moves from political ontology to inescapable antagonism and so to a Fanonian view of violence as a condition of freedom, his second conclusion returns to the premise shared with Wilderson, who says, “black freedom is an ontological” not “experiential” issue. “Black freedom” is not repeated action to contest or interrupt social death, or fugitive forms of slipping the yoke, but “an event of epic and revolutionary proportions” that is “the end of both blackness and humanness,” the “emergence of new ontological relations” (Wilderson, 2010, p. 27).

Critics object that arguments about social death deny both the “agency” of blacks and the “hope” political resistance requires (Brown, 2009). Sexton denies any “rejection of the notion of agency in advance,” but instead depicts an “endeavor to think rigorously about its conditions of possibility.” Likewise, theory must face the position of the “ex-slave without recourse to the consolations of transcendence.” Rather than “blaming pessimism,” he quotes Joshua Foa Dienstag to say, “perhaps we can learn from it. Rather than hiding from the ugliness of the world, perhaps we can discover how best to withstand it.” Depicting the false solace sought by those who cannot abide the twinned truths of destruction and antagonism, Sexton (2016) enacts a pointedly dismissive “intramural” critique of Black political thought. Speaking in the mode of realism to advance the “pessimistic” claim that the modern world is organized to negate and annihilate black agency, he practices a kind of radical negativity. Does this view blind us to or even foreclose the “life” of black agency in conditions of social death, or, does it stipulate what would count as fundamental change? Does this view preclude hope for a different future, or, stipulate its threshold, to open a possibility we cannot know or depict in advance? Here is theory as speech-act, my second context, but also, his idiom of false solace or real transcendence signals my third context, political theology.

Second Context: From Theory to Speech-Act

Gayle Rubin (1975) once joined Engels and Levi-Strauss to theorize what Sexton calls the “structural positionality” of women in patriarchy, whereby the exchange of women (as quasi-human objects) became the condition of “human” life and culture, and by using Freud and Lacan to theorize the “libidinal economy” tied to this exchange, she depicted how those marked as women internalized and reproduced their position. But feminism, she argued, sought a “radical” re-imagination of patriarchal kinship conceived as a conventional not natural condition of human being. It must be said that Rubin herself, and feminism more broadly, did not theorize the differences slavery instituted. It took Hortense Spillers
to show how the modern form of gender was produced by white supremacy, as enslaved women were denied the status of gender as a form of being, and reduced to mere “flesh.” The modern sex–gender system, and its feminist critics, rested on disavowal (or unthinking presumption) of this prior denial of being (Spillers, 1987; Broeck, 2008). If this insight vindicates the structuralist ambition of “Afro-Pessimist” argument, however, the animating sense of possibility that living insurgency imparted to the structuralism of radical feminist theorizing remains absent. Its avowed “pessimism” is partly a symptom of our own moment of impasse, but it also minimizes the current forms of insurgency surrounding it, and in these regards it performs a black radicalism that can seem defensive, even bullying, and “academic” in its distance from insurgent politics.

At issue for me, then, is not the idea of a structural positionality that is both foundational and distinctive, but the motives and idioms that give it a troubling form and affect. Wilderson and Sexton rightly claim that neither legal enfranchisement nor material assets secure immunity from vulnerability as a fungible object; they rightly see the depth and scope of the change needed to achieve equality. But they posit a categorical and absolute (not historical or contingent) difference: between ex-slaves, as non-human beings subject to gratuitous violence; indigenous people, as “almost-human” subjects, who retain forms of sovereignty; and white women and workers “whose humanity is a given.” They do not depict the mutual imbrication of race, class, and gender, the braiding of native dispossession and slavery, the ratio of violence or fungibility in other forms of domination, or how political economy and culture is underwritten, especially, by women positioned as objects of available for use (and violence.) They refuse what Wilderson calls “the ruse of analogy,” whereby accounts of domination as being (like) slavery deny a categorical difference in “ontological” positionality (Wilderson, 2010).

A “political ontology of race” is thus tailored to address post-civil rights fragmentation in the black world, post-1965 immigration and neoliberal multiculturalism, as well as multiplying varieties of oppression. Partly, Afro-Pessimism uses abundant evidence of fungibility and violence to posit and defend black commonality against forms of upward mobility it credibly casts as a deceptive appearance, but it also ignores or devalues the reality of appearances, that is, the real complexity of a black world increasingly differentiated and divided. Likewise, Afro-Pessimism correctly situates recent versions of ethnic pluralism and class/gender radicalism within an unchanged black/white racial grid, to credibly mark how coalition/reform politics continue to evade the distinctive grip of antiblackness. But rather than highlighting the intractable grip of antiblack specificity amid multi-dimensional intersectionality, and rather than tracing how antiblackness has entwined with settler colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism, Sexton and Wilderson depict black exceptionality.7
Understandably foregrounding how analogy is typically used to (trade on but) evade what is distinctive in racial domination, they seem unable to admit let alone credit complexities and confusions in the gray zone of intersectionality. As a result, they create a black radicalism that categorically separates not only itself from other constituencies, but also the truly revolutionary from the mere “consolation” of other forms of organized black insurgency. These versions of what I am calling exceptionality suggest my third context, because, in its very critiques of false transcendence, Afro-Pessimism repeats the idioms of political theology.

Third Context: From Political Theology to Psychoanalysis

Sexton and Wilderson seem to mean political ontology as a philosophical/political alternative to political theology. Like Marx they criticize other-worldly forms of redemption for the sake of “soberly” facing our “true conditions”; like Marx on class, they depict blackness as a non-cultural positionality, not an identity; and like Marx, they project the necessity for, but do not depict, a world beyond this one. They also echo the revolutionary paradigm of Fanon, which depicts consignment to non-being, narrates polarized antagonism, and without substantializing blackness, seeks an epochal movement from social death to life. Surely, then, the emphasis on positionality, antagonism, and eschatology evokes Carl Schmitt’s “political theology” as well as his “concept of the political.” For if American liberal nationalism is constituted by the sovereign violence that establishes social death for some as the condition of (access to) life for others, then those positioned as Black are thrown across a theological frontier that differentiates the damned to produce the saved. Those marked by non-being are thus called to “decision,” to take exception to social death as a state of exception. Even if Wilderson and Sexton invoke insurrection but not resurrection, can they escape entanglement in political theology?

At the same time, we should recall Nietzsche’s “analysis” of the grip of the ascetic ideal among those – especially democrats, abolitionists, and atheist leftists – who renounced literal theism and other-worldly forms of redemption. For they sustain “faith in truth” and in its name devalue plurality, perspective, and contingency, as well as the unavoidably constitutive impact of the drives and fantasies that motivate our thought and action. Interpreting our will to truth as itself a motivated faith and perspective on life, Nietzsche makes faith ubiquitous by placing an act of faith beneath every perspective or optic. He then weighs the “value” of contrasting faiths in terms of their motivation on one side and their worldly consequences on the other side. In this way, he discovered the rancor driving his own faith in critical negativity, and he thus fashioned a “gay science” to mitigate it. How might his model of a counter-political theology help us interpret and engage a theory focused on the grim truth of social death?
Because modernity premises life for some on consigning others to social death, Hartman claims, deliverance is the master trope of Black culture. But how to seek life against death is contestable. Wilderson and Sexton depict the unbearable truth of social death and unremitting antagonism between master and slave, in contrast to which they depict our seduction by (our wish for) narrative and the redemption it offers. They speak not to whites, whose narrative of modernity, nationhood, and progress is premised on black non-being, but “intramurally” to those marked as black, who are drawn to narratives that promise to overcome white innocence (in Baldwin’s sense) by civic integration, or that promise the redemption of black suffering by de-colonization, nation-building, or fugitive creativity. Against seduction by narrative, Afro-pessimist structuralism is presented as the essential and all-controlling truth of black experience; it gives off the scent of the ascetic ideal not only because it disavows its own fictionality as an optic, genre, or organizing fantasy, but also because of its categorical juxtaposition of friend and enemy, its heroized but abstract radicalism, and its dismissal of any other position as a demeaned form of solace.

Especially if we credit the truth to which Afro-Pessimism bears witness, including the likelihood of white resistance to or disavowal of its validity, we may well feel pressured to assent to it. We are pressed by the form or logic of the argument, which signifies any doubt or question as objectionable whiteness or pathetic black acquiescence. As a white man trying to make this argument, I am struggling to articulate both its crucial truth, and my sense, politically and theoretically, that it should be presented or inflected otherwise, with different affective tonality and political bearing.

For on the one hand, it seems to me that “social death” is totalized as the truth that must be faced without consolation, while on the other hand, the only valid response is depicted as revolutionary (perhaps violent) refusal. We are driven toward helplessness and despair by an annihilating structure that seems impossible to change, but also, if we ask, what can be done, we receive images of revolutionary suicide. The systematic character of critique offers a clarity that is appealing; we also may be tempted by the appearance of heroic radicalism – and by an unavowed solace we may derive from the form of “election” it offers.

But we may be better served by questioning the either-or structure of exceptionality, which juxtaposes social death in/as the ordinary to metaphors of radical refusal. By that structure, Schmitt distinguished ordinary existence as deadening repetition, and miracle as the decision to take exception to it; for Wilderson and Sexton “life” thus seems to require the decisive, unequivocal “event” of overcoming an ordinary life ruled – indeed emptied out, negated, or literally killed – by inescapably gripping social death. But what kind of life or politics is this? Might the “fact” or “lived experience” of blackness as social death be metabolized, transfigured, resisted, or dramatized in other ways? Rather than radically juxtapose awful truth and demeaned consolation, could we rework the
relationship of critique and repair? Or is the impossibility of repair in its usual senses – because only a revolution would be truly reparative – the necessary assumption for rightly seeing the conditions of black agency? Rather than respond to their critique by asking, what radical action could possibly suffice to change this world, could we ask instead, what is already being done? 

If we grasp the truth signified by a "political ontology of anti-blackness," we should and will doubt the sufficiency of civil rights and coalition politics, but couldn’t we still value rhizomatic practices of protest, prosaic efforts at legal redress or self-defense, local experiments in counter-sovereignty, forms of black nationalism, or diasporic cultural politics that poeticize black creativity? These are ongoing all around us, but virtually unremarked by Wilderson or Sexton, who focus on the unbearable truth disavowed by most whites, and whose radical implications are evaded by many blacks. But we should not demonize this focus as simply a fault, either.

In addition, if I focus on the "lived truth" (the affective bearing and prosaic meaning, not the referential accuracy) of Afro-Pessimism as an organizing optic, I recall how Nietzsche focused on the rancor we must feel over our inability to will backward, and by focusing on our resentment, he foregrounded our affective orientation toward our suffering and its injustice. In this spirit, in turn, Eve Sedgwick (2003, 2007) used Melanie Klein's concept of paranoid and reparative positions to "analyze" the "hermeneutic of suspicion" in critical and queer theorizing, in ways that may help us creatively engage Afro-pessimism.

On the one hand, anti-blackness and homophobia manifest paranoid splitting, as desire and aggression – what Phillip Roth tellingly calls "human stain" – are projected into objects rather than acknowledged. Through what Eric Lott called "love and theft" (unintentionally echoing Klein's "envy and gratitude" toward the mother), the enfrenched and normal enact a paranoid structure that produces demonized objects but that also loves – and so cannibalizes – what it repudiates. On the other hand, Sedgwick argued, queer theory itself inhabits a "paranoid position" by a systemic explanation that "anticipates" injury and humiliation, precludes surprise, polarizes friend and enemy, and denies value to reparative action. Might theoretical and political practice repair rather than repeat the aggressive splitting, disavowal, and longing for innocence (or purity) that characterizes the object of critique? In regard to white supremacy, can we devise what New Lefties called prefigurative practices, to anticipate and embody in our means the revolutionary ends we posit? Of course, Sedgwick is often read in a "paranoid" way, as if she posited an either-or between the paranoid and reparative positions, partly because at moments she herself does this splitting. But a truly "reparative" view of paranoid theory or radical politics would have to value and sustain ambivalence, a tension between the hermeneutic of suspicion and quest for deep truth that characterizes "critique," and a generosity that seeks and welcomes possibility, in the form of unexpected changes, actions, attenuations.
If anti-blackness is a paranoid onto-theology in Klein's sense, what would a reparative alternative feel like and do? Like Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, Wilderson and Sexton place blackness in the position of the unconscious — and in the position of maternity. Under the bar, these signify abjection, excess, and nonsense, the threatening non-being against which subjectivity, rationality, and the human is defined in phobic, violent ways. But they do not affirm let alone explore the life made by people positioned "in the hold," under the bar — and because they are positioned there. No more than Lacan on maternity do they substantialize blackness as a heritage to retrieve or an identity to make and assert. But critical negativity, focused on social death and invested in the paradoxical purity of asceticism, risks becoming death-like; moreover, radical politics fails unless it bears witness to life against death.

What this might mean once appeared in feminist theories that risked exploring the ubiquitous but disavowed meanings of maternity, whether as the creative genius of the "semitic" juxtaposed to the symbolic, or as an ethic of care contrasted with Kantian autonomy. In that feminist spirit, Spillers in fact discerned opportunity hidden in conditions of social death: because enslaved women were reduced to "flesh" and denied the status of gender, she argued, their children inherit the chance to do gender and kinship otherwise (Spillers, 1987). In the essay Sexton quotes, she also says: "Men of the black diaspora are the only men who had the opportunity to understand something about the female [and vice versa] that no other community" could. Indeed, "I used to think that black culture was on the verge of creating...a kind of democratic form...in relationship to being human. That people did whatever work was to be done, whether 'men's work' or 'women's work'" (Spillers et al., 2007).

Spillers never makes an ethnic claim about blackness, but she does show catastrophe and positionality conferring "intramural" gifts, as well as an art and politics that disturb what Jacques Rancière calls the partition of the sensible. In turn, Fred Moten uses her feminism to create an exemplary agon with Afro-Pessimism. On the one hand, he endorses its fealty to Fanon's basic insight: "he fully accepts the definition of himself as pathological as it is imposed by a world that knows itself through that imposition...This affirmation...is a willing or willingness to pay whatever social costs accrue to being black, to inhabiting blackness, to living black social life under the shadow of social death." But on the other hand, just as "blackness is not reducible to its social costs," so "there is a relation between nothing and something or...between death and life." If "pessimism" allows us to "discern that we are nothing," he calls "optimism" the recognition that "nothing is not absence...Poverty in the world is manifest in poetic access to what it is of the other world that remains unheard, unnoted, unrecognized in this one. [Whatever] you call these resources...it remains to consider precisely what is it that the ones who have nothing have...or to which they have access? What comes of it?" Here, social death does not preclude agency;
agency means occupying “nothingness itself in its fullness,” and identifying with those “who have nothing and who, in having nothing, have everything” (Moten, 2013).

In encouraging us to look and ask what this everything might be, Moten honors the radical idiom relating Jesus, William Blake, and young Karl Marx, the dionysian Christianity of Norman O. Brown, the messianism of Walter Benjamin, the aesthetic of John Coltrane. In this dark time, it seems crucial to bear witness against violent repetition and against all the structural reasons we should anticipate it, but it seems as crucial to model a politics that struggles against death by remembering the aporetic and excessive, the improvisatory and the unexpected, as elements of our democratic faith.

George Shulman

“When I Fall:” A Reparation of Despair

We need to lean on each other ... This is a leader-full movement. We empower each other. If we just have one leader then that depletes that person of all their resources, their energy and everything. But if we have more than one person then, when I fall I have this person and this person on the right and left of me to pick me up and give me some of their energy...

(Jasmine Abdullah Richards, Founder of Pasadena Chapter of #BlackLivesMatter)

Afro-pessimism is finding its way, as this critical exchange advances, into fields far less familiar with the fugitive communities and maroon abolitionist investments to which it is indebted. It is a mode of conversation about race and racism that cohered against a backdrop of the election of the first black American president and in opposition to those who anticipated, far too soon, that with black representation at the highest level of national governance we must have finally arrived at the end of the era of antiblack racism. A new generation of activist-scholars is rising up and speaking out against the false optimism of post-racialism. Were black lives to matter, were the critical condition of black peoples’ lives and the forces that structure that condition a pressing concern to people wherever they live, clear and common across lines of racial, national, and ethnic difference, their pessimism would have no place in a politics of liberation. Their pessimism is, however, a prophetic defense against the future white supremacy makes all but inescapable. Their despair works to expose the limits of political agency, incorporation, representation, and progress. Instead of demands for rights and protection under the law, they center the nihilism of white supremacy, focusing in particular upon the
singular, irredeemable significance of slavery and ongoing justifications for black suffering that persist in its wake.

Rather than making a case for or against the project of Afro-pessimism as an academic enterprise, what I am inspired by in this intellectual movement is the enthusiasm with which my students are taking it up as a way to conjoin their activism with their analyses of race and racism. For them, this field is defined by more than a static contest of those for and against. At its best, Afro-pessimism is not about the future of black studies as much as it is about the future of black life. The antagonisms within and around the field of Afro-pessimism are animating an atmosphere of unrest with implications for black studies, the university, and the country at large. Read as a trans-generational call and response for black liberation born of what Sudbury calls, “activist motivations for involvement and barriers to participation,” it stands to reason that what we have to gain from its young and plastic drive to get free from both the burdens of anti-blackness and white supremacy is still unfolding and I believe the best is yet to come.

**Forced to Believe**

Jared Sexton (2016, pp. 6–7) writes that, “In a sense, Afro-Pessimism is not an intervention so much as it is a reading ... It is a reading of what is gained and lost in the attempt – the impulse – to delineate the spatial and temporal borders of anti-blackness, to delimit the “bad news” of black life ... to find an edge beyond or before which true living unfolds. It is an attempt to resist that centrifugal force that overwhelsms us like fear or exhausts us like fatigue.”

What is gained by situating current activist and academic debates on Afro-pessimism, as Sexton does, within a larger politics of loss – the loss of property, of rights, of belief in black life? If Afro-pessimism is a project of loss mitigation, a viable alternative to dispositions of dispossession that animate unrest, in the academy, in cities and communities, and in the U.S. as a whole, then it could serve as a first step on the road to seeking reparation for the conditions so many black people are subject to living within, that intimate union of national belonging and domestic violence that is the reward for legal legibility. Pessimism-in-defense-of-black-life is then, neither strictly academic, nor a merely matter of resentment, but necessarily political, a social force that presses back upon the coherence of politics-as-usual. It has roots in the everyday spaces of “getting over,” refusal, or non-compliance in encounters with enslavers, overseers, and patrollers in the fields, quarters, and swamps of the plantation South. Consequences for such movement against the nihilism of white supremacy have historically included policing, criminalization, internment, torture, and death. They have culminated in national crisis at catastrophic as civil war and as transformative as the movement for civil rights.
Given that the endgame of Afro-pessimism as an academic enterprise is limited by its location within the neoliberal university (see Fred Moten and Stephano Harney's "The University and the UnderCommons,"), the most generative aspects of its analysis of anti-blackness and Western civilization are indebted to knowledge about black life and liberation produced outside the academy and on the ground of struggles for freedom. The pessimism of conventional philosophical concern presses on the ontological foundations of a person's individual sense of agency and purpose, throwing one's will to live into question.

Prophetic despair, such as that which Baldwin expresses in an often quoted interview between James Baldwin Dr. Kenneth Clark in May of 1963, presses on the material cohesion of our moral infrastructure. In the interview Baldwin professes to remaining pessimistic with regard to his own life when he says, "It doesn't matter any longer what you do to me; you can put me in jail, you can kill me. By the time I was 17, you'd done everything that you could do to me. The problem now is, how are you going to save yourselves?" He goes on a bit later to refuse, in no uncertain term, pessimism as a politics of the future.

When Clark asks, "Jim, what do you see deep in the recesses of your own mind as the future of our nation, ... I think that the future of the Negro and the future of the nation are linked ..., What do you see?", Baldwin replies, "I can't be a pessimist because I'm alive. To be a pessimist means that you have agreed that human life is an academic matter, so I'm forced to be an optimist. I'm forced to believe that we can survive whatever we must survive. But the future of the Negro in this country is precisely as bright or as dark as the future of the country (Clark et al., 1963).

I want to savor the tensions of Baldwin's response. I want to hold them, not resolve them, and observe how they situate pedestrian personal pessimism outside the movement for black life, while calling out the limits of a political process propelled and legitimated by white supremacy. Even insofar as pessimism is a social expression of the affective limits of social death, a feeling that brings us back to life, out of isolation, and into conversation with each other the promise of pessimism is clearly far more than an academic matter.

The antithesis of pessimism in this instance is not optimism but apathy, willful passive acceptance of the untenable conditions of a people systemically and forcibly made to understand that there are some whose existence is at best immaterial and at worst a clear and present danger, and then there are those lives that do matter. What we have been witnessing in the activist and academic movements for black life is the implosion of identity politics and the failure of its possessive claims to liberal demands for rights and protection. The abolition of whiteness demands a kind of justice the state may not yet know how to sanction. As Patrisse Cullors (2015), one of three original founders of #BLM, argues, "I believe we can’t wait on the State to take care of our Black lives. We have to show up now to build the world we want to see."
Thinking the purchase of the pessimistic prophetically then, as a residual, inevitable, yet generative practice of the black prophetic tradition with reparative properties that precede and exceed Afro-pessimism’s formal incorporation into scholarly journals and conferences, I find myself constantly reminding my students that while we can take the analysis of power Afro-pessimism offers and run with it, academic enunciations of pessimism run the risk of remaining loyal to the limits of legibility and respectability of politics as usual. As Nick Mitchell (forthcoming, p. 10) writes: “When the intellectual becomes interchangeable with the slave, it is perhaps too easy … to smooth over the fact that black intellectuals have interests as intellectuals that can and do diverge from those of the people for whom they might want justice. Without an acknowledgement (not a confession) of this divergence … the project of race theorization risks deploying the generalizing force of theory and the moralizing tendency of critique to generalize a class perspective.”

What we are dealing with here is more than occident anxiety of ontological uncertainty. It is an ethical imperative to engage in a struggle to change the meaning of rights and protection from the ground up (or suffer senselessly at the altar of the state’s right to defend itself by any means necessary). As Baldwin (in Clark et al., 1963) suggested in the interview with Kenneth Clark, the pessimism of antiblack racism is not just a black problem, it presses on the condition of whites and upon the country as a whole: “These people have deluded themselves for so long, that they really don’t think I’m human. I base this on their conduct, not on what they say, and this means that they have become, in themselves, moral monsters.”

The predicament of the pessimist is not a personal problem that is easily self-contained. It presses upon the body, moving it to unrest, unleashing a rage that cannot stand to be at home in moral monstrosity. It just wants to burn it all down. “Now, we are talking about human beings, there’s not such a thing as a monolithic wall or some abstraction called the Negro problem, these are Negro boys and girls, who at 16 and 17 don’t believe the country means anything that it says and don’t feel they have any place here, on the basis of the performance of the entire country.” The question Afro-pessimism poses as a practice of prophetic desire then, turns away from a politics of recognition and respectability toward an abolitionist praxis of fugitive reparation to ask, “Will you run with me?” Does my pessimism press on your sense of superiority, exception, perfection enough for you to forfeit your status and help us move the country, force the nation to believe there is freedom beyond this world, a more prophetic imagination of difference, identity, and inclusion? “What white people have to do,” Baldwin (in Clark et al., 1963) reminds us, “is try and find out in their own hearts why it was necessary to have a nigger in the first place, because I’m not a nigger, I’m a man, but if you think I’m a nigger, it means you need it.”

In the present moment Black Lives Matter (BLM) is advancing the cause for the abolition of white supremacy in local ways in chapters throughout the world. They
call us to account for the material consequences of the unfinished work of antislavery abolition and reconstruction. They are part of an underground lineage of fugitive communities that emerged from the marshes, swamps, and hiding spaces of the plantation South. Their message is decentralized. It is not uniform. It does not reproduce old antagonisms. It does not pit moral suasion against direct confrontation. It does not ask that we choose to remain either optimistic or pessimistic. It exercises a practice of the political that harnesses both. In this last section then I turn to a speech against apathy by Patrisse Cullors, a beacon in a leader-full movement who has been animating pessimism as a protocol of self-care and prophetic political organizing powerful enough to propel activist and intellectual movements from isolated places of loss into collective liberation, out of abstractions into objections, subjecting the logics of antiblack racism to the collective force of intersecting fugitive communities of abolitionist movement against nihilism and toward an affirmation of life.

We Can Survive?

At age 25 on 19 April 2015 Freddie Gray died from injuries sustained while shackled by his feet in a Baltimore Police Department van where he was being held in custody following his arrest. Baltimore stood up, rose up, died in, and rolled out. We all bore witness. His death was deemed a murder by the medical examiner a few weeks later. That Sunday morning, May 3, 2015, I, a Buddhist, found my way to church, to All Saints in Pasadena, CA, into the strikingly upper-class congregation of post-service attendees who piled in along with an unlikely mix of young greater Los Angeles activists-of-color and their white hipster allies. It would be my first time hearing our speaker in person. The whole room stood and cheered as she entered – the woman who helped coin the hashtag, the longtime activist organizer, Patrisse Cullors greeted us like family, all knowing eyes, bright smiles, and then began a talk she called “Abolition Theology.”

Her voice was clear and certain, free of the cross-bearing affect of black suffering that often accompanies talk of state-sponsored antiblack violence in predominately white spaces. Cullors gave us a speech that touched us, that moved us – mourning, rage and all – into a mood for collective action.

She impressed upon us the fact that the movement for black lives was a call to action for all black life, not just the names we could recite, not just cisgendered young men, not just “innocent” “children,” not just Americans. She let us know there had been recent formations of #Black Lives Matter chapters beyond U.S. borders. There were Afro-Latino chapters, chapters forming in Haiti, and in Ghana. She reminded us that the concept of blackness that resonates across the globe called on us to broaden the scope of our movements and to build alliances, to build with Latino communities in particular. It was a call for #BLM without borders. We were being enlisted in a movement that began, she reminded us, with the movement to
abolish the institution of slavery. We were being reeducated as she drew connection between the hard-won efforts of formerly fugitive abolitionists to build resilient communities out of the so-called contraband during and following the Civil War through to the present-day “leader-full” movement of #BLM.

“Isn’t this a great time to be alive?” Cullors asked in closing. Is she joking I wondered? I found not one drop of cynicism in her question. Without missing a beat, she proceeded to relay the names, the facts, the numbers, the bodies killed by police, by gun, by force. As she listed the lives taken a wave of loss flooded the room and we were still, breathless. “Protest is about disrupting apathy,” she continued.

She left us eager to join her in this twenty-first century revival of reconstruction, in a fight for food, for access to housing, for access to education, and for a kind of justice for black lives that will not come without our willingness to show up, stand up, and throw down. In the streets, in solidarity, we will find the power to change people, she said, to change policy. She echoed the words of civil rights organizer Ella Baker, “the system under which we now exist has to be radically changed... It means facing a system that does not lend itself to your needs and devising means by which you change that system.”

For Cullors that “means” came by way of waves grief, rage, despair, the loss of family, the loss of hope, bearing witness, heartbreak, and the will to return to face it all again. She closed us out with the rallying chant of the movement for black lives, the recitation of a prayer by Twentieth century fugitive slave Assata Shakur, “It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love each other and protect each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains.” The congregation’s joy burst through the siren of her words and bound us toward another way of sitting with the litany of loss.

We Must Survive

What Baldwin and Cullors make clear is that pessimism is most powerful as an unrelenting political process of coming back to life, beginning to feel one another’s humanity. What my students who are taking up the work of Afro-pessimism are in most need of are new ways to put their pessimism to work, to come together and collectively counteract the mind-numbing soul-crushing isolation centuries of antiblack racism have waged on our humanity. We need not fear falling short. The more we “fail,” the stronger we rise to try again armed with the alchemy of despair. What we need are stories and speeches, and spaces that moves us from abjection toward that fertile ground of self-transformation one can only find in the witness of another. What might we give up in a move from critique to healing and reparation, generative of the choice to be fearless in the face of the impossibilities of freedom? What might the audacity to “lean on each other,” as Jasmine Abdullah
Richards says in the epigraph, and imagine a future for black life otherwise, add to the pursuits of the pessimist?

Jasmine Syedullah

Notes

1 Originally published in 1987, the essay appears in revised form in Spillers' (2003) collection, Black, White, and in Color. I use page numbers from the latter.
2 While I do not develop this point here, there is a corresponding dissection between their respective readings of Fanon.
3 On flesh/body, see also (Weheliye, 2014, p. 2; JanMohamed, 2005, p. 10).
4 See also Grace Hong (2006) on Patterson’s masculinism in Slavery and Social Death, though see Donette Francis (2013) for a countervailing view.
5 Kevin Bruyneel shows that Wilderson likewise glosses over the violation and animalization of Indigenous maternity in a dialogue with Saidiya Hartman that precedes the publication of Red, White, and Black by several years (see Wilderson and Hartman, 2003, fn11; Bruyneel, 2016).
6 I focus on the work of Frank Wilderson III and Jared Sexton, especially, but Wilderson identifies “Afro-pessimism” with Franz Fanon, Lewis R. Gordon, Orlando Patterson, George Yancy, Achille Mbembe, Hortense Spillers, R.A. Judy, David Marriot, Saidiyah Hartman.
7 Jews were subject to extermination, but those who survived remained Jews, Wilderson argues, whereas Africans entered the middle passage and “came out as blacks,” i.e., non-beings (2010, p. 38). He insists on splitting what J. Cameron Carter joins: Kant separated Christianity from Jews, and racialized them, in ways that set-up the meaning of Blackness. Likewise, Wilderson emphasizes not the extermination of indigenous people, but their survivors retaining the “half-human” form of sovereignty. Conversely, he argues that non-beings cannot be designated settlers, as benefitting in any sense from native dispossession.
8 I owe this wonderful formulation to the inimitable Bonnie Honig.
9 Hartman, for example, presumes an intractable structure of social death, and posits the impossibility of recompense for the death, loss, and injury it has inflicted over centuries, but she joins mourning to a militancy including legal activism and political reform.

References