

Antiblackness and fundamental accumulation:
an aesthetic ontology of prohibition and persistence through black arts

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Abstract

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This dissertation elaborates an answer to the question, *what is antiblackness?* Countering understandings of antiblackness as a fundamentally psychic force, the dissertation develops the concept of *fundamental accumulation* as the *antiblack prohibition of aesthetic capacity*, a process that is both material and immanent. Antiblackness, as this prohibition of temporal, spatial, and motile capacity to blackness, is read alongside modes of black refusal and antagonism, through five black artistic works from the past fifty years. Chapter 2 examines the antiblack prohibition of temporal capacity, and its refusal as *black persistence*, through a reading of Sarah Maldoror's 1972 film *Sambizanga*. Chapter 3 examines the antiblack prohibition of spatial capacity, alongside *black antaesthetics*, through a reading of Dionne Brand's books *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (2001) and *Ossuaries* (2010). Chapter 4 analyzes the We Still Outside Collective's 2020 video *On the black leadership and other white*

myths, and Kahlil Joesph's 2013 short film *Until the quiet comes*, in order to theorize *black motion* as an immanently antagonistic movement. The dissertation's introduction provides a genealogy of *afropessimism*, outlining and critiquing Frank Wilderson's *structuralist* analysis of antiblackness as proper to the symbolic register, and posits the need for a materialist account of antiblackness. Chapter 1 develops the concept of antiblackness as *fundamental accumulation* via comparison with *primitive accumulation* as theorized by Marxist thinkers, and a close reading of Marx's own understanding of slavery as integral to the development of capacity, community, and the self, in a passage from the *Grundrisse*. The first chapter also outlines the dissertation's methodology of *aesthetic ontology*, placing the dissertation's arguments and stakes within the context of contemporary criticism and analysis of black artistic works and practices.

Acknowledgments

(Thinking)... How is it to be done?

All necessary modesty aside, I believe that, after having worked on and finally produced this project over the past seven years, I now have the tiniest fraction of an inkling. Or rather, and this is the same thing, I now have enough experience to begin to really learn from my teachers.

My teachers—by which I mean, in this happy instance, my comrades. This formulation describes my experience working with and learning from all four of my dissertation committee members. First and foremost, Laura Chrisman is my main intellectual-scholarly mentor and role model. We share a proclivity to take down some trendy academic posture that's a little too transparent *not* to offer an honest partisan assessment. But that seems like just a fun thing in the distance compared with the serious and loving fidelity to intellectual study and practice that Laura has shared with me (although really they're very closely related)—for which I am grateful and aspire to live up to. From our first meeting in my first quarter in this program it was apparent that Laura was an ideal advisor and mentor for me, and it seems worth saying now that I would like to retain that relationship for as long as possible. My committee co-chair, Phillip Thurtle, has been so supportive and sharing over the past five years that I would liken him to a shining beacon, without whom my negotiation through the open waters of *philosophy* (and some science—*though physics, not biology...*) could have ended tragically. Then again, he didn't once attempt to restrain my own getting lost (*in nihilism, not like a goth...*), either. Suffice to say he knows what he's doing as a teacher, and I have had the pleasure of benefiting from his expertise, input, and example. It has likewise been an ongoing pleasure to tarry with Eva Cherniavsky's ongoing questioning of the very basis of this project. I trust she will recognize in the following pages the impact her questioning has had on my thinking, and I hope the result is generative of

more of the same ongoing, critical dialogue. Moreover, I cannot imagine a more rightly attuned and honestly dedicated Director of Graduate Studies, and her work in that capacity—without which, who knows whether I would have had the time here that it has taken me to produce this dissertation—is very much appreciated and not at all taken for granted. (Eva, you once said to me you thought it likely that before too long we won't be doing this work in the University. But I'm glad I got to do this work in the University, in spite of myself and all my comments and vibes to the contrary!) Adair Rounthwaite, who has given me more invaluable practical advice for negotiating the academic world than everyone else I know combined, I feel as a friend first, whose scholarly insights I am so lucky, therefore, to *also* engage with. Our joint reading of Deleuze's *Cinema* books way back when yielded the seed of this dissertation, so our conversations really provided the necessary conditions for everything in these pages. This dissertation simply would not have been possible without these four brilliant and dedicated teachers, whose presence and direction has animated my time at the University of Washington. Have I had any other teachers at UW besides these four? I really don't remember.

Oh, yes I do! To my all-time friend and collaborator Patrick McGowan, much love. It is not just *doubtful* whether I could have made it through this program without your political and intellectual comaraderie—I would certainly have fallen victim to depression and attrition (not to say I'm not depressed...). Patrick, Matthew Hitchman, Alec Fisher, Nina Sobers—a.k.a. *The Real Society of Scholars*: this dissertation has benefitted from your careful reading and thoughtful observations and suggestions. But more importantly, our being and studying together formed a groupuscule I've gotten to write in, with, and for, which is a form of alienation so much preferable to that of the sad absolute loneliness and isolation, or the bogus, always-already-subsumed community (once again, these amount to the same thing), that the University would

have us dwelling in and amongst. So, thank you! I should also offer my sincere gratitude to Kathy Woodward and the Simpson Center, and my summer 2022 *Society of Scholars* peers, for the opportunity to work on and discuss this dissertation at a critical point in its development. Additional thanks to all my other comrades and collaborators at the University of Washington, with whom I've organized and studied a diversity of texts, conferences, concepts, study groups, images, and actions—Reuven Pinnata, Kaelie Giffel, Max Lane, Ethan Ucker, Brittney Frantece, Luis Resendez, and everybody else. Lastly, of all my students at UW, who have helped me think through everything in this dissertation, Kent Vo stands out for his intellect, curiosity, and friendship.

I would also like to single out some crucial teachers from outside the University of Washington. During my summers in the Bard College MFA program, Fred Moten took time to talk with me about my music, and thereby (inadvertently?) put me on the road to/of Black Studies. Without his generous critical engagement, which motivated me to stoke my own incipient participation in black study, I most certainly would not be doing what I am doing. Subsequently, at UC San Diego, Gabriel Mendes gave me a formal introduction into “Black thought; roots and routes” that was formative and still resounds in my thinking. Also at UCSD, Mariana Wardwell furnished my classmates and I with the most fabulous and exciting example of intellectual practice and introduction into Marxist critical theory that I can imagine. While at UCSD, I was incredibly lucky to meet and spend time with my friend and intellectual soundboard Juan David Rubio. Our collaborations in California played a formative role in my intellectual development, and our ongoing conversations continue to sustain and stimulate me. With my great friend and brother Tyler Wilcox, I share a connection that first manifested in music, but continues to enrich our mutual and parallel paths in and through this universe. As you

put it recently Tyler, we're both interested in the truth, and it's a full time job. Thank you for your friendship and fellowship.

Thanks to Andrew Culp, whom I met at the Spiral Film and Philosophy Conference in 2018, for giving me encouraging feedback on the first couple versions of the article that became the second chapter of this dissertation. And lastly, thanks to Frank Wilderson, who, after reading one of those same drafts at The Home School in 2018, encouraged me to persist with the project—it must have seemed utterly inconsequential to him, but it was crucial for me. His example and generosity, both in his writing and during his visit to UW in 2020, are an inspiration. I hope something of them are recognizable within these pages.

I have presented parts of this research at the 2022 University of Wisconsin—Madison Graduate Conference in English, the Elaboration 2: Terror and Misery Conference, the 2019 Society of Cinema and Media Studies National Conference, the 2019 Modern Languages Association Conference, and the 2018 Spiral Film and Philosophy Conference. A modified version of Chapter 3 is forthcoming as an article published in *New Centennial Review* (Summer 2023), and a modified version of Chapter 2 is forthcoming as an article in *Cultural Critique* (Fall 2023).

Finally, I must note that nothing is possible without Sara Hofmann, my companion in love and life. Thank you, I love you! And love and thanks to our beautiful boys Asa and Hani, whose energies have doubtless found their way into this work. Gratitude is due to Marilyn and Robyn Boyd, who have helped support us throughout the years. And most thanks to Karen Burns, whose love and care created and shaped me. My father, Eric Burns, passed away when I was writing the first pages of the paper that eventually became this dissertation. I miss him.

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**Antiblackness and fundamental accumulation:
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If social death is aporetic with respect to narrative, this is a function of both space and time, or, more precisely, their absence.

Frank Wilderson (2020, 227)

The simple construction is thereby negatively determined.

Karl Marx (1973, 491)

The white man is all around me; up above the sky is tearing at its navel; the earth crunches under my feet and sings white, white. All this whiteness burns me to a cinder.

Frantz Fanon (2008, 94)

Find the self, then kill it.

Amiri Baraka (1965)

Introduction

Antiblackness, from structure toward immanence

What is antiblackness? A psychic structure, disposition, or pathology? A political ideology? A form of racism autochthonous or inherent to the devolution of the social bond? Is the function of antiblackness to retroactively justify political-economic disparities and policy, as a tool of the ruling class for the suppression of working class solidarity—as orthodox Marxists and socialists have claimed of *racism* for over a century? Or does antiblackness condition those disparities from their beginning? Is antiblackness one of many contemporary “xenophobic” symptoms of whiteness that develop in reaction to global and local struggles against Euro-descended privilege and power? Or is antiblackness somehow prerequisite to these issues of identity, privilege, and resistance?

This dissertation provides an answer to this cluster of questions by thinking antiblackness (1) as basic and necessary to the (human) world, and (2) as fundamentally a material force or process. This first aspect of antiblackness as “world-structuring” is posited by much recent work in Black Studies, especially by Black Feminist and—of primary importance to this dissertation—afropessimist theorists. The second aspect of antiblackness as a subject for materialist analysis derives from the Marxist tradition. If antiblackness is specific and inherent to the world of the *human*, as Frank Wilderson, building on the work of many others, compellingly argues, we nevertheless should not abandon Marx’s insight that “the human essence is no abstraction

inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.”¹ This dissertation is an effort to think these two aspects of antiblackness together, and that effort, as I demonstrate in the chapters that follow, necessitates the theorization of a third aspect of antiblackness (already present in the preceding quote from Marx), (3) as an *immanent* process. I find support for this in both afropessimist and Marxian analyses, in my re-reading of Frantz Fanon’s “*L’expérience vécu du Noir*” and the philosophical texts I treat with it, and in my close reading of five black artistic works: Sarah Maldoror’s 1972 film *Sambizanga*, (Ch. 2), Dionne Brand’s 2001 and 2010 books *A Map to the Door of No Return; Notes to Belonging* and *Ossuaries* (Ch. 3), and Kahlil Joseph’s short film *Until the Quiet Comes* (2013) and the We Still Outside Collective’s 2020 video work *On the black leadership and other white myths* (Ch. 4).

The second essential feature of this dissertation is its methodology—what I have termed an *aesthetic ontology*. This term operates in a double sense: First, over the subsequent chapters, I elaborate the immanent material process of antiblackness in terms of what I call the “aesthetic capacities,” or the faculties of temporality (Ch. 2), spatiality (Ch.3), and motility (Ch.4), each of which I elaborate not as a static a priori form, but as themselves immanent processes in constant (de)volution. These capacities are simultaneously creative and privative, as each relies upon its own prohibition to blackness as the inaugural auto-differentiating moment of its immanent “self-causation” or “self-organization.”² This describes the aesthetic ground of human antiblack ontology. And this central concern with the aesthetic orients my theoretical elaboration towards a constellation of previous thinkers including Kant, Marx, Merleau-Ponty, and most prominently, Deleuze, all of whom I put in conversation with theorists working in Black Studies—including

¹ Thesis “VI” in “Theses on Feuerbach (Tucker 1978, 145).

² “Immanence is self-caused, or, as we might say today, self-organized. Immanent being produces itself, in itself, through itself” (Thacker 2010, 222).

Fanon, Wilderson, Jared Sexton, Christina Sharpe, Daniel C. Barber, Tina M. Campt, Katherine McKittrick, Fred Moten, Stefano Harney, Hortense Spillers, Alexander Weheliye, Idris Robinson, Lauren M. Cramer and Liquid Blackness Collective, and Calvin Warren—thus both introducing novel onto-aesthetically oriented conceptual tools into the field of Black Studies and intervening into philosophical and critical conversations that otherwise neglect the centrality of antiblackness and its violences. Secondly, while Chapter 1 focuses on a specific theoretical intervention—the elaboration of the concept of *fundamental accumulation*, which re-articulates the theorization of antiblackness with materialist thought—the subsequent chapters theorize antiblackness as aesthetic prohibition through close readings of the artistic works mentioned above. Each of these chapters also theorizes black opposition and material refusal to the prohibition of capacity, through the same immanent-materialist framework. So this dissertation theorizes antiblackness as the prohibition of *aesthetic* capacity, and its *antimmanent* refusal, and does so largely by analyzing the *aesthetic* (and formal-structural) dimensions of selected black artistic works from the past fifty years.

Gilles Deleuze, a thinker whose work is engaged extensively in four of the five chapters this dissertation comprises, gives three criteria for a useful text that “is not the resolution to a problem, but the elaboration, to the very end, of the necessary implications:”³

A worthy book is written only if (1) you think that the books on the same or a related subject fall into a sort of general *error* (polemical function of a book); (2) you think that something essential about the subject has been *forgotten* (inventive function); (3) you consider that you are capable of creating a new *concept*

³ Deleuze 1991, quoted in Dosse 2010, 111-12.

(creative function). Of course, that's the quantitative minimum: an error, an oversight, a concept... Henceforth, for each of my books, abandoning necessary modesty, I will ask myself, (1) which error it claims to correct, (2) which oversight it wants to repair, and (3) what new concept it has created.⁴

To bluntly summarize my aspirations for the present text in line with Deleuze's criteria, then, this dissertation (1) exposes and addresses how prevailing analyses of antiblackness—those from humanist, materialist, and afropessimist perspectives—conceive of it as a purely or fundamentally *psychic* phenomenon or force (polemical and corrective function), (2) re-articulates the critique of antiblackness with materialist analysis by elaborating antiblackness as an immanent, material (aesthetic) process (inventive and reparative function), and (3) creates and develops the concepts of *fundamental accumulation* and/as the *prohibition of capacity* as tools with which to read artistic works and to consider the possibilities for an *antimmanent* politics of black liberation. That these functions of the dissertation are carried out via a transdisciplinary approach and mixed methodology of theory and analysis of artistic works will, I hope, enrich the arguments and concepts that compose them.

To formulate two overarching themes that animate the proceeding chapters, in broad strokes and without here providing the accompanying full arguments, the theorization of immanent material antiblackness involves a procedure by which I render the binarism basic to structure and form—or what in the following chapters I identify as differentiation or difference itself—as immanent; and vice versa, immanence itself as this most basic binarism. If this sounds close to the immanence (or univocity) of Deleuze's "difference and repetition," there is a crucial

⁴ Deleuze, letter to Arnaud Villani; quoted in Dosse 2010, 112; emphasis original.

deviation here. Namely that, as I argue, immanent differentiation is both material and antiblack. The “rule of two” (see below) is antiblack, and it is materially immanent/immanence. To some, this might seem to imply an aporia of *undecidability* between the (human) One and the (antiblack) binary—and subsequently or “dialectically,” between antiblack immanence and (anti-)antiblack differentiation,... Following along via Derridean protocols, this might result in a conception of antiblackness as *hauntology*. But it is precisely my aspiration, not to uncover such antinomial ghostings (which tend to neutralize politics in favor of the impotence of the ethical), but rather to make a theoretical-critical contribution to a preparation for the utter dissolution of (antiblack) immanent distinction, in real material practice.

In current popular discourse and culture, antiblackness seems to stand in all the roles listed at the outset of this introduction, as the term is mobilized with increasing frequency by a variety of progressivist and liberal discourses in a variety of contexts where long standing assumptions about race and racism are being challenged. As the term has begun to displace or at least supplement the more ‘traditionally’ deployed terms “white supremacy” and “racism,” “antiblackness” seems to offer a specificity and a demarcation that invokes the political more immediately and more definitively. In scholarly discourse generally, the concept of *antiblackness* is also increasingly invoked and mobilized, if not always with a precise theoretical delimitation of the concept.⁵ If the cultural push to “center black voices” or “center blackness,” accelerated if

⁵ At the most general level of “scholarly discourse,” examples are far too numerous to delineate clearly. The first ten unique results of a university library search for “anti-black” give an idea of the diverse and widespread applications of the concept: Jaime Amparo Alves, *The Anti-Black City: Police terror and black urban life in Brazil* (2018); Bruce A. Glasrud, *Anti-Black Violence in Twentieth-Century Texas* (2015); Wille Jamaal Wright, “As Above, So Below: Anti-Black Violence as Environmental Racism,” *Antipode*, Vol. 53, no. 3 (2021); Vanessa V. Volpe, et. al,

already well underway by the wake of the 2020 George Floyd uprisings, tends to result in the popular and critical foregrounding of *black joy* and *black agency* on one side, and *black suffering* and *black death* on the other, *antiblackness* has become the central concept with which to understand the latter of these tendencies.⁶ In its popular, scholarly, and/or critical usage, *antiblackness* tends to name a particular *logic*—the domain of which ranges from the psychic to the cultural to the institutional—that repeatedly and recursively posits blackness as abject and unvalued, the object of fear and hatred, or of unlimited use without consequence.

Over the past two decades, the ensemble of theoretical perspectives and texts known as *afropessimism* has, more than any other critical tendency, attempted to theorize antiblackness most extensively and incisively, precisely in terms of the specificity and function of black

“Anti-Black Structural Racism Goes Online: A Conceptual Model for Racial Health Disparities Research,” *Ethnicity & Disease* 31, no. Suppl (2021); John David Smith, ed., *Anti-abolition tracts and anti-Black stereotypes* (1993)[!]; “Arghavan Salles, et. al, “Everyone Must Address Anti-Black Racism in health Care: Steps for Non-Black health Care Professionals to Take,” *JAMA: the journal of the American Medical Association* 326, no. 7 (2021); Matthieu Chapman, *Anti-black racism in early modern English drama: the other “other”* (2017); Danielle King, et. al, “Research on Anti-Black Racism in Organizations: Insights, Ideas, and Considerations,” *Journal of Business and Psychology* 38, no. 1 (2023); Della V Mosley, et. al, “Critical Consciousness of Anti-Black Racism: A Practical Model to Prevent and Resist Racial Trauma,” *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 68, no. 1 (2021); Janet Dees, ed., *A Site of Struggle: American Art Against Anti-Black Violence* (2022).

⁶ On articulations of *black joy* in popular media see, for example, the twitter hashtag #BlackJoy; Tracy M. Lewis-Giggetts, *Black Joy: Stories of Resistance, Resilience, and Restoration* (2022); Elaine Nichols, “Black Joy: Resistance, Resilience and Reclamation” (at the website of the National Museum of African American History & Culture, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/black-joy-resistance-resilience-and-reclamation>). For a scholarly engagement with black joy at a more critical register see, for example, Lindsey Stewart, *The Politics of Black Joy: Zora Neale Hurston and Neo-Abolitionism* (2021). Christina Sharpe’s (2016) concept of *black care* seems to me a more salutary development than *black joy*, while not totally unrelated. For popular media articulations of black suffering and death, one need look no farther than the mainstream, independent, and diy media coverage of the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and the countless other black people murdered via police and vigilante antiblack violence before and after 2020. Recent popular films such as Steve McQueen’s *Twelve Years a Slave* (2013) and Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* (2017), among others, also engage antiblack dynamics from differing perspectives.

suffering and the ubiquity and “gratuitousness” of black death within an inherently antiblack world. Arguing that antiblackness constitutes the primary structuring principle of the modern world, the theoretical intervention of afropessimism, led most visibly by Frank Wilderson III and Jared Sexton, first manifested within critical scholarly discourse in a special journal section and cluster of journal articles in 2003, and an extended dialogue between Sexton and Fred Moten that staged a debate between afropessimism and “black optimism,” respectively, between 2008 and 2013.⁷ These followed “On the Question of Nigga Authenticity” (1994) by Ronald Judy, which implied a radical politics maximally defiant to the politics of respectability, and *On Black Men* (2000) by David Marriott, which elaborated a contemporary psychoanalytic treatment of the omnipresence of antiblack violence within psychic relationality and the position of the black man as phobogenic object within the libidinal economy of the twentieth century United States. In 2008, Sexton published *Amalgamation Schemes*, a critique of the antiblack logic of multiracialism, and Wilderson then published the initial definitive statement of afropessimism with his 2010 volume *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. Various critical texts by self-proclaimed afropessimists including Wilderson and Sexton, and those explicitly influenced by afropessimism, followed. These include, importantly, Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), and Calvin Warren’s *Ontological terror:*

⁷ “Dossier on History, Representation, and the Impossible Subject of Race,” *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003), includes articles by Jared Sexton and Huey Copeland, David Marriott, Kara Keeling, Copeland, Neferti X. M. Tadiar, and visual “Frames” by Hank Willis Thomas. Steve Martinot and Jared Sexton’s “The Avant-Garde of White Supremacy,” Wilderson’s “Gramsci’s Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?” and Sexton’s “The Consequence of Race Mixture: Racialised Barriers and the Politics of Desire” appeared in *Social Identities* 9, no. 2 (2003). For Sexton’s and Moten’s conversation between “afro-pessimism” and “black optimism,” see: Moten, “The Case of Blackness” (2008), “Black Op” (2008), “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)” (2013); and Sexton, “The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism” (2011), “Ante-Anti-Blackness: Afterthoughts” (2012).

blackness, nihilism, and emancipation (2018). Also important is the 2018 special issue titled *Afro-Pessimism and Black Feminism*, co-edited by M. Shadee Malaklou and Tiffany Willoughby-Herard—especially Patrice D. Douglass’s “Black Feminist Theory for the Dead and Dying,” which elaborates the converging “pessimisms” of black feminism and afropessimism.⁸ Wilderson’s second statement of afropessimism as a “metacritical lense” came in 2020 with the mass-marketed memoir-theory hybrid *Afropessimism*.

Summarily, afropessimism argues that the essential and worldwide antagonism of non-Blacks (or humans) toward Blacks, understood generically as *antiblackness*, grounds, enables, and sustains all political- and libidinal-economic conflicts, such as those between workers and capital, women and patriarchy, colonized and colonizer, indigenous and settler-colonialist, people of color and white supremacy, gays and lesbians and homophobia, etc. Antiblackness is essential to (non-black) humanity because, by bonding social death (or slaveness) and blackness to each other as the creation of blackness, it produces the not-human or anti-human figure that anchors human coherence and meaning across psychic and political-economic fields—even while specific historical institutional and systemic manifestations of antiblackness vary according to local dispensations.⁹ In this formulation, the concept *social death* is borrowed and developed

⁸ *Theory and Event* 21, no. 1 (2018). “Each offering an unflinching analysis of the world that rendered Korryn’s [Korryn Gaines, a black mother who attempted to defend herself and her five-year-old son against the Baltimore SWAT in 2016] vulnerability absolute, the world she resisted, and the world that misunderstood and failed her. The afterlife of slavery breeds the necessity to remember Black women, like Korryn, so she is not held as collateral damage of an articulation of gender that theorizes her into a void... Gender is a category for Humans. The violence of ungendering is a domain for the captive, those who died in the hold of the ship and continue dying by the wayside of gender.” Douglass (2018, 199).

⁹ This thesis is formulated throughout Wilderson’s work. For example: “Human life is dependent on Black death for its existence and for its conceptual coherence. There is no world without Blacks, yet there are no Blacks who are in the world. The Black is indeed a sentient being, but the hobble of Humanist thought is a constitutive disavowal of Blackness as social death, a disavowal that theorizes the Black as a degraded human entity... The essential antagonism,

from Orlando Patterson’s sociological account of slavery, as discussed below.¹⁰ For afropessimism, the “contingent violence” of human conflict, resolution, and the potential for restoration, is thus possible only via the enabling material ground and conceptual contradistinction with its absence or impossibility in blackness, the latter which is characterized by a “grammar of suffering” of “gratuitous violence;” intra-human conflict and development relies upon antiblack antagonism as its precondition.¹¹

Furthermore, the grounding of human conflict in antiblack antagonism should be understood not only by analytically contrasting black and non-black subject positions and their attendant narratives and “grammars of suffering,” but also by considering the way the conflict/antagonism dualism exists *within* subjects, saturating the entire psyche, while manifesting differently in unconscious and conscious realms, and with different psychic implications for black and non-black subjects. So while non-black political progressives may

therefore, is not between the workers and the bosses, not between settler and the Native, not between the queer and the straight, but between the living and the dead” (Wilderson 2020, 228-9).

¹⁰ Patterson understands the condition of the slave to comprise three elements: violent domination, natal alienation, and general dishonor (see below). Patterson 1984, 13.

¹¹ Wilderson 2010, 2020. I rely on Wilderson’s formulation of the afropessimist perspective for this summary, and throughout this dissertation. He is the author who has been most concerned with consolidating afropessimism as a discrete discursive formation and theoretical perspective, followed by Sexton who has also written and commented on “afropessimism” as a critical lens. See Sexton, “Afro-pessimism: the unclear word,” 2016.

The briefest bibliography of afropessimism, focusing on the work of Wilderson and Sexton, would include Wilderson’s, *Red, White & Black* (2010), and *Afropessimism* (2020), and Sexton’s “People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery” (2010), “The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism” (2011), and “The Vel of Slavery: Tracking the Figure of the Unsovereign” (2014). Additionally, “Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction” is a free reader widely available on the internet. See <https://libcom.org/library/afro-pessimism-introduction>. On the implications of antiblackness as forcibly internalized in the black psyche, see, following Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008), David Marriott, *On Black Men* (2000), and Wilderson, (2020). Wilderson develops the concept of “grammars of suffering” in *Red, White & Black* (2010).

work consciously to ‘dismantle racism’, their unconscious sense of humanity is nonetheless replenished by the horrifying spectacle of antiblack violence. And while members of the black working class *experience* exploitation, alienation, and subsumption just as all other subjects of capitalism, their essential *condition* is social death.¹² Afropessimism takes this arrangement of political- and libidinal-economy as constitutive of *the world*, structured and constrained at its most basic by the relational dynamic of antiblackness. Echoing Fanon (in *Black Skin, White Masks*) and Césaire (in *Discourse on Colonialism*), it thus calls for the world’s destruction.¹³

Despite its polarizing nature—or perhaps via the propulsive energy generated by that polarization—afropessimism seems to be at least partly responsible for the increased engagement with *antiblackness* across popular and critical cultures over the past two decades,¹⁴ while also attracting much more than its fair share of *hate*—if “antiblackness” as a term and locus of analysis has ascended within popular discourse, especially over the past decade, it has been to the general chagrin (if not outrage) of many Marxists, socialists, (white and “intersectional”) feminists, and decolonialist influencers and academics, yielding a plethora of bad faith, and just *bad* critiques of afropessimist analysis which refuse to engage the terms of its argument, instead rejecting it outright for its “race reductionism,” its perceived affective and imagined practical-

¹² See specifically Marriott 2000 and Wilderson 2020. Marriott does not utilize Patterson’s concept of social death, but relies on psychic and psychoanalytic categories.

¹³ Afropessimism defers any description, definition, strategy, or “plan” of/for the destruction of the world. It would exceed “revolution” as understood traditionally by Marxism, but may not necessarily be heterogeneous from a “Black Revolution” as genealogically related to that of Haiti (1791-1804).

¹⁴ Winters, “Afropessimism’s Contribution to Black Studies” (2020). Wilderson’s third book, *Afropessimism*, was marketed (and arguably, composed) for a mass market and was longlisted by the 2020 National Book Awards for nonfiction.

political effects, accusing afropessimist theory of perpetuating neoliberal, identitarian, and even old-school “upward mobility” ideologies.¹⁵

Nevertheless, within Black Studies, afropessimism’s reception has contributed to a revived interest and re-reading of the work of Frantz Fanon, and a re-emphasizing of blackness’s antagonistic relation to whiteness and the non-black, both within political (and ontological) rather than cultural terms.¹⁶ At the same time, however, that these effects have been absorbed as a tendency within the field, it is often without a thoroughgoing attending to the full implications of the afropessimist argument. For example, in their 2019 article “Black Fugitivity Un/Gendered,” Marquis Bey “will grudgingly concede that ‘the Black,’ ... is non-being, a non-ontology.”¹⁷ While Bey’s primary interlocutor in this essay is Hortense Spillers (also a primary influence on afropessimism, as I account for below), this is a clear concession to afropessimism. But Bey is not interested in tracing the implications that follow in their own (otherwise compelling) elaboration of the articulations and co-valences of blackness and transness (and the materialization of these in what Bey terms “traniflesh”). Instead, denying that the “non-being” of blackness constitutes “an incapacity or absolute abjection,” they insist that, somehow, “this non-being” constitutes “a becoming that torques the very texture of how we come to exist and opens up existence to the primary avenue of non-recognition.”¹⁸ How can non-ontology so quickly and

¹⁵ Reed 2022. See also Olaloku-Teriba (2018), Okoth (2020), Sanchez (2022). Nick Mitchell, in his 2020 review/critique of Wilderson’s *Afropessimism*, gives a more salient if opposing account. However, his critique seems strangely to rely on a criticism of what he sees as Wilderson’s improper blending of theory and memoir as distinct genres.

¹⁶ Regarding afropessimism’s reading of Fanon, see Wilderson (2010), and Marriott, *Whither Fanon?: studies in the blackness of being* (2018).

¹⁷ Bey 2019, 59.

¹⁸ Bey 2019, 59.

easily transform into a plenitudinous, if “para-ontological,” becoming?¹⁹ Bey here seems either to take *non-being* (and, therefore, *being* also) in an *ontic* sense—which would completely undercut the meaning of the preceding “concession,” and of this appropriation of ontological terminology altogether—or to demonstrate a kind of poor Derridianism, in which an *aporia* surfaces to neutralize a core difficulty for the author’s critical-theological itinerary, while itself remaining below the critical radar—the ostensible *aporia* here being one between *becoming* and *non-being*. Or, perhaps Bey has a *dialectics* of non-being and becoming in mind. In any event, this problem is left undeveloped and passed over in a hasty effort to articulate the *capacity* of black-transness as a becoming of “multiplicity and subversion”²⁰ that “offers different formations and matterings, different and differing subjectivities, of material and symbolic life.”²¹ Bey’s desire to frame blackness in the language of non-being—which indicates their indebtedness to afropessimism’s re-reading of Fanon’s (2008) insight into the non-congruence of blackness and ontology, coupled with their insistence on “traniflesh” as “an otherwise way of being,”²² demonstrates their unwillingness to fully acknowledge and assimilate the “agreement” between afropessimism and Moten’s black optimism on the “absolute abject” status of blackness. As summarized by Sexton:

To speak of black social life *and* black social death, black social life *against* black social death, black social life as black social death, black social life in black social death—all of this is to find oneself in the midst of an argument that is also a

¹⁹ One approach would be via a Deleuzian account of the constant interaction between being (or the actual) and non-being (or the virtual). But this does not seem to be what Bey has in mind. I critique the equation of antiblack domination with Deleuzian non-being, as formulated by Barber, in Chapter 2, below.

²⁰ Bey 2019, 61.

²¹ Bey 2019, 57.

²² Bey 2019, 57.

profound agreement, an agreement that takes shape in (between) *meconnaissance* and (dis)belief. Black optimism is not the negation of the negation that is afro-pessimism, just as black social life does not negate black social death by vitalizing it. A living death is as much a death as it is a living. Nothing in afro-pessimism suggests that there is no black (social) life, only that black life is not social life in the universe formed by the codes of state and civil society, of citizen and subject, of nation and culture, of people and place, of history and heritage, of all the things that colonial society has in common with the colonized, of all that capital has in common with labor—the modern world system. Black life is not lived in the world that the world lives in, but it is lived underground, in outer space. This is agreed. That is to say, what Moten asserts against afro-pessimism is a point already affirmed by afro-pessimism, is, in fact, one of the most polemical dimensions of afro-pessimism as a project: namely, that black life is not social, or rather that black life is *lived* in social *death*. Double emphasis, on lived and on death. That’s the whole point of the enterprise at some level. It is all about the implications of this agreed upon point where arguments (should) begin, but they cannot (yet) proceed.²³

The political import of afropessimism only becomes apparent when this point is agreed upon. At that point, the imperative status of Fanon’s call to destroy the world comes clearly into focus, even if a concrete description of the practical unfolding of such “destruction” remains deferred by theory. Without arriving at this point of agreement, however, what emerges instead is an imperative to *work around* the worldly “non-being” or abjectness of blackness—either by way of

²³ Sexton 2012, 7-8.

flat rejection and a retreat into the inadequacies (for analyzing antiblack domination) of historical materialism, decolonization, etc., or by taking refuge in the aporetic invention of ontological “alternatives,” “alterities,” and “otherwise” modes of resistance that seem always to rely on a reinvention of *the politics of everyday life*.²⁴

Notwithstanding the strength and influence of the afropessimist argument—not only in reorienting discussions of anti/blackness toward the frame of “political-ontology,” as evidenced by Bey above—it is important to note that in order to make its argument, afropessimism locates the black “absence” of human capacity and relationality primarily within the *psyche*, and only secondarily within material processes. It is the psychic need of the human as such (white and non-black) to locate her own absence or antithesis as proximate and present—in the flesh—thereby obtaining, through the structural dynamic of opposition, coherence and capacity for (her) (self-)meaning, life, value, presence, order, interest, that defines *antiblackness itself* for afropessimism. This psychic necessity, elaborated through contingent historical conditions over the past one and a half millenia of human devolution, manifests as racial antiblackness, whereby violence against those identified as racially black is generalized, ritualized, and rendered both spectacular and quotidian, in various local patterns, and serves within the Modern as what Wilderson describes as the bedrock of civil society.²⁵ Or as Calvin Warren puts it in early Heideggerian terms, blackness—“as commodity, object, slave, putative backdrop, prisoner, refugee, and corpse—is the quintessential tool that Dasein uses” to experience itself as thrownness in the world.²⁶ Whether structuralist or otherwise, the location of this binary

²⁴ Wilderson might diagnose this as part of the “politics of culture,” as opposed to the “culture of politics” that he intends for afropessimism to help authorize and proliferate. Wilderson 2020, 202-3.

²⁵ Wilderson 2003, 2003b, 2010.

²⁶ Warren 2018, 14.

opposition between the Black and the human either within the psyche (Wilderson, Marriott), within Dasein (Warren), or within being (Sharpe, Moten),²⁷ effectively de-materializes antiblackness—at least in the absence of an explicit rethinking of the psychic, existential, or ontological realms themselves along materialist lines. This is ironic, since structuralist semiotics—the main theoretical framework of afropessimism, as detailed below—served a half century earlier as an essential component and motivator for both “structural Marxism” and “poststructuralist” attempts to bring psychoanalysis and Marxist materialism into alignment with each other after the failings of earlier “Freudo-Marxisms.” In other words, in its theorization of antiblackness’s emergence and proliferation, afropessimism ends up explaining *why* humanity is integrally antiblack. And the *reason* is an immaterial psychic proclivity that is only secondarily filtered through the material contingencies of human history and historicity.

Building on the insights and interventions of afropessimism,²⁸ this dissertation is an attempt to theorize antiblackness—to answer the question *what is antiblackness?*—in a more rigorously materialist manner. At the largest scale this involves two main corrections (the first of which is not a novel contribution, the second of which is): 1) I insist on materialism, not as the mere privileging of *matter* (let alone of the *physical*) over the *ideal*, but rather materialism as the privileging of *force* or *process* as ontologically and politically primary; 2) I locate antiblackness—which retains its binary-opposition functionality or core—as immanently distributed within and throughout material processes. This immanentization of antiblackness

²⁷ “Always, Black being seems lodged between cargo and being” (Sharpe 2016, 110-111); see also Moten (2013), “Blackness and nothingness: mysticism in the flesh.”

²⁸ While I use the name *afropessimism* here to indicate the most direct theoretical influence on my thinking, the insights and interventions of thinkers previous to or adjacent to afropessimism as a discursive formation are also crucial. Specifically, Black feminists such as Hortense Spillers and Saidiya Hartman, who do not necessarily see themselves as afropessimist scholars, supply foundational insights and concepts for my project, as they do for so many others. See below.

mandates the removal of its ontological origin from within the psyche (or Dasein, presence, being, etc.) and re-replaces it *everywhere*, as that within which we move and that which flows through us.

Against all-too familiar *humanist* discourses of racial equality—which assume a universal being, presence, or Dasein for all *homo sapiens* or human animals, and tend to privilege the psyche or consciousness as the location of racist “bias”—afropessimism mounts an unapologetically binarist analysis, drawing a clear political-ontological line between the humanity from and to which flow rights, consent, capacity, and relationality, and the Blacks/slaves who function collectively and individually as the global anti-human, thereby grounding human coherence in its contrary.²⁹ What I am calling “binarism” may be thought of as what philosopher and Media Studies author Alexander Galloway has called “the rule of two:” the presupposition of “an ever-present discretization into two or more parts” that, even when articulated into a relation or a whole, remain distinct.³⁰ Each of the terms—for afropessimism, the human and the Black—is meaningless, useless on its own, without its oppositional counterpart. The terms only receive meaning and use within the overall arrangement, which “generates a transcendental essence within a symbolic order” that “supersedes the merely

²⁹ Oxfordreference.com defines “binarism” as: “1) The ontological division of a domain into two discrete categories or polarities, e.g. mind/body or active/passive. *See also* binary opposition. 2) A loaded term applied by critics to what they regard as the obsessive dualism of structuralists such as Lévi-Strauss and Jakobson.”

<https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095506246>.

³⁰ Galloway 2022, 226. “[E]ven as combinatory wholes, such ratios never elide the two elements that form them. As in music, two voices may sing the harmony of the fifth interval, yet they will forever remain two voices. There is no fifth outside of the two, just as there is no more reduced form of 3:2 than the two arithmetical atoms that compose it.”

homogenous substrate of elements.”³¹ Such binarism is a distinct feature of structuralism, and both of these terms characterize the nature of afropessimism’s intervention.³²

Moreover, this distinction between humanism and binarism illustrates a long standing division within thinking and politics of resistance to racism. There is a whole diversity of humanist antiracisms that maintain the category of the human as both a source and horizon for politics, insisting on the totality or indivisibility, the *oneness* of human kind. What I am calling binarist antiracisms, on the other hand, prioritize the division between races—or in particular between Blacks and whites, or Blacks and non-Blacks: *the color line*—as both source and horizon, setting the tone for what is often popularly interpreted as a more “negative” approach. While humanist orientations imply and employ “positive” political slogans of “unity” and have often reproduced ideological calls for “peaceful” “resolutions” to “race relations,” binarist antiracisms highlight stark division and the role of violence, both in existing racist structures or systems, and for political praxes of liberation. “One approach seeks reconciliation by alleviating tension while the other approach heightens the tension to the point of dissolution.”³³ Non-violence as a strategy here emerges as humanist “politics” par excellence, decrying the use of violence towards fellow beings or humans (even if they would otherwise seem to be the “enemy”) as unethical, and relying strategically on the notion of the opposition’s recognition of a mutual humanity. So, as opposed to the (early) non-violent politics of Martin Luther King Jr.,

³¹ Galloway 2022, 227.

³² Wilderson draws explicitly from structural linguistics and semiotics to make this argument, usually without citing specific structuralist authors. On the “oppositional” ground of linguistic meaning, see the works of Saussure, Greimas (the “semiotic square”), Roman Jakobson, et al. I analyze afropessimism’s structuralist orientation and methodology in detail below.

³³ Winters 2020. Winters is contrasting, according to Wilderson’s (2020) formulation, *denouement* and *abolition*. The characterization also describes *humanist* and *binarist* approaches to struggle against antiblack racism.

which involved the strategic and tactical practice of non-violence and maintained an ideology of unity in transcendence and vision of the future (social) and past (religious) oneness of humanity, we can enlist the binarist approach of Malcom X or the Black Panther Party in its identification of a *we*—black people—fighting against an enemy—the white oppressor who institutes systematic and violent apparatuses of domination to differentially enrich white America while immiserating black communities. Such an analysis led both Malcolm X and the BPP to the development of strategies and diversities of tactics (both “violent” and “non-violent”) that worked to increase the power of black people collectively and to defend against and defeat (when necessary, violently) the oppressor—the political goal being to *eliminate* the oppressor from black communities.³⁴ Indeed, the political itself seems to presuppose binarism at some level, as a “we” and an “enemy” are prerequisites to any real political formation; even a Marxist or communist political struggle against “class society” or against “the capitalist value form” requires recognition of *the capitalist, the state, the police, the bourgeoisie*, etc., as an enemy agent against who’s apparatuses, instituted systems, and repression the communist revolutionary intervenes—otherwise the would-be revolutionary cadre or collective (or less idealistically the would-be party of politics) is left with an *ethics*, a social program, a moral code.³⁵ As Galloway puts it, *the rule of two* “is the mechanism of negation, of the confrontation of the *two*, of breaking

³⁴ See, additionally, Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (2004), especially Chapter 1 “On violence.”

I have taken MLK and Malcolm X as a contrasting pair to demonstrate this difference between humanist and binarist approaches, simply because the contrast is so recognized in the U.S. popular imagination. This, despite the still largely unobserved and undigested *convergence* between MLK and Malcolm that developed in the years immediately before Malcolm X’s assassination and between that and the assassination of King.

³⁵ Of course, it is also possible for an *enemy* and a *we* to be identified *without* any real political content or intervention. This is precisely the state of U.S. electoral politics and political parties for the past fifty years—or rather, in the last analysis, this describes the form and function of parliamentary politics *period*.

with the present state of affairs... of the event, and thus of a political confrontation more generally.”³⁶ If binarism yields the political, then humanism, as an invocation of “the one,” is a turn away from politics and towards the ethical,³⁷ recognizable in its call for performances of “doing, action, production, creativity, experimentation, and pragmatism”³⁸ over critique, material confrontation, and violence, the latter which it seeks to devalorize.³⁹

A humanist approach to the analysis of racism is perhaps most clearly recognizable in approaches that focus on a critique of whiteness, such as “Whiteness Studies” or “Critical Whiteness Studies,” whose foregrounding of concepts like “white privilege” (originally “white skin privilege”) assumes the existence of a unitary humanity which is unjustly and erroneously differentiated and asymmetrically invested via race and racism. Even the concept of “white supremacy,” while not devoid of analytic value, seems to articulate a similar assumption—as if “race” could in fact exist as a social category—black, white, yellow, red...—without its conjunction with “supremacy,” that is, without power and violence effecting differential or hierarchical relations “between races.” In the context of such humanist political-critical horizons, even the critique of “institutional racism,” originally elaborated by Kwame Ture (then Stokely Carmichael) and Charles Hamilton in their treatise on “Black Power” and “Liberation”⁴⁰ (which includes a chapter critiquing “the myth of coalition”) becomes a means for the reform(ation) of existing structures—an easy slide into the contemporary landscape of “diversity, equity, and

³⁶ Galloway 2022, 232. For Galloway, “binarism” and “the rule of two” both describe the category of *the digital*, which he juxtaposes to *the analog* or “the one.”

³⁷ Galloway 2022, 211.

³⁸ Galloway 2022, 219.

³⁹ Although the philosophical underpinnings of his account differ fundamentally from the Deleuzian perspective drawn in this dissertation, Alain Badiou provides a harsh and compelling condemnation of *ethics* (as opposed to the political) that is worth mentioning. See Badiou, *Ethics: an essay on the understanding of evil* (2001).

⁴⁰ Carmichael 1967.

inclusion.” This describes contemporary (humanist) antiracist *ethics*, in which institutions must merely be made more *equitably accessible* (in the language of hegemonic neoliberal discourse), and “privileged” individuals must simply “do the work” of working on themselves. Humanism thus functions for liberal antiracism in much the same way it does for politically liberal socialism: the ideological figure of humanity facilitates the coalition of otherwise antagonistic ‘races’ (parallel to ‘classes’ for socialism) in the service of the demand for a more equitable redistribution of social goods, thereby avoiding any real political challenge to the material relations that create and reproduce racial hierarchy (or for socialism, the capitalist value form). Political confrontation is converted into a universal ethical call.

White supremacy thus becomes the watchword for humanist antiracism, indicating the mistaken and unjust privileging of whiteness or white people over humanity itself, over *the rest* of humanity (the non-white “majority”). Hence, while the field of Critical Whiteness Studies usefully denaturalizes whiteness, analyzing its often invisible or transparent role in motivating and enforcing racist hierarchies, its humanist presuppositions foreground whiteness and white supremacy as the fundamental feature and cause of “racial disharmony” and racial inequality, even while articulating white supremacy variously to other social dynamics and conflicts such as capitalism and patriarchy.⁴¹ The grounding assumption of most if not all modes of critical

⁴¹ See, for example: Peggy McIntosh (1989, in Rothenberg 2016), “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack;” Ruth Frankenberg (1993), “White women, race matters: the social construction of whiteness;” Theodore Allen (1994), “The invention of the white race;” Noel Ignatiev (1995, 2022), “How the Irish became White,” “Treason to Whiteness is loyalty to humanity;” David Roediger (2007), “The wages of whiteness: race and the making of the American working class.” Humanist opposition against whiteness and white supremacy facilitates an ethical call rather than a political confrontation *across* the varying and diverse critical projects that intersect in whiteness studies. For instance, in Ignatiev’s analysis, the call to “defect” from the ranks of whiteness manifests as an ethic or moral responsibility, which then enables the *real* political work of organizing against capital. On the other hand, in *Being White, Being Good* (2010), Barbara Applebaum labors to formulate a “white complicity pedagogy” that

whiteness studies, whether explicitly stated or implied, is thus that white supremacy prevents us all from accessing our “natural” transcendence as *humans*.

Unfortunately, the prevailing left-initiated critiques of humanist antiracism, which are themselves barely or rarely capable of embracing an antihumanist perspective, tend to fetishize the humanist’s neglect of capitalist class antagonisms, thus jumping head first into a stalemate of “race reductionist” vs. “class reductionist” argumentation that remains unresolved and undiminished with the amplification of “identity” via discourses of “intersectionality.” Absent from the resulting discursive milieu is any acknowledgment of the forceful critique of humanism found in the “structural Marxism” of the 1960s and 70s, usually associated with Althusser, but also manifest in non-“orthodox” Marxisms from Germany, others in France, and even from North America.⁴² This absence indicates a critical naiveté (perhaps even an old-school *idealism*)

may replace the insufficient and problematic “white privilege pedagogies” that continue to enjoy hegemonic status in progressive education theory and practice. Applebaum frames her intervention with the question: “What can it mean for white people ‘to be good’ when they can reproduce and maintain a racist system even when, and especially when, they believe themselves to be good?” (4). Thus, her analysis seems initially to promise a critique of moral and ethical frameworks of personal responsibility as insufficient for the real struggle against racism, but ultimately it merely offers a “better” version of moral and ethical responsibility discourse: introducing “white complicity pedagogy” in the book’s last chapter, Applebaum asks, “What does ‘good’ look like now?” (180). She answers that “complicity can serve as a framework for pedagogy that aims at... doing whiteness differently” (198). This disappointingly reinstalls the ethical as praxis and, in complicity with the ideologies of contemporary capitalism, equates that with struggle.

I briefly engage the work of the philosopher George Yancy—one of the most compelling practitioners of Critical Whiteness Studies, below.

From a far different critical perspective, Arun Saldanha makes what is ultimately a similar move, subjecting race and racism to a decidedly “rhizomatic” strain of Deleuze-Guattarianism: “A true freaking of whiteness would grasp its lines of light not for fascism but for a future where paler-skinned bodies have no privileged access to economic and cultural capital and to happiness. Freaking whiteness is problem-based, coalition-led, and self-critical; it would try to understand what biophysical and technological forces subtend it (...) [because] [h]umanism and cosmopolitanism are severely limited if the struggle against racism is defined only in human terms” (Saldanha 2009, 198).

⁴² See Endnotes 2010.

on the part of both popular and academic contemporary humanist approaches to the analysis of race and racism, and the enduring seductiveness of humanist ideology—so useful for the preservation of institutions and social relations.

In a much more self-conflicted, and ultimately much richer manner, we might also recognize this differentiation between humanist and binarist approaches in the thematic and analytic contradictions within the oeuvre (and within single texts) of James Baldwin, a black American writer who is quoted and claimed by progressive humanists as often as he is by afroessimist theorists. In novels like *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (1953) and *Another Country* (1962), and critical writing from the same period, Baldwin examines issues of (antiblack) racism and systemic oppression alongside sexuality, while contextualizing them within a theological-teleological, if agonistic, national experience, often centering mutually alienating effects of racism within the interpersonal experiences of fictional multiracial friends and lovers, and gesturing towards the necessity for a national transcendence of racism, if not of race itself. In “Everybody’s Protest Novel” (1955), even while Baldwin rejects “devotion to Humanity” and its complacency with “notoriously bloodthirsty” “Causes,”⁴³ he contrasts that *bad* Humanity (of colonialism, racism, and oppression) with “a devotion to the human being, his freedom and fulfillment,” which he connects to a concept of *authentic truth*.⁴⁴ The exploration of this irreducible truth of the complexity and “paradox” of human freedom, “the power that will free us from ourselves,” is, for Baldwin, the proper vocation of the Novelist—to articulate “this journey toward a more vast reality which must take precedence over all other claims.”⁴⁵ At the end of the

⁴³ Baldwin 1988, 12.

⁴⁴ Baldwin 1988, 12. “Let us say, then, that truth, as used here, is meant to imply a devotion to the human being, his freedom and fulfillment; freedom which cannot be legislated, fulfillment which cannot be charted. This is the prime concern, the frame of reference...”

⁴⁵ Baldwin 1988, 13.

short essay Baldwin makes the stakes of his argument clear, enunciating what today we would recognize as a clear reproduction of the humanist hypothesis:

But our humanity is our burden, our life; we need not battle for it; we need only to do what is infinitely more difficult—that is, accept it. The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended.⁴⁶

In her recent chapter “Deleuze after Afro-Pessimism,” Deleuzian cultural theorist Claire Colebrook claims that this essay of Baldwin’s exposes “both the mythic lure of ‘the human’, and the problem of humanity that humanism occludes” by “covering over the existential trauma of the human” (racism) with “the ideal of human good feeling.” She therefore positions Baldwin as anticipating “the problematic posthumanism of later thinkers like Foucault, Bernard Stiegler and Deleuze and Guattari, who also regard the human and its relation to life as a problem.” For Baldwin, then, as well as “many versions of twenty-first-century posthumanism,” there exist two humanities: “humanity *in its humanist form*” (“sentimentalist” for Baldwin),⁴⁷ and humanity or *the human being* as the horizon and site for truth, meaning, and life. Despite the critique of the former, the latter endures as the sole, if inherently “problematic” and struggle-ridden horizon.

Baldwin deploys a similar logic in an essay written the following decade, this time addressing “the problem of the color line...” without the mediating thematic of literary genre:

⁴⁶ Baldwin 1988, 18.

⁴⁷ Colebrook in Daigle and McDonald 2022, 260-61.

a fearful and delicate problem, which compromises, when it does not corrupt, all the American efforts to build a better world—here, there, or anywhere... What one would not like to see again is the consolidation of peoples on the basis of their color. But as long as we in the West place on color the value that we do, we make it impossible for the great unwashed to consolidate themselves according to any other principle. Color is not a human or a personal reality; it is a political reality. But this is a distinction so extremely hard to make that the West has not been able to make it yet. And at the center of this dreadful storm, this vast confusion, stand the black people of this nation, who must now share the fate of a nation that has never accepted them, to which they were brought in chains. Well, if this is so, one has no choice but to do all in one's power to change that fate, and at no matter what risk... For the sake of one's children,... one must be careful not to take refuge in any delusion—and the value placed on the color of the skin is always and everywhere and forever a delusion. I know that what I am asking is impossible. But in our time, as in every time, the impossible is the least that one can demand—and one is, after all, emboldened by the spectacle of human history in general, and American negro history in particular, for it testifies to nothing less than the perpetual achievement of the impossible.⁴⁸

Baldwin is clear here in his (non-sentamentalist) humanist vision for the national if not civilizational overcoming of racism and race, and he follows earlier writers, especially Ralph Ellison, in positioning “the Negro” as prototypical of the human or national condition. Via the centrality of antiblack racism to the history of the United States and of the West, the Negro

⁴⁸ Baldwin, “Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind,” 1988; 345-46.

emerges as a privileged agent in its ethical and political development (for Ellison, the Negro even bears a unique “responsibility” for the Nation).⁴⁹ While Baldwin does deploy the binary white/black across his work, here this binary is foregrounded only against the background of “human history in general,” which authorizes the (impossible) American transcendence of racism: the overcoming of the political problem of racism and the recognition of a common humanity, “the transcendence of the realities of color, of nations, and of altars.”⁵⁰ For, “[i]f we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others,” are able to maintain “our” struggle towards this *telos*, “we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world.”⁵¹

But Baldwin’s writing is frequently as “paradoxical” as the freedom he celebrates in his most humanist moments. Despite the persistence of humanist framing and orientation, “Down at the Cross” also contains passages that powerfully presage Baldwin’s late turn, and that presage, in fact, the conclusions that afropessimism itself draws. Five pages earlier Baldwin writes:

And I submit, then, that the racial tensions that menace Americans today have little to do with real antipathy—on the contrary, indeed—and are involved only symbolically with color. These tensions are rooted in the very same depths as those from which love springs, or murder. The white man’s unadmitted—and apparently, to him, unspeakable—private fears and longings are projected onto the Negro. The only way he can be released from the Negro’s tyrannical power over

⁴⁹ See Ellison 1955.

⁵⁰ Baldwin 1988, 333.

⁵¹ Baldwin 1988, 346-47.

him is to consent, in effect, to become black himself, to become a part of that suffering and dancing country that he now watches wistfully from the heights of his lonely power and, armed with spiritual traveller's checks, visits surreptitiously after dark.⁵²

For Baldwin, antiblackness is as basic to the psyche as love and hate, and it orients individual and group desire around “the Negro” as *the* (phobic) object (of desire).⁵³ But strikingly, the “solution” Baldwin posits here can only be understood in a political sense; for the white to “become black himself,” thus liberating himself (and the black) from the libidinal arrangement in which he is “tyrannically” imprisoned, real material interventions into the historical conditions of “the Negro problem”⁵⁴ would be necessary. What Baldwin symptomatically does not explore here is the possibility of the Black’s own liberation by “blackening the world” as a political strategy. Drawing out the implications of such a strategy for Black liberation would contrast sharply with the visions of American transcendence that conclude this text (and this task is left to afropessimism). It is rather as if Baldwin, at his core a non-materialist thinker with deep commitments to a framework of transcendence, is pushed by his subject matter and by his experience to move beyond those ideological-conceptual proclivities, but nevertheless can only move so far.

Baldwin’s late works tend to more clearly delineate a differential relation between whiteness and its privileges and black immiseration and death, as well as clearly critiquing the

⁵² Baldwin 1988, 341.

⁵³ Ironically, when Baldwin specifies that “racial tensions—as a social dynamic—are based in “color” merely “*symbolically*,” he is utilizing precisely the psychoanalytic concept (although he uses it here apart from its technical meaning) with which afropessimism will base its formulation of antiblackness. See below.

⁵⁴ Baldwin 1988, 341.

insufficiency of progressivist and legalistic approaches to humanistic social change, even when the latter is conceived of non-sentimentally. The conceptual connections between passages from his last published work, *The evidence of things not seen* (1985), and themes within afropessimism, is even more striking, as Baldwin writes that “Blacks exist, in the American imagination, and in relation to American institutions, in reference to the slave codes. [T]he first legal recognition of our presence remains the most compelling;” “[t]he auction block is the platform on which I entered the Civilized World.”⁵⁵ Pressaging Wilderson’s formulation of the experience of human self-coherence as the ability to know and say “at least I am not Black,”⁵⁶ Baldwin writes, “[i]t is hard to imitate a people whose existence appears, mainly, to be made tolerable by their bottomless gratitude that they are not, thank heaven, you.”⁵⁷ In this respect, Baldwin observes, whites of diverse national origins or “ethnicities” have never “differed among themselves concerning the role and the utility of the Black.”⁵⁸

So, Baldwin’s work overall does include positive formulations of *human being*, anticipating contemporary “problematic posthumanisms” (Colebrook) that retain the category of the human as *the* paradigm for social and political thought and struggle. But it also contains a pessimism towards the assumption of *human being*’s assumed salutary status, an affective exhaustion vis-à-vis the human as the site of political or ethical struggle, and an exposure of the human itself—sans sentimentality and in excess of moralism—as the oppressor par excellence, thus anticipating the analyses of an whole itinerary of black critique, including afropessimism.

⁵⁵ Baldwin 1985, 31, 45-46.

⁵⁶ Wilderson 2020, 219-220.

⁵⁷ Baldwin 1985, 44.

⁵⁸ Baldwin 1985, 32.

Humanist antiracism, as elaborated above along the lines of its essential conceptual contours, provides a general context for, and opponent of, critical interventions that have in common a binarist, if not structuralist disposition. Afropessimism inherits and sharpens that binarist orientation. Thinkers within Black Studies and Africana Studies have, of course, roundly critiqued naïve humanist approaches. Foremost among such critiques, perhaps, Sylvia Wynter's work painstakingly analyzes the historical construction of the human *as Man*, over the course of the Reformation, the Enlightenment and the “age of discovery,” colonialization and new-world slavery, through the twentieth century. For Wynter, Man's “overrepresentation”—that is, the self-representation of the “present ethnoclass (i.e. Western bourgeois)... as if it were the human itself”—prevents the struggle “of securing the well-being, and therefore the full cognitive and behavioral autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves.”⁵⁹ If Wynter retains the category of the human, it is only as a kind of proto-utopian horizon, a presently unknowable community or reality that necessitates the undoing of the global regime of the human as (European, white, landed) Man. This is no simple, nor purely real-political undertaking. Rather, citing a talk given by Aime Césaire on the “half-starved” condition of the natural sciences, Wynter proposes that

Only the elaboration of a new science, beyond the limits of the natural sciences (...), will offer us our last chance to avoid the large-scale dilemmas that we must now confront as a species. This would be a science in which the “study of the Word”—of our narratively inscribed, governing sociogenic principle, descriptive statement, or code of symbolic life/death, together with the overall

⁵⁹ Wynter 2003, 206.

symbolic, representational process to which they give rise—will condition the ‘study of nature’ (Césaire 1946, 1990). The latter as study, therefore (...), of the neurophysiological circuits/mechanisms of the brain that, when activated by the semantic system of each such principle/statement, lead to the specific orders of consciousness or modes of mind in whose terms we then come to experience ourselves as this or that genre/mode of being human. Yet, with this process taking place hitherto outside our conscious awareness, and thereby leading us to be governed by the ‘imagined ends’ or postulates of being, truth, freedom that we lawfully put and keep in place, without realizing that it is we ourselves, and not extrahuman entities, who prescribe them.⁶⁰

It is not necessary to follow Wynter’s turn to the neuro-biological/cognitive sciences in order to appreciate the profundity of her appropriation of Fanon’s concept of the sociogenic and the way she uses it to undermine the ubiquity and ground of the category of the human as received from the European/white Enlightenment tradition.⁶¹ The self-apperception of *homo sapiens* creatures as, or in terms of, individuals who belong to *mankind*—however alienated from that community given individuals may be or feel historically—is unquestionably a product of sociogeny; neither biological nor physiological (for Fanon, neither “phylogenic” nor “ontogenic”), but a “construct” produced through historically contingent forces.⁶² Wynter’s assertion that human apperception as

⁶⁰ Wynter 2003, 328-29.

⁶¹ Although, in following this turn of Wynter’s, an interesting and potentially productive comparison would be with the work of the American philosopher Wilfrid Sellars, and especially the contemporary appropriation of his work by Ray Brassier.

⁶² Wynter’s suggestion of a “study of nature” as necessary for the examination of human apperception as such, with its realist orientation, moves in a direction that informs this dissertation, even if I avoid terminology and procedures of natural science (and positivistic philosophy) in favor of a theoretical protocol that prioritizes forms of analysis not unprecedented within “humanistic” disciplines, while at the same time acknowledging and biding by the

such is a key determining factor for the emergence and maintenance of regimes of power and violence at the global and local levels—from the most brutal regimes of punishment to the biopolitical—is an essential premise that this dissertation works to detail from a specific theoretical perspective.

Wynter shows how the “code of symbolic life/death”⁶³ (an unabashedly structuralist formulation!) has been mobilized over centuries through the development of European social formations—from the medieval theocratic to the colonial to the contemporary post-democratic, producing a series of “epochal redescription[s] of the human” that derive their oppositional coherence via the “systemically instituted” liminal category of “the other.”⁶⁴ This latter, through functioning simultaneously as a part of “empirical reality” *and* as a “signifier of symbolic ‘death’ to the code of symbolic ‘life’,” thereby “exemplif[ies] and actualize[s] the notion of the truly human, or conception of the ideal self.”⁶⁵ Wynter further argues that, as a supplement to every “culture-specific” figure of the ideal self, the symbolic-material death manifested as the liminal negative figure, an “antithetical presence of the [ideal self’s] equally embodied liminal negation,” supplies a “criterion or value” adequate to motivate behavior and orient society across a culture.⁶⁶ Thus, as Wynter writes, “‘normal’ North American identity” is claimed “by the putting of visible distance between [oneself] and the Black population group[,]. . . the group that is still made to occupy the nadir, ‘nigger’ rung of being human. . .”⁶⁷ To answer this situation, Wynter calls for a strategy of “epistemological revolution.” (In this and her scientist turn, Wynter

(Fanonian) principle that the social affects the ontological (sociogeny has *real* effects, effects in/on the real).

⁶³ Wynter 2003, 263.

⁶⁴ Wynter 1996.

⁶⁵ Wynter 1996, 304.

⁶⁶ Wynter 1996, 304. Wynter elaborates variations on this argument across her work.

⁶⁷ Wynter 2003, 261-62.

strangely seems to echo both Althusser's previous reading of the "epistemological break" in Marx, and his formulation of a "scientific Marxism" in the face of the ideological apparatuses of capitalism.) Wynter's epistemological revolution would be coupled with an "epochal second emergence by which 'we-the-underdeveloped' intelligentsia... will seek to *complete* the only 'partial truth' of the West's science" through the achievement of cultural and ideological autonomy.⁶⁸

Wynter thus mounts a powerful critique of the human as Man, a project that she claims involves and affects "all our present struggles with respect to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, struggles over the environment, global warming, severe climate change, the sharply unequal distribution of the earth resources..."⁶⁹ This critique offers a strong structuralist (or rather, "post-structuralist") critique of humanism and the human as they have functioned thus far in the history of world-dominating European epistemology (and political-libidinal economy); rather than positing a universal humanity that must, as a corrective, be made (more) totally inclusive and accessible, Wynter rigorously diagnoses the structural, binomial arrangement of the human world as Mankind, analyzing the violence it necessitates and implies, and proposes a radical break from its apparatuses and structures of consciousness and telos.

Wynter's work clearly informs afropessimism's critical lens, even while she is cited in the afropessimist literature only a handful of times.⁷⁰ And although it has gone virtually unremarked, Wynter's formulation as outlined above bears striking similarities with what is perhaps

⁶⁸ Wynter 1996, 312.

⁶⁹ Wynter 2003, 160-61.

⁷⁰ Wilderson 2020, xi.

afropessimism's chief theoretical influence: the theorization of slavery given by the historical sociologist Orlando Patterson, in his study *Slavery and Social Death* (1982).

Drawing on transhistorical accounts of slave-holding societies,⁷¹ Patterson famously defines the condition of enslavement as one of *social death*, whose three “constituent elements” are *natal alienation*, *total domination*, and *general dishonor*.⁷² In other words, the slave is denied access to ties with her ancestors and descendants, is violently and permanently dominated by her master (or, when the case allows, or calls for it, any master), and is definitively unable to defend or cultivate self-honor within society. These three constituents are clearly tied to power – individual power in the case of the ‘personal’ relation between master and slave, societal power since slaves, individually or collectively, are dominated by society as a whole, and institutionally, in the case of large-scale slave-holding societies and the various historical large-scale slave trades. Patterson demonstrates that, contrary to other understandings of slavery, including those of Hegel and Marx, “[t]here is nothing in the nature of slavery which requires that the slave be a worker. Worker qua worker has no intrinsic relation to slave qua slave.”⁷³ Instead of worker, or rather *means of labor*, the essential role of the slave within a given society is, according to Patterson, a means of personal and social elevation for the master. The slave makes possible “freedom” and “honor” by instituting their opposite poles: domination and dishonor. As Patterson puts it,

⁷¹ Patterson draws evidence from accounts of slave-holding societies of the tribal, antiquity, pre-modern, and modern, throughout the world.

⁷² Patterson 1982, 13.

⁷³ Of course, the slave's condition makes her both qualified and available for a multitude of forms of work, and historically slaves have frequently been used as laborers. Nevertheless, Patterson argues that work is inessential to the slave's condition, pointing out that “most slaves in most precapitalist societies were not enslaved in order to be made over into workers, they may even have been economic burdens on their masters;” Patterson 1982, 99.

[w]hat the captive or condemned person lost was the master's gain. (The real sweetness of mastery for the slavholder lay not immediately in profit, but in the lightening of the soul that comes with the realization that at one's feet is another human creature who lives and breathes only for one's self, as a surrogate for one's power, as a living embodiment of one's manhood and honor)...⁷⁴

As both the real manifestation and cultural signification of power's degree zero, the slave exists within an "institutionalized marginality, *the liminal state* of social death,"⁷⁵ which functions to ensure the coherence of the social system. By nature of her exteriority to social life,⁷⁶ "the very anomaly of the slave emphasized what was most important and stable, what was the least anomalous in the local culture of the non-slave population."⁷⁷

Strikingly, Wynter's formulation seems to echo this account of Patterson's, deploying the same binary arrangement in simultaneously more general and specific terms than Patterson's study of historical "slave societies" (Wynter is theorizing capitalism and colonialism, not only rigidly slave-holding societies; Patterson's historical examples traverse the continuum of history and geography, while Wynter focuses on the dominative tendency of "the West"). Patterson and Wynter converge with the theorization of a liminal category of society's *other*, through which the human-as-Man (Wynter) or Master (Patterson) derives its meaning and power via the primary relation of opposition. As Wynter writes,

⁷⁴ Patterson 1982, 78.

⁷⁵ Patterson 1982, 46; emphasis added.

⁷⁶ Whether she had been captured from an outside population, or condemned to slave status from within society for any of various reasons. See Patterson on "intrusive" and "extrusive" modes of social death. Patterson 1982, 39-45.

⁷⁷ Patterson 1982, 46.

[t]he systemic categories that are everywhere, at the level of empirical reality, the signifier of symbolic ‘death’ to the code of symbolic ‘life,’ embodied by the hegemonic ruling groups of all human orders, serve thereby to exemplify and actualize the notion of the truly human, or conception of the ideal self, about whose ‘governor’ the subjects of each order orient their behaviors. Such a notion cannot be made to signify as a criterion or value, however, without the antithetical presence of its *equally embodied liminal negation*: without therefore the mechanism of *conceptual/existential otherness* that each such category embodies as the signifier of a Laconian [sic] lack-of-being or ‘death.’⁷⁸

In the accompanying footnote to this passage, Wynter makes explicit the structuralist nature of this symbolic economy: “... *representations of symbolic life are the only lives that humans live*. The point made here is that representations can only be experienced as life if they are antithetically counterposed by a *liminal systemic* category that is made to signify symbolic death.”⁷⁹ (Characteristically structuralist features of thought, which Wynter articulates here, will be discussed at length below.) Patterson narrates the slave’s “liminal incorporation” in strikingly similar terms:

[i]nstitutionalized marginality, *the liminal state of social death*, was the ultimate outcome of the loss of natality as well as honor and power... In cultural terms the very anomaly of the slave emphasized what was most important and stable, what was least anomalous in the local culture of the non-slave population... it was

⁷⁸ Wynter 1996, 304; emphasis added.

⁷⁹ Wynter 1996, 315; n27; emphasis added.

precisely what stood at the margins that emphasized the boundaries... The slave, in not belonging, emphasized the significance of belonging.⁸⁰

While Wynter theorizes the liminal *other* category as applicable to diverse social arrangements of theocratic, capitalist, and colonialist relations (including antiblackness as the privileged iteration), Patterson's is an account of the specific relations of domination proper to slavery and slave societies. Another difference between the two is Wynter's inclination towards theorizing not just at higher levels of abstraction, but about the *largest* of social (and even civilizational) relations and tendencies; hers is a critique of the coloniality of "being/power/truth/freedom" themselves.⁸¹ Patterson, on the other hand, seems determined to retain the *individual* as the basic and privileged unit of his sociological account: "We may summarize the argument as follows: slavery is an *individualized* condition of powerlessness, natal alienation, and dishonour represented legally as a condition of propertylessness and *symbolically* as a state of social death."⁸² Despite these largely disciplinary and methodological differences, then, Wynter and Patterson both theorize the human's liminal other as a structural positionality rendered concrete through the material practices of cultures overdetermined by the symbolic order, articulating the binomial production of meaning and coherence within given societies in which the slave/other both embodies and signifies symbolic and social death *so that* the dominant or parasitical group and its individuals may experience what it is to live.

Two other thinkers whom afropessimism draws on extensively and explicitly are the Black feminist theorists Hortense Spillers and Saidiya Hartman. Spillers's widely-cited article

⁸⁰ Patterson 1982, 46-47; emphasis added.

⁸¹ Wynter 2003.

⁸² Patterson 1979, 40; emphasis added.

“Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe; and American Grammar Book” (1987) famously engages most forcefully with psychoanalytic themes from Freud to Lacan, linguistics from Barthes and Todorov. Articulating these discourses with Black and Feminist Studies, Spillers theorizes the social-ontological violence perpetrated via the historical Middle Passage and the political-cultural prospects that present themselves in the wake of that scene’s scrambling of the symbolic orderings of gender and sexuality. While the rest of Spillers’s oeuvre remains, comparatively, largely neglected (by scholars generally, and to some extent afropessimist ones), *Mama’s Baby* functions as a foundational text for afropessimism, which takes the article’s elaboration of the “zero degree of social conceptualization” of *the flesh* as descriptive of the condition of blackness generally and globally.⁸³ Parallel to Wynter and Patterson, Spillers delineates the position of the Black vis-à-vis the dominant culture as the “culturally unmade,” whose *flesh*—the enslaved African’s socially-culturally determined *body* is the initial and enduring loss of captivity—“becomes the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality” through which the white “liberated” subject-position may enjoy his power and freedom (i.e., “pornotropoing”).⁸⁴

Saidiya Hartman’s work, especially her first book *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), provides a fourth theoretical-discursive moment essential for the formation of afropessimism. In it, Hartman reexamines archives of black life and subjugation in the nineteenth century antebellum and post-emancipation South, to interrogate the complicity of “‘will,’ ‘agency,’ ‘individuality,’ and ‘responsibility,’” in the constitution of the subject within the United States’ historical continuity

⁸³ Spillers 2003, 206. Afropessimism disregards the “optimistic” aspects of *Mama’s Baby* in favor of its “pessimistic” depiction of the *flesh*. This is not necessarily a criticism, as I follow their lead in privileging the negativity of the flesh over the article’s optimism for the “insurgent ground of the [black queer] female social subject” (229). Disagreement over readings of the valence of this essay, and of Spillers’s work as a whole, constitutes a flash point within recent conversations in Black Studies and Black Feminism.

⁸⁴ Spillers 2003, 206. I engage this and another of Spillers’s essays in Chapters 2 and 3, below.

of black domination. Hartman's findings suggest a radical critique of key categories of post-Emancipation thought and politics: "From this vantage point, emancipation appears less the grand event of liberation than a point of transition between modes of servitude and racial subjection. As well, it leads us to question whether the rights of man and citizen are realizable or whether the appellation 'human' can be borne equally by all."⁸⁵ Hartman thus uncovers the binary of racialized *freedom* and *servitude* as the enduring ground of both past and present U.S. social-political formations (while casting doubt on the ability of Western political-ontological structures outside the U.S. to escape the same set of dynamics), writing that "the enduring legacy of slavery was readily discernible in the travestied liberation, castigated agency, and blameworthiness of the free individual..."

Apparent here are the entanglements of slavery and freedom and the dutiful submissions characteristic of black subjectivity, whether in the making and maintenance of chattel personal or in the fashioning of individuality, cultivation of conscience, and harnessing of free will.⁸⁶

This antinomy of slavery and freedom is neither subject to dialectical negation of one term by the other—let alone dialectical resolution—nor is it a self-contained and isolated aspect of the past beyond which social relations have since progressed. As Hartman clarifies in an important interview with Wilderson, "I think of the book as an allegory; its argument is a history of the present... 'Not yet free': that articulation is from the space of the twenty-first century, not the nineteenth, ...the same predicament, the same condition."⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Hartman 1997, 6. Hartman here references Wynter directly, citing the latter's "On Disenchanted Discourse: 'Minority Literary Criticism and Beyond'" (1987).

⁸⁶ Hartman 1997, 6-7.

⁸⁷ Hartman and Wilderson 2003, 190-92.

This constellation of afropessimism's antecedents comprises two generations of black theorists, the first no less widely influential than the second is currently celebrated within the critical humanities and adjunct fields (artistic and cultural practice, activism, social media work...). A key commonality to these thinkers' work is a tendency for their differing methodologies to yield a primary binary opposition that is posited as basic to local and global social-political ontologies (even while three of the four—Patterson is the outlier here—appropriate what might be called “post-structuralist” strategies).⁸⁸ These binaries converge around two sides: the black/slave and the white/human. Thus, these thinkers offer a renewed critique of the human—after the mid-late twentieth century critique of humanism associated with Althusser and structuralism more generally—that engages race and antiblackness as its fundamental mode of differentiation,⁸⁹ wherein the *structural* role of the black/slave is to facilitate the derivation of meaning, coherence, and existence for the white/human via an oppositional material-symbolic relation to the abject, subjugated other. In one sense, then, and to simplify to the point of vulgarization, the main innovation afropessimism attempts is to synthesize these structuralist arguments revolving around racism, slavery, embodiment, and the symbolic structuring of the social and political, into a cohesive theoretical program that centers

⁸⁸ In this way, it is novel that Wynter, and Hartman (and, at least in *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe*, Spillers too), while appropriating and innovating on methodologies from “poststructuralist” theorists (variously, Foucault, Kristeva, Barthes, etc.), reinforce the dynamic of antiblack domination *as a basic binary*—a move apparently contrary to common understandings of the very ethos of “postructuralism.” This is in contrast to the *other* “post-structuralist” school of “African-American Studies,” most recognized in the figure of Henry Louis Gates Jr., whom Wynter dedicates space to critiquing. See, for example, Wynter 2006 (109-111).

⁸⁹ Again, with Patterson as an outlier, who, in providing a generic account of slavery, includes race as a historically contingent factor—his first concern is not the antiblack present and its immediate history.

and explains the suffering of contemporary black people. As I will show below, it does this by doubling down on structuralist protocols.

Antiblackness: from structure to immanence

In his short text "How do we Recognize Structuralism?,"⁹⁰ Deleuze outlines six criteria characteristic of structuralist thought, analyzing "a system of echoes" that unites thinkers across disciplines, including Saussure, Jakobson, Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, (early) Foucault, Althusser, Barthes, and Tel Quel.⁹¹ First, Deleuze notes "the discovery and recognition of the symbolic" as essential to structuralism, the distinction and differentiation of the symbolic order from both the real and the imaginary. Secondly, the elements of a structure—that is, of the symbolic as such, "have neither extrinsic designation, nor intrinsic signification." The symbolic is independent of both the real, "to which it would refer and which it would designate," and the imaginary and conceptual, "which it would implicate, and which would give it a signification."⁹² The symbolic elements of a structure "have nothing other than a *sense*," indicating both *meaning* and *direction*, "a sense which is necessarily and uniquely 'positional'."⁹³ This sense is defined by Deleuze's third criterion: the differential and the singular. In differential calculus "dy is totally undetermined in relation to y, and dx is totally undetermined in relation to x: each one has neither existence nor value, nor signification." However, "the relation dy/dx is totally determined, the two elements determining each other reciprocally in the relation."⁹⁴ Such differential

⁹⁰ Deleuze 2004, 170-192.

⁹¹ Deleuze 2004, 170.

⁹² Deleuze 2004, 173.

⁹³ Deleuze 2004, 174.

⁹⁴ Deleuze 2004, 176.

determination is “at the heart” of the symbolic register. Corresponding to this “curve” of (mathematical) differential determination are singularities, “points,” or “so many places in the structure.” While the *differential* “distributes the imaginary attitudes or roles of the beings or objects” that occupy a structure, *singularities* are the very sites or positions that concrete beings “come to occupy.”⁹⁵ These are the positional units or *kin-emes* of Lévi-Strauss’s kinship structures, the bodily “libidinal movements” of Lacanian psychoanalysis (Deleuze is here citing Serge Leclair), or the roles and functions within the productive process, determined by the *relations* of production that “concrete men come to occupy.” The “true subject,” for structuralism, is thus “the structure itself: ...the differential relations and the singular points.”⁹⁶

Based on his first three criteria, Deleuze concludes the fourth, that structures are “real without being actual, ideal without being abstract.”⁹⁷ They are therefore necessarily “unconscious,” and actualized only through “species and parts” in time and space. Structures are thereby “overlaid by their products or effects,” as “an economic structure” is “covered over by the juridical, political and ideological relations with which it is incarnated.” Therefore, “one can only read, find, retrieve the structures through the effects.”⁹⁸ The fifth and sixth characteristics address how structures function or move. Deleuze observes that structures function is *series* of symbolic elements, that always relate to *other series*, capable of autonomous development but forming relations of “*structural homology*” between “systems of differences.”⁹⁹ Deleuze

⁹⁵ Deleuze 2004, 177.

⁹⁶ Deleuze 2004, 178.

⁹⁷ Deleuze 2004, 179.

⁹⁸ Deleuze 2004, 181.

⁹⁹ In this discussion Deleuze again draws on Lévi-Strauss, in his study of totemism, the two series being composed of “animal species taken as elements of differential relations,” and “a series of social positions themselves caught symbolically in their own relations.” Deleuze 2004, 182.

identifies the feature of “the empty square” or “object=x,” the “wholly paradoxical object or element” that “ceaselessly traverses” and circulates within corresponding series, functioning as their “point of convergence.”¹⁰⁰ This point or element of “degree zero” is exemplified by the *letter* in Poe, the *debt* in Freud’s Rat Man case, Lacan’s *dummy hand* in bridge, the painting by Valasquez in Foucault’s opening to *The Order of Things* (1966), the *floating signifier* of “mana” in Lévi-Strauss, the *phallus* of Lacanian psychoanalysis, and *value* within structural Marxism.¹⁰¹ The object=x connects otherwise divergent symbolic series and propels them into motion. Lastly, Deleuze observes the general directionality of the structural determination: “from the subject to practice.” Singularities within the symbolic structure are determined or “filled in” by the differential relations *before* they are occupied “by real beings.”¹⁰² Thus, “the real, the imaginary and their relations are always engendered secondarily by the functioning of the structure, which starts with having its primary effects in itself.”¹⁰³ This is not a rejection of the possibility for intervention into the order of structured “positionalities,” but rather an observation of how structures work.

These characteristics of structuralism are easy to find in afropessimism as articulated by Wilderson.¹⁰⁴ In his major critical work *Red, White and Black; Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (2010), the afropessimist argument is explicitly framed as an intervention into Lacanian theories of the symbolic economy. Wilderson argues that “within civil society’s *unconscious* is the knowledge that the black position is *a position, not an identity*, and that its

¹⁰⁰ Deleuze 2004, 184.

¹⁰¹ Deleuze 2004, 185-88.

¹⁰² Deleuze 2004, 189.

¹⁰³ Deleuze 2004, 191.

¹⁰⁴ And in afropessimism as articulated in the work of others, such as Sexton and Marriott. However, as explained above, I take Wilderson’s formulation as “canonical” and most influential, and therefore as the object of the present examination.

constituent elements are coterminous with and inextricably bound to the constituent elements of social death...”¹⁰⁵ Within the political-ontological structure of the United States (subsequently to *Red, White and Black*, Wilderson will expand his argument to a properly global scale), this “structuring position” (Deleuze) of the Black/slave is determined, precisely, through the “differential determination” (Deleuze) of the (non-dialectical) master-slave relation, in turn determining the “singular points” (Deleuze) occupied by black people as “subject position(s).” *Antiblackness*, as conceived by afropessimism, may thereby best be understood as a name for this specific relation of differential reciprocal (though radically asymmetrical) determination which, according to Wilderson, is not merely one determining relation among others, but the fundamental determination for our “political ontology” or “episteme;”¹⁰⁶ the structure of antiblackness, in addition to effecting its own differential and singularities, is the primary series that determines, thereby grounding, all other series of relations. Wilderson therefore surpasses Deleuze’s agnostic evaluation that “The question of knowing if the first series forms a basis and in which sense, if it is signifying, the other only being signified, is a complex question the nature of which we cannot yet assess.”¹⁰⁷

Within this symbolic economy, the place of the *object=x* is clearly *the black, the negro, un nègre*. Wilderson quotes Ronald Judy on how “the Negro is a symbol that cannot ‘enable the representation of meaning [because] it has no referent.’”¹⁰⁸ The Black, as the absolute abject figure of libidinal economy, facilitates the convergence of series of whiteness, of redness, of yellowness, of brownness, series of workers, of women, of men, of queers, of trans, even larger

¹⁰⁵ Wilderson 2010, 27; emphasis added.

¹⁰⁶ Wilderson 2010; 23, 27, 96.

¹⁰⁷ Deleuze 2004, 182.

¹⁰⁸ Wilderson 2010, 39.

series of humans, by persisting as their shared absence, an absence moving in ceaseless and total circulation. *The Black*, therefore, more properly, sufficiently, and efficiently fulfills the role of object=x than does even *the phallus* or *value* itself.

Deleuze describes a certain spatiality proper to structures: “Space is what is structural, but an unextended, pre-extensive space, pure *spatium* constituted bit by bit as an order of proximity, in which the notion of proximity first of all has precisely an ordinal sense and not a signification in extension.”¹⁰⁹ When Wilderson posits the “spatial and temporal incapacity” of the black subject, he has in mind precisely this structural space, demonstrated in the beginning of *Red, White and Black* with the metaphor of the chess board:

...subjects’ paradigmatic location, the structure of their relationality, is organized around their capacities: powers subjects have or lack, the constituent elements of subjects’ structural position with which they are imbued or lack prior to the subjects’ performance. Just as prior to a game of chess, the board and the pieces on it live in a network of antagonisms. The spatial and temporal capacities of the queen (where she is located and where she can move) articulate an irreconcilable asymmetry of power between her and a rook or a pawn for example. Vest the rook with the powers of the queen(...) and it is not the outcome of the game that is in jeopardy so much as the integrity of the paradigm itself—it is no longer chess but something else. And it goes without saying that no piece may leave the board if it is to stand in any relation whatsoever to its contemporaries (asymmetry aside);

¹⁰⁹ Deleuze 2004, 174; emphasis in original.

this would be tantamount to leaving the world, to death. Power relations are extant in the sinews of capacity.¹¹⁰

The worker, or any other oppressed or dispossessed subject, Wilderson argues, might cease playing “the game” and act to subvert it, altering relations between pieces and their relative capacities, achieving an end to the exploitation and alienation inherent to the board’s unequal distribution of capacity. The Black/slave, on the other hand, is a subject without location on the board to begin with, structurally “outside” the network of relations and capacities (the condition of social death), and therefore without the capacity for movement of *any* degree or power. The interruption of any specific game of chess, or the détournement of the very rules of the game, therefore offers no redress with regard to the slave’s condition. Instead, all that can be struggled for is the destruction of the board itself—all boards, all games, all series, the totality of which series forms the “matrix of violence” the slave must constantly negotiate (“the social life of social death”).¹¹¹

This priority of “positionality,” and the understanding of capacity as its product, illustrates Deleuze’s observation that “structuralism cannot be separated from a new transcendental philosophy, in which the sites prevail over what occupies them.”¹¹² Beginning with structural positionality as transcendental ground—or that which is immanent to all subjects/objects, Wilderson can and does only conceive of space as proximal relationality between subjects and objects on the grid of structure, and of time as the narrative arc of events and intersections in that grid-space. Temporal and spatial capacity, then, are not only always

¹¹⁰ Wilderson 2010, 8.

¹¹¹ On “The social life of social death,” see Sexton 2011.

¹¹² Deleuze 2004, 174.

symbolically mediated but at base derive directly from this symbolic economy; they are nothing more than the fact of being always already emplaced and emplotted in the grid (their *uneven* distribution according to the “rules of the game” notwithstanding). It is here that my own critique of afropessimism takes shape. There are other, equally or more compelling and useful ways of understanding time and space, temporal and spatial capacity, than as attributes inherent to one’s distributive emplacement in the symbolic grid. Too much has been written about time and space (too much to cite) that compellingly exceeds the structuralist lens to accept that their emergence coincides with the fact of the symbolic economy. It follows that while the capacity *of the subject* (of structural symbolic economy) may indeed be thus constrained, nevertheless we may *also* speak of a capacity of that which occupies, “concretely,” structure’s sites and positions; time and space (and movement) of the real; real temporal and spatial capacity, real capacity itself.

Such a direction, exceeding the symbolic, can lead to a celebratory impulse. Since, if we accept afropessimism’s analysis of antiblackness as belonging merely to the symbolic economy, then passage from structure to the real should occasion the transcendence of antiblackness itself.¹¹³ But such a “formal” transcendence would contrast in the harshest terms with

¹¹³ Such a mistakenly celebratory (and explicitly Deleuzo-Guattarian) reappraisal of the dynamics of “race” animates Arun Saldanha’s *Psychedelic white: Goa trance and the viscosity of race* (2007). Saldanha encouragingly observes the insufficiency of psychoanalytic/structuralist explanations of race and racism (whiteness in particular): “That whiteness is central to contemporary race relations is a geo-historical accomplishment, not a question of formal logic in the unconscious... Seen through a Deleuzian-Guattarian framework, whiteness is a force whose strength, as I said about race in general, lies in its concurrent implicitness and plasticity” (196-97). But his prescription is curious and troubling when read sixteen years after its publication: “So: race should not be abandoned or abolished, but *proliferated*. Race’s energies are then directed at multiplying racial differences, so as to render them joyfully cacophonous. What is needed is an affirmation of race’s virtuality... It is not that everyone becomes completely Brownian (or brown!), completely similar, or completely unique. It is just that white supremacy slowly becomes obsolete as other racial formations start harboring the same creativity as whites do now, linking all sorts of phenotypes with all sorts of wealth and all sorts

antiblackness's concrete effectuations. *Antiblackness is (in) the real*. The theoretical problem of elaborating time and space outside of structuralist protocols, as outside of or prior to symbolic economies, must therefore be counterbalanced with an analysis of the nature of extra-structural antiblack violence. This double-pronged theoretical approach, which I take up in this dissertation, receives an urgency, else the surpassing of structuralism's *impasse* via "immanence" or "the real" should lead to a facile repudiation of afropessimism's central and enduring claim—the inherence of antiblackness to the world—returning us to an (immanentized or de-structuralized, and thereby) all the more naïve humanism: the "pre-structural" read as sanctuary and realm of universal plenitude. This is a major point of justification and direction for the present study, as various versions of immanent and non-structuralist ontology continue to inform projects within the critical humanities.¹¹⁴

On the other hand, my approach differentiates itself from numerous recent theoretical-strategic approaches to antiblackness and its opposition that, while otherwise brilliant and instructive, continue to propose essentially structuralist conceptions. I have in mind here especially a trio of recent articles by McKittrick (2015), da Silva (2017), and Warren (2019). While McKittrick proposes the indeterminate within pure form as a mode of (opposition for) black life against the white supremacist mathematics of calculation, da Silva proposes rendering the formal itself as non-sensical, via operations of infinity, in order to realize pure matter (the *plenum*) without antiblack time or space. Warren, taking both McKittrick's and da Silva's

of ways of life(...)" (199). See varying but similar treatments of race throughout the edited volume *Deleuze and Race* (ed. Saldanha and Adams, 2013).

¹¹⁴ Interestingly, as Alexander Galloway points out, within the continuing hegemony of "realist," "empirical," and otherwise anti-structuralist modes of thought, confluent with the so-called *ethical turn*, we can witness repetitions of structuralism's untimely "return." Afropessimism is a high-point of this dynamic. See Galloway 2019.

arguments into account, proposes “render[ing] both form and matter unthinkable or obsolete” via “a mathematical nihilism that attempts to escape the rigid organization of existence.”¹¹⁵ To realize, or at least speculate about this obsolescence, Warren proposes the model of “catastrophe theory” as developed by the French *topologist* René Thom. Catastrophe theory uses differential topology (closely related to differential geometry and calculus) “to study the ways in which a system can undergo sudden behavior as one or more of the variables that control it are changed continuously.”¹¹⁶ As Warren puts it, “[t]his theory enables us to understand the dynamic relation between variables, as they press against each other. It allows us to think what a sudden change in any relation might entail,” and “it is often a catastrophic occurrence,” such as when a bridge, bearing a heavy load, slowly deforms until, when the load reaches a precise *critical value*, the bridge collapses. Catastrophe theory “enables us to speculate on the dynamic relation of two variables and on the impact of pressure on those variables—without the promise of purity [pure plenum] or interminable skepticism [of the antiblackness of forms and formalization].”¹¹⁷ While McKittrick and da Silva mount differing interventions into form and the formal—which have implications for *structure* without locating it as the very site of struggle—Warren’s “mathematical nihilism” seems to conceive of the antiblack world as a topological structure—a structuralist conception par excellence, an analytic tendency farther evidenced by Warren’s continuing concern with “value:”

Our experiment, then, considers the *critical value* [at] the moment of catastrophe... when the bridge collapses and the cars are ruined. I reread the term *critical value* not as the affirmation and reproduction of value, but as a critique of

¹¹⁵ Warren 2019, 367-8.

¹¹⁶ Warren 2019, 368.

¹¹⁷ Warren 2019, 368.

value itself. It is *critical* because it destroys the condition of possibility for value circulation, since its aim is total destruction.”¹¹⁸

The gap here between topological analysis and real “total destruction” is, apparently, a gap of speculation.

I submit that such speculation is unnecessary (though not inherently unhelpful), whereas a non-structuralist or extra-structuralist understanding of antiblackness’s world-saturation is much needed. As I demonstrate in Chapters 2 and 3, this entails an insistence on *materialism* and *immanence*, not the psychism that afropessimism regularly resorts to; a materialist conception of *immanent antiblackness* is needed. Such a conception has been approached or gestured to across recent Black Studies literature, without being sustained or fully theorized. For example, in her 2016 work *In the wake: on being and blackness*, Christina Sharpe offers the figure of *the weather*: “the weather is the totality of our environments; the weather is the total climate; and that climate is antiblack.”¹¹⁹ For Sharpe, the world in the wake of historic chattel slavery, after so-called emancipation, remains inherently antiblack, to the extent that antiblackness as the weather “necessitates changeability and improvisation[,] is the atmospheric condition of time and place[, and] produces new ecologies.” While “[t]he shipped, the held, and those in the wake also produce out of the weather their own ecologies,”¹²⁰ Sharpe does not argue that such black production constitutes a break with the weather’s global antiblack determination; black ecologies of care and resilience do not, through their quotidian innovations, escape the weather.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Warren 2019, 368-9, emphasis original.

¹¹⁹ Sharpe 2016, 104.

¹²⁰ Sharpe 2016, 106.

¹²¹ There is a temptation to misread this subtle point and to characterize black people’s production of “their own ecologies out of the [antiblack] whether” as an agency that definitively escapes the shadow of antiblack determination. Such an optimistic misreading of everyday and

Antiblackness is figured here as a generic force that both calls into being, and serves as the material for, local and processual forms and movements (of blackness). But Sharpe's immanent rendering of antiblackness remains at the level of metaphor; while she relies on Saidiya Hartman's historically inflected phrasing of *the afterlives of slavery* for conceptual support,¹²² Sharpe gives no analysis of the (antiblack) weather itself, at the level of its ontology.

Immanent antiblackness is also gestured towards in philosopher George Yancy's 2012 chapter "Looking at whiteness: tarrying with the embedded and opaque white racist self." Analyzing specifically *white* racist modes of being, Yancy argues that whiteness is "a profound site of concealment, that whiteness is embedded in responses, reactions, good intentions, postural gestures, and denials."¹²³ Fundamental to whiteness, "white self-formation" involves the denial of "one's 'immanent other'—that is, the opaque white racist self,"¹²⁴ which perpetually threatens the white's "arrival" at genuine antiracism with racist rupture or "ambush." The perpetual denial, by the well-meaning white, of this immanent racist self/other, of the way in which one's own identity thus "presupposes the reality of various destructive processes of white iterative racist practices," ends up ironically undermining attempts at antiracist self-reckoning, engendering a self-opacity that "place[s] a limit on self-knowledge regarding one's own white racism."¹²⁵ As an illustration, Yancy recounts an infamous 2006 incident, in which the white comedian and

artistic resistance seems on the verge of surfacing when Tina Campt writes that "[Sharpe's *the weather*] is a pervasive environment and an atmospheric condition in relation to which Black folks persistently struggle. And it is our persistent struggle to survive and, more importantly, to thrive under these ever-changing conditions (*weathering* the persistent *weather* of anti-blackness) that Sharpe argues engenders the creation of 'new ecologies'—that is, new relationships between the living, the dead, and their environments, and alternative organizing principles for living in relation to one another" (Campt 2001, 45).

¹²² Hartman 2007.

¹²³ Yancy 2012, 169.

¹²⁴ Yancy 2012, 170.

¹²⁵ Yancy 2012, 170.

actor Michael Richards, while performing a stand-up routine at the Laugh Factory, interrupted his set to point out a group of black audience members.¹²⁶ “Launch[ing] into an explosive racist tirade” in which, yelling, using the N-word multiple times and referencing the history of antiblack lynching that was commonplace just “fifty years ago,” he called for the group’s removal from the club: “Throw his ass out, he’s a nigger! He’s a nigger! He’s a nigger! A nigger! Look, it’s a nigger!”¹²⁷

Yancy quotes Richard’s televised apology, given via satellite on the Letterman show, for his racist tantrum, in which the comedian simultaneously denies his own racism while admitting his racist actions: “I’m not a racist. That’s what’s so insane about this. I don’t... and yet... *it’s said. It comes through. It fires out of me.*”¹²⁸ For Yancy, this neatly illustrates white self-formation in all its self-racist-denial—in spectacularized iteration; he asks rhetorically, “How does one reconcile his [Richards’s] understanding of himself as not a racist in light of his blatant racism? ...How many times does it take a white man to use the N-word before he acknowledges himself as a racist?”¹²⁹ The racist affect and ideology expressed by Richards is thus contained *within* the psyche, the self, *the racist*. Richards even confirms this himself when at the end of his apology, in response to David Letterman’s question, “And having apologized, is there much more you can do, much more you would like to do?” he submits that “I just have to do personal work.”

¹²⁶ Michael Richards is best known for playing the character Kramer on the television series *Seinfeld*.

¹²⁷ Yancy 2012, 171.

¹²⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EC26RI-Ria8>.

¹²⁹ Yancy 2012, 171.

However, despite this focus on the individual psyche as the locus of racism, Yancy gets close to an immanent articulation:

[Richards's] claim, 'I am not a racist,' is falsified and postponed by the weight of what comes through and fires out. His alleged 'nonracism' is deferred in relationship to his opaque racist white self. What fires out is the white racist surplus, the white residue, as it were, that exceeds Richards's disavowal. What fires out points to profound and pivotal forms of relational constitution that have taken place over time, forms of exposure to white racist practices that have undergone processes of calcification and sedimentation.¹³⁰

For Yancy, these "forms of exposure" and "processes of calcification and sedimentation" have taken place within the self, within the white psyche. But it is a relatively slight stretch to understand them not (only) as individual processes but as social processes, or better, processes that precondition the social. The "racist surplus," what I would rather call the *antiblack surplus*, is a surplus insofar as it is in excess not only of the (imagined) nonracist white self, but of the self altogether, an immanent form of "relational constitution" that *flows through* individuals—*coming through* them, *firing out of* them, what Richards begins his apology by describing as "the force-field of this hostility." This is not to deny Richards's own individual racism, but rather to indicate a greater problem for criticism, thought, and politics, and to disagree with Richards's self-prescription: we do not just need to do personal work.

Wilderson himself supplies a final insipient iteration of immanent antiblackness. In contrast to his explicit exposition of afropessimism's structuralist basis, orientation, and

¹³⁰ Yancy 2012, 171.

methodology, there are ample moments in Wilderson’s own texts that suggest a more capacious account. For example, we might cite afropessimism’s repeated image of black liberation as the *destruction of the world*, which, as a matter of definition, does not point toward any kind of redemption, restoration, reparation, or reclamation. Rather, the destruction of the world would much more radically “free” every and all positions and subjects, precisely through the elimination of positionality itself—what Wilderson might refer to as the blackening of the world.¹³¹ So afropessimism offers a structural analysis of the world that ultimately calls for the absolute destruction of all *structure*. Thus, in this “positive” aspect of afropessimism, its “call for action,” afropessimism gestures most urgently towards structure’s displacement—at least in *practice*. But more critically, in *Red, White and Black* Wilderson writes,

The libidinal economy of modernity and its attendant cartography (...) achieves its structure of unconscious exchange by way of a ‘thanatology’ in which Blackness overdetermines the embodiment of impossibility, incoherence, and capacity. Furthermore, political economy achieves its symbolic (political or economic) capacity and structure of preconscious exchange by way of a similar thanatology.¹³²

This passage might be read against structuralist protocols to suggest that symbolic structure (“libidinal economy’s” “structure of unconscious”) follows or derives from, *is subsequent to a prior force of antiblackness* (a prior antiblack “thanatology”), and that this previous force is the

¹³¹ In *Red, White & Black* (2010), Wilderson writes, “Lacan seems to take for granted the universal relevance of (1) the analytic encounter, (2) the centrality of signification, and (3) the possibility of ‘contemporaries.’ But can a Blackened position take up these coordinates with merely a few culturally specific modifications, or does blackening these coordinates precipitate crises writ large?” (77).

¹³² Wilderson 2010, 44.

source of blackness's privation of possibility, coherence and capacity. "Libidinal and political economy," under this reading, is not strictly identical to symbolic economy, but rather names a multi-register process at the "base" of which antiblackness "itself" materially supplies its conditions of possibility. In other words, "Without the Negro, capacity itself [i.e. *real*, "presubjective" capacity] is incoherent, uncertain at best."¹³³ Black incapacity, the pre-structural effectuation of a pre-structural, pre-subjective, pre-symbolic violence, enables the (pre-structural) parasitism of human capacity, thus in turn supplying the material for a structural-symbolic ordering of the libidinal-political.

Given Wilderson's staunch adherence to structuralist and Lacanian analytic protocols, my reading here must be labelled a misreading. Nevertheless, this misreading states, in a sense, one of the theses of this dissertation. The following Chapter 1 develops an intervention into afropessimist and Marxist analyses in order to elaborate this thesis through the concept of *fundamental accumulation*, and then articulates the subsequent chapters' elaboration of that process as the prohibition of aesthetic capacity.

¹³³ Wilderson 2010, 45.

One

Fundamental accumulation and aesthetic ontology

By way of transitioning to my own formulation of antiblackness as eminently *material* and *immanent*, I will now examine one of the most generative of extant critiques of afropessimism, which provides an explicitly materialist, Marxist context in which to illustrate the “previousness” of antiblackness with respect to the symbolic. This examination, and the conceptual elaboration of *fundamental accumulation* that follows, will facilitate a resumption of thinking the connections between antiblackness and gendered capitalist relations, though in a way that certainly *stretches* existing Marxian analyses.

In her chapter “Afro-feminism before afro-pessimism: meditations on gender and ontology,” Iyko Day rightly argues that Wilderson “bifurcate[es] libidinal economy and political economy,” circumscribing antiblackness, “as a relation of gratuitous terror rather than a relation of capitalist hegemony,” within the libidinal.¹ Wilderson thus “rejects Marxism’s emphasis on work, production, and exploitation, and counters that the foundational irrationality of anti-blackness precedes and exceeds the normative circuits of capitalism...”² Day’s strategy is to expose Wilderson’s representation of Marxism as a kind of straw-man, then demonstrate the salutary connections and overlaps between Wilderson’s analysis of antiblackness and that of

¹ Day 2021, 68.

² Day 2021, 68. Day primarily cites Wilderson’s 2003 article “Gramsci’s Black Marx: Wither the slave in civil society?” which provides a sustained engagement with (orthodox) Marxism, albeit via an early, less developed version of his afropessimist argument compared to later works (2010, 2020).

“value-form Marxism”— a more robust and sufficient critical apparatus than the ‘traditional’ or ‘orthodox’ Marxist formulations that Wilderson (rightly) dismisses. “Indeed, a traditional Marxist fixation on labor exploitation or class domination falls short of offering an explanatory framework that can account for the experience of Black social death.” On the other hand, value-form Marxism, such as the work of Moishe Postone, whom Day cites,³ theorizes the capitalist value form itself (the commodity form) as the source of domination; it is the “self-mediating” condition of possibility for both class domination and labor exploitation, supplying the structural principle for both ‘base’ and ‘superstructural’ relations within capitalism.⁴

Day therefore attempts to argue that while neither labor exploitation nor class domination, strictly speaking, describe antiblackness and its violence, value itself *is* the proper category with which to think antiblack domination. Even though Marxists of various persuasions have discounted the slave as a laborer per se, Day argues that in the mixed-economic system of the American plantation economy, “slave labor time was objectified into an abstract quantification of value that was ‘socially necessary’...” Moreover, “[i]n the manner that slavery instituted and manipulated technologies of efficiency that impacted ‘socially necessary labor time’ in commodity production, it was perhaps the highest expression of the abstract domination of capital rooted in the value form that constantly works to reduce time through reconfigurations in social relations.”⁵ For Day, because the institution of new world plantation chattel slavery and its reproductive technologies were utilized by capital to profoundly affect the production process, specifically by accelerating production, slavery must therefore be “an expression” of the value-

³ Probably the most well-known in North America, Postone is also among the more politically conservative value-form Marxists and thinkers of “communisation.” For an overview, see “Communisation and value-form theory” in Endnotes Collective 2010.

⁴ Day 2021, 69.

⁵ Day 2021, 73.

form itself. Day justifies this conclusion by observing that, with respect to “socially necessary labor time” as “the entire social cost of reproducing commodity-determined labor,” “[t]he mark of innovation in the American South was Black women’s reproductive labor.”⁶ In this use, enslaved black women’s labor functioned as a continual source of *relative surplus value*, an “efficiency measure”—in this case a biological one—akin to the temporary or initial introduction of superior technology or equipment that was also “inherently destabilizing because of its temporal impact on commodity values.”⁷

Furthermore, “by cheapening commodities and the labor through reproduction,” the enslaved black woman, therefore, “passed on a devaluation—in addition to a disinheritance” (*partus sequitur ventrem*). Day claims that this implies that the enslaved black woman’s “reproductive power held within it the ability to mediate time, its acceleration or suspension.”⁸ And in the century and a half since formal emancipation, this “association with acceleration was recast as temporal excess and a threat to the entire system of social relations mediated by capitalist value,”⁹ which “threat” Day attempts to translate into “Black women’s political power over the value form, from slavery to its afterlife.”¹⁰

Day draws from her analysis a series of critical conclusions vis-à-vis afropessimism: (1) it is the value relation, and not the unwaged condition of the slave, that illuminates “questions

⁶ Day 2021, 73.

⁷ Day 2021, 74.

⁸ Day 2021, 75.

⁹ Day 2021, 75.

¹⁰ Day 2021, 76. This is perhaps the least compelling moment in Day’s chapter. For, if Black women had, at any time, real political power over the value form itself, then how can we account for their non-exercising of that supposed power? Why didn’t Black women destroy the value form? Shall we hold Black women accountable for not destroying the root and source of capitalist relations, when they (always) had the power to do so?

about the gendered racialization of the value form;” (2) black women’s reproductive labor was a constituent element of slavery and its afterlife; (3) “the intrinsic value of any and all Black lives is constituted through the inheritance of Black woman’s threatening relation to value; (4) “[t]he social reproduction of Black life is pathologized because it is a violation of the value form, a violation of the socially necessary reproduction of possessive whiteness.”¹¹ Thus having explained antiblackness as rooted in the capitalist value form, Day can now safely dispose of Wilderson’s (and Fanon’s and Césaire’s) too-radical call to “destroy the world,” which she decries, in language all too typical of structural-phobic academics (issuing most commonly from Cultural and Ethnic Studies fields) as ““abandon[ing] the messiness and ambiguity of actual struggle for the reassurance of a political ideal’.”¹² Afropessimism, for Day, is thus a “totalizing,” “metaphysical” position, that contrasts with, and ultimately works against “the legion who confront the struggle on the ground.”¹³

¹¹ Day 2021, 77-78.

¹² Day 2021, 80. Day is quoting from Victor Li, 2009.

¹³ Day 2021, 80. The representative of this “on the ground struggle” *must* be, for Day, “the queer Black gendered subject of feminism.” The passage, in its entirety, reads: “Against a position of totalizing, irremediable abjection, the queer Black gendered subject of Black feminism stands for the legion who confront the struggle on the ground against disappearance, disposal, and erasure in an antiblack value regime.” Day chooses to ignore Wilderson’s own status as one among this “legion.” His first book, *Incognegro: a memoir of exile and apartheid* (2008), details his participation in radical South African politics as an elected official in the ANC and as an operative for the latter’s underground armed wing, *umkhonto we sizwe*. There are also various moments in both that book and *Afropessimism* (2020), and in numerous interviews, videos, and podcasts, in which Wilderson discusses the emergence of afropessimism in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as he and other emerging black academics based in the California Bay Area began to theorize their stifling experiences *as activists* working within multi-racial political groups and alliances.

The basis for Day’s claim that afropessimism is “clinging to a political ideal” at the expense of *real* politics is unclear. The charge, rather, seems to apply equally or more so to Day herself (in this text of hers).

Besides the obvious objection that metaphysics *is* (always) political, there are a number of problems with Day’s argument. First, while she initially appears to formulate a critique of afropessimism on its own terms—that is, through argumentation and engagement and not through mere pronouncement—she willfully disregards Wilderson’s concept of slavery—which he appropriates directly from Patterson, and which appropriation Day demonstrates a knowledge and understanding of—as a “relational dynamic” and *not* as an event or institution (or economic system). As discussed above, both Patterson and Wilderson explicitly argue that slave work (or “labor”) is a contingent facet of slavery, unnecessary for and not even always historically present within the institutions of the master-slave relation. What Day *has* shown is the profound importance of slave labor in the American South for the development of the capitalist value form, but she offers no argument or evidence whatsoever that there exists a “necessary historical link” between black women’s ontological condition as slaves and their (coerced) contribution to the capitalist value form (I am here adapting Day’s own language: she asks rhetorically, interrogatively repeating Wilderson’s own assertion, “Does Black woman’s reproductive labor register only as a historical variable?”).¹⁴ But neither does she argue against Wilderson’s Pattersonian understanding of the reality of antiblack violence as *the condition of the slave as social death*; she merely shows that the condition of the black under an antiblack regime can be powerfully instrumentalized by capital.¹⁵

¹⁴ Day 2021, 70.

¹⁵ At stake here is the nature—in the context of political-libidinal economy, or, more deeply, the political-ontological—of the “intricate and savage web of oppression intruded at every moment into the black woman’s life during slavery,” against which “a single theme appears at every juncture: the woman transcending, refusing, fighting back, asserting herself over and against terrifying obstacles...” and “accepting or providing guidance according to her talents and the nature of [she and ‘her man’s’] tasks” (Angela Davis 1971).

Neither is it clear, from Day's analysis, that from the perspective of the capitalist value form, the enslaved black woman who provided the plantation's value-extraction processes with continuous relative surplus value (via their innovations in reproductive labor) would be viewed as *variable capital* (i.e. a labor cost), and not as *constant capital* (i.e. investment in non-labor means of production). As Day points out, "[r]elative surplus value represents a temporary infusion of additional surplus value to the capitalist, often resulting from the implementation of new, more efficient equipment before competitors have a chance to introduce similar innovations."¹⁶ In other words, Day provides no evidence to contradict Wilderson's argument that blacks/slaves are "sentient implements," paradigmatically non-human *tools*. Day simply works backward, under the cover of a relatively complex theoretical apparatus, from the fact that the implementation of slaves produced value, to the faulty conclusion that slaves are therefore human. However, in light of Day's otherwise productive analysis of American slave labor and the value form, we should supplement Wilderson's description: the black/slave in the antebellum South (and North) was a sentient *piece of machinery*, a non-human though biologically living node in the newly industrialized cotton production process that enabled and initiated the 'second industrial revolution'.

Furthermore, given the status of slave "labor" in this specific historical site as productive of relative surplus value, it is also unclear why the value produced via the implementation of *women* slaves should receive a privileged status relative to that produced via the implementation of male slaves. Day bases black women's importance and "threat" to the regime of the value form on the fact that, "as the source of relative surplus value, the enslaved Black female's

¹⁶ Day 2021, 74.

reproductive power held within it the ability to mediate time, its acceleration or suspension.”¹⁷ The black woman’s “power” is thus based not so much on the nature of her “labor” as *reproductive*, but on its role in the production process. In fact, this role is not unique to female slaves, as enslaved black men working, say, picking cotton in the fields were also productive of relative surplus value. Edward Baptist has given a thorough history of the coerced innovations made by enslaved black workers, of all genders, picking in the fields, which, he argues, were crucial to the economic success of the American cotton industry—corresponding to and complementing the cotton gin’s importance as a purely technical innovation.¹⁸ Following Day’s logic, these enslaved black field workers should also have had the power to manipulate time, and thereby to destroy the capitalist value form back in the nineteenth century. The same could even be said of *any* worker productive of (large amounts of) relative surplus value.

Day is nevertheless correct to criticize Wilderson’s dismissal of Marxism generally, as if all Marxist struggle was concerned only with the reclamation of stolen labor time and the valorization of the working class, a dismissal that is repeated throughout Wilderson’s work.¹⁹

¹⁷ Day 2021, 75.

¹⁸ Baptist 2014.

¹⁹ In “Gramsci’s Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?” (2003), the text that Day cites most frequently, Wilderson writes: “By examining the strategy and structure of the black subject’s absence in Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* and by contemplating the black subject’s incommensurability with the key categories of Gramscian theory, we come face to face with three unsettling consequences... Finally, we begin to see how Marxism suffers from a kind of conceptual anxiety: a desire for socialism on the other side of crisis—a society which does away not with the category of worker, but with the imposition workers suffer under the approach of variable capital: in other words, the mark of its conceptual anxiety is in its desire to democratize work and thus help keep in place, ensure the coherence of, the Reformation and Enlightenment ‘foundational’ values of productivity and progress” (1-2). In *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (2010, especially 251-77), Wilderson’s Marxist straw men are Negri and Hardt, the co-authors of *Empire* (2000) and *Multitude* (2004), purveyors of a very specific brand of Marxism that, in the tradition of Mario Tronti, emphasizes the priority of living labor *before and against* its parasitic exploitation by capital as a strategy for the reclamation of the commons. Distinguishing the “demands” of the “slave” from those of

However, we should reflect more carefully on what is at stake in one particular formulation of Wilderson's that Day quotes and takes issue with. Wilderson writes in "Gramsci's Black Marx: whither the slave in civil society?" (2003) that contrary to the worker qua worker, who "demands that productivity be fair and democratic (...), *the slave, on the other hand, demands that production stop; stop without recourse to its ultimate democratisation.*"²⁰ Day claims that in spite of to Wilderson's intention, this line points to an overlapping "between Afropessimism and value-form Marxism," insofar as, per Day's general argument, the destruction of the capitalist value form "would constitute a radical break from existing social categories of time, space, and being" sufficient for the actualization of Black liberation from the regime of antiblackness, but sans the "metaphysical" "totalizing" of the "end of the world."²¹ Three calls have thus,

Marxism in *Afropessimism* (2020) Wilderson states again, "for the Slave, there is no surplus value to be restored to the time of labor" (229), and, "[t]he violence of social death (slavery) is actually subtended to the production of the psychic health of all those who are not slaves, something that cannot be literally commodified or weighted on an actual balance sheet. That's the more intangible, libidinal aspect to it" (224), as if twentieth century Marxist theorists had not engaged libidinal economy. And again, when Wilderson argues that, "[w]hereas the positionality of the worker (whether a factory worker demanding a monetary wage, an immigrant, or a white woman demanding a social wage) gestures toward the reconfiguration of civil society, the positionality of the Black subject (whether a prison-slave or a prison-slave-in-waiting) gestures toward the disconfiguration of civil society" (251), he ignores the increasingly theorized possibility of a Marxist/communist subject in excess of the figure of the "worker." "The proletariat wakes up in the morning wondering, How much will I have to do today and how long will I have to do it? Exploitation and alienation morphed into an early morning ulcer. How much will the capitalist demand of me and how long will I have to do it?" (303). True—but the proletariat *good worker* is increasingly insufficient for understanding the insurrectionary "subject" of radical anticapitalism, who may reject work itself (in keeping with a relatively old tradition, especially in Italy), the value form, civil society, and the function of the *subject* itself. Wilderson's sound critiques of Gramsci, Hardt and Negri, and a vaguely defined yet familiar "orthodox" Marxism of the "working class," do not amount to a convincing critique of Marxisms in general or in total, specifically of more radical value-form Marxisms, and let alone of more radical and heterogeneous (but still variously Marx-influenced) contemporary insurrectionist political theory, such as that of *Tiqqun/Invisible Committee*. One aspiration of this dissertation is to supplement the afropessimist critique in a way that affords such an extended critique.

²⁰ Wilderson 2003, 230; emphasis added.

²¹ Day 2021, 70.

apparently, been issued: one for the end of the world (afropessimism), one for the end of the capitalist value form (Day and value-form Marxism), and one for the end of production (the slave, according to Wilderson). Which two of these three coincide? Or in Day's terms, which are *materialist* and which are *metaphysical*? Day implies and then argues that the call for the abolition of the value form is coterminous with the call for the end of production. To do this, she assumes that Wilderson's slave's call is for the end of production *within the regime of the capitalist value form*—an end to production for production's sake, production for the market, production for/of exchange-value. But Wilderson is explicit: the slave's demand is for an end to production *tout court*, that is, “without recourse to its ultimate democritisation,” or its reclamation for the satisfaction of needs via use-values. What would an end to production, as such, entail?

For Marx himself, *production* is an extremely basic concept, first and foremost signifying the relation between humans and nature: “[b]y producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life.”²² Production, as the “purposeful activity”²³ whose use provides the human element of the *means of production*,²⁴ “is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature... He sets in motion the natural forces which belong to his own body, in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form adapted to his own needs.”²⁵ This passage from the first volume of *Capital* contains several key elements:

²² Marx 1970, 42. Thomas Nail (2020) provides useful insights into the relevance of Marx's dissertation on the ancient Greek and Roman materialists. In that context, Nail reminds us that *production*, or *metabolism*, is first a process innate to nature itself, preexisting human existence and interaction.

²³ Marx 1990, 284.

²⁴ Marx 1990, 290-91.

²⁵ Marx 1990, 284.

production is a composition, that is, a transformation or modification of preexisting elements or forces into a usable form; production, therefore, is always coupled with consumption—in fact, as Marx writes in the *Grundrisse*, “[p]roduction is also immediately consumption,” and vice versa. “The individual not only develops his abilities in production, but also expends them... just as natural procreation is a consumption of life forces...”²⁶ Production and consumption oppose each other, mediate each other, producing and consuming each other by furnishing each other’s conditions and absorbing each other’s yields.²⁷ Thus, production involves, or *is* a process of metabolism, between the human and nature, between the human and herself, and, as *social* production, between humans.²⁸ Although he retains this naturalistic basis throughout his oeuvre, Marx’s object of critique is, of course, political economy. Therefore, in general for Marx, “[w]hen we speak of production, then, what is meant is always production at a definite stage of social development—production by social individuals.”²⁹ Indeed, Marx distinguishes the human from the animal as “in the most literal sense a political animal, not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal which can individuate itself only in the midst of society.”³⁰ To summarize, “[a]ll production is appropriation of nature on the part of an individual within and through a specific form of society.”³¹

Wilderson’s call for an absolute “end to production” can now be read with more clarity. We can assume, given the centrality of the social to both Marxism generally and Wilderson’s analysis of blackness as *social death*, that he is referring to social production (and not the more

²⁶ Marx 1973, 90.

²⁷ Marx 1973, 91-92.

²⁸ Nail has also compellingly analyzed and built upon Marx’s notion of *metabolism*. See Nail 2020, especially Chapter 5, “Metabolic Drift.”

²⁹ Marx 1973, 85.

³⁰ Marx 1973, 84.

³¹ Marx 1973, 87.

basic natural production innate to biological and physical processes). This is, then, a call for the end of *social metabolism*, the social processes of production and consumption (and so also of distribution and exchange)³² through which humanity is differentiated as a species, and through which human individuals are differentiated as individuals. Wilderson identifies this as the slave's demand because it is precisely social metabolism (social production) that the slave/black is radically excluded from in social death. And clearly, a total end to social production or metabolism is not identical to the abolition of the capitalist value form; it is both ontologically prior to and politically more far reaching than the latter, which would leave social metabolism intact, albeit in a different mode, as the means of (communist) human and individual individuation.

For Marx and (value-form and other) Marxists, the creation of the capitalist value form is linked to another essential process. *Primitive accumulation*, Marx writes, is that which capitalist accumulation (the accumulation of capital) presupposes, the “point of departure” for the “whole movement” of the “capitalist mode of production.”³³ Analogous to the role of “original sin” in theology, Marx defines primitive accumulation as “nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production,” forming “the prehistory of capital” and capitalism.³⁴ Although both Marx and orthodox Marxists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries tended to characterize it as solely a historical stage or period that, once having performed its historical role, was dissolved into capitalist relations, recognition of so-called primitive accumulation as a recurrent and ongoing process within capitalism is now widespread amongst theorists of Marxist and Cultural Studies. So primitive accumulation is exemplified by,

³² Marx 1973, 88-90.

³³ Marx 1990, 873.

³⁴ Marx 1990, 873-75.

on the one hand, the brutal repression of female social production through literal witch hunts and associated forms of female dispossession, the *formal* enslavement of African and indigenous peoples, and the genocide of populations and conquest of vast lands, all of which *did* historically function to consolidate and enable the emergence of “capital” proper through “non-“ or “pre-capitalist” means. In this sense, primitive accumulation was an *event* (or a series of events).³⁵ On the other hand, however, primitive accumulation is a *process* that is distinct from, yet immanent to the capitalist mode of production, necessary, as Jason Read writes, for the *ongoing* “separation of labor from the means of production and reproduction of its existence.”

The two essential results of primitive accumulation—workers with only their labor power to sell and capital free to invest anywhere—are also effects of the capitalist mode of production’s encounter not only with other modes and economies but also with the remnants [or persistence] of noncommodity production internal to [and against] capitalist societies. Primitive accumulation can be said to take place at every point where something in common is converted into private property (...) or where the conditions for the production and reproduction of existence are converted into commodities (...) It is thus possible to talk about an endo-colonization (the colonization of the remainder of noncommodified or nonexploited dimensions of existence internal to capitalist societies) alongside exo-colonization (the extension of capital to other spaces).³⁶

Manifest as event or process, primitive accumulation “involves a relation of force” and power that seems to disappear as violence at the point of its execution, “immediately justified within

³⁵ See, for example, Federici 2014.

³⁶ Read 2003, 27.

and by the new order that it constitutes,” while its preexisting outside ceases to exist as a place from which to view the new relations.³⁷ And in its simultaneous manifestation and disappearance, primitive accumulation mirrors its main result: the creation of the capitalist value form itself.

According to Thomas Nail, “the emergence of value requires that it immediately distinguish itself from nonvalue... Value is only value because it ‘is not’ nonvalue...”³⁸ The entire distinction between value and nonvalue is predicated on specific historical practices of simultaneous devalorization of nature, women, and colonial populations, and the creation of value from white men’s paid labor. And, just as primitive accumulation is repeated as a process within the capitalist mode of production, so too is devalorization repeated at every moment of value creation.³⁹ This is exemplified in the production of commodities, which, as Marx notes, have a dual form as both use-values and exchange-values.⁴⁰ In the simplest of terms, the capitalist extracts surplus value from the worker by paying only the necessary amount to cover her reproduction, and not for the entire socially necessary labor time needed for the production of the commodity, thus realizing a profit when the commodity is sold on the market. But the worker’s reproduction is in truth only partially paid for. The massive amounts of domestic and community labor—from birthing to parenting, friendships to mentoring, emotional and physiological *care* in all its forms and relations—needed for the social (re-)production of the worker is devalorized, unpaid. In the other direction, while production and consumption are always, in reality, integrated as two aspects of the same movement (as discussed above),

³⁷ Read 2003, 27-28.

³⁸ Nail 2020, 79.

³⁹ Nail 2020, chapter 6, “the Patriarchy of Value.”

⁴⁰ Marx 1990, 138. See Nail 2020, 116-17.

consumption is devalorized at the same time that value accrues to formalized production. At the point of consumption, the commodity's exchange-value is retained by the capitalist while the use-value is consumed "free of charge." This disparity becomes more easily objectionable and less transparent within contemporary economies in which, for instance, communication technologies industries have become economically dominant—big data relies on our consumption as free production. The process of devalorization is thus ongoing within capitalism's constant production of commodities, and without it the material and conceptual status of the work-day, employment, division of labor, and capitalist relations generally would be thrown into question.

This account of primitive accumulation and devalorization is compatible with Day's formulation of plantation slave labor as productive of relative surplus value, whether the "contribution" of the female slave is viewed as devalorized labor, devalorized machinery, or a devalorized "biological" process. But it does not account for the slave's condition as such, as theorized by Wilderson and Patterson; the processes of primitive accumulation and value creation/devalorization may explain why the slave is not paid, but they do not explain her accrual of social death (even if that status makes her an easy target for devalorization). This dissertation argues that another, prior level of accumulation is executed, not in the domain of the political-economic (as it is usually understood by Marxism) but rather at the limit of what I will persist in calling the political-ontological (though I do not mean to retain the structuralist or Lacanian sense of this designation as articulated by Wilderson).⁴¹ This is a *fundamental accumulation*.

⁴¹ The following chapters illustrate the process that in this chapter I theorize as *fundamental accumulation*. They do so by thinking with a series of late twentieth and twenty-first century works of black film, literature, and video, each of which registers aspects of this process, along with black antagonism towards it, in unique and compelling ways.

Primitive accumulation and creation of the capitalist value form on one side, antiblackness as the differentiating real movement of (human) capacity and coherence from and against blackness, on the other: the two do not commute. But this is not to deny any relation whatsoever between them (as critics of afropessimism frequently accuse the latter of doing). The key concept that links these two levels, as already introduced by Wilderson (but understood by him in terms of the symbolic economy, as explained above), is *capacity*. Within a structuralist framework, capacity is something endowed to a position, differentially, according to given principles or axioms—according to and *as* a position of emplacement and emplotment in symbolic space. But outside of a structuralist framework, capacity becomes the very principle of the real *process* of individuation, the “material base” of self-ness and therefore of coherence itself. The capacity to exist temporally and spatially, the capacity for movement or motion, the capacity for thought, judgment, action, etc., it is through these capacities that we know ourselves, and that we exist *as selves*.

However, capacity—or capacities, powers, the faculties—are not pregiven as ahistorical human essence. Rather, capacity is a fully historical, material affair that is continuously transformed through, as Marxism puts it, the development of productive forces and relations of production—that is, socially. As Marx himself puts it, capacity at the level of “species-being”⁴² (d)evolves over history as human individuals “change... in that they bring out new qualities in themselves, develop themselves in production, transform themselves, develop new powers and ideas, new modes of intercourse, new needs and new language.”⁴³ Capacity also forms the basis of capitalist exploitation. It is the sheer capacity for work, for production—which itself is based

⁴² In the language of the early Marx, as in the *philosophical manuscripts*.

⁴³ Marx 1990, 494; quoted in Nail 2020, 105-6.

on the foundational capacities for time, space, and motion—that is objectified and alienated within the capitalist mode of production as labor-power or *labor-capacity*. Pierre Macherey highlights this, elaborating on Marx’s own insight on the historical mutability of human capacity through the productive process:

What in fact is this famous productivity attributed to labor-power in order to modify it, or rather to re-modify it? It is the “virtue” or “power” that may be ascribed to it when one begins to consider and treat it materially: as a “productive power” in the sense of a capacity to be put to work. This power is not only measurable on paper but can be modeled and modified so as to increase it. Such is effectively the goal of the rationalization of labor, which, by subordinating it to norms, and by shifting these norms, intensifies labor’s “productivity.” ...In other words, the norm acts to transform the reality to which it applies, grasps it not as it is but as it could be if one were to develop its potential.⁴⁴

The capitalist thus “practices metaphysics” in a “practical” manner⁴⁵ of abstraction-investment-concretization.

Capacity is generative of the human individual and community—and even of the human species; it provides the means of individuation or differentiation in both cases, as it is constantly de-/trans-formed through and as material social relations. My central claim, however, in excess of this premise, is that in order for capacity itself in any mode or instance to acquire and maintain coherence and potency, a movement of incapacitation must be simultaneously effected. In other words, capacity requires the simultaneous *prohibition of capacity*, not in the symbolic economy

⁴⁴ Macherey 2015. <https://viewpointmag.com/2015/10/31/the-productive-subject/>

⁴⁵ Macherey 2015.

but in the material economy of the real. Antiblackness, as it is theorized in the following chapters, is precisely this prohibition of capacity, within a modern(izing), global(izing) historical context, and parallel and prior to the process of devalorization that is executed in the creation of value. The event and process of *fundamental accumulation*, creative of the human individual at the ontological level, consists precisely of the dual process of the prohibition and (re-)production of capacity through a violence more fundamental but no less material than that found within the political-economic. Parallel to primitive accumulation as historical event, the event of fundamental accumulation can be read in Patterson's accounts of historical institutions of slavery, in Wynter's account of the overrepresentation of Man as human at the expense of the Black as liminal other throughout modernizing colonization and slavery, in Spillers's theorization of the reduction of African people to zero-degree flesh via the Middle Passage, and within Hartman's reading of emancipation as a transitional moment in the historical continuity of the reciprocal presupposition between white freedom/power and black captivity/servitude, as discussed above in the introduction. Fundamental accumulation can also be traced in its long historical itinerary of becoming globally antiblack: emerging as antiblack with the Arab dominated trans-Saharan trade in black slaves, proceeding to the trans-Atlantic trade, the plantation economy as basis for the 'second industrial revolution', and then quickening its circulation with the intensified political-economic axiomatics and technological innovations of the post-emancipation period and its global political-libidinal economies, thereby enduring, persisting, and developing into the present.⁴⁶ Historically, fundamental accumulation *becomes antiblack/ness* via this route. But as a *process*, parallel to the process of primitive accumulation,

⁴⁶ This formulation is consistent with afropessimism's historical sketch of antiblackness, as articulated in Wilderson's most recent work (2020). In earlier texts, Wilderson cited the emergence of antiblackness with the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

fundamental accumulation occurs materially whenever a capacity is engendered, created, or developed,⁴⁷ at every moment human individuation is in process.

In an effort to further demonstrate the connection and importance of fundamental accumulation for both the Marxist understanding of primitive accumulation and for a thorough analysis of antiblackness, I will here examine a passage from Marx's *Grundrisse*.⁴⁸ In that work's fourth notebook, "The Chapter on Capital," Marx gives an explanation of "[t]he original conditions of production," which, he begins, "cannot themselves be products—results of production."⁴⁹ Marx posits that within "the relations of slavery," there occurs no historical separation between nature itself ("the natural, inorganic conditions of [humans'] metabolic exchange with nature") and "living and active humanity" or the social. The slave's labor, as well as the slave herself, "is classified as *an inorganic condition* of production along with other natural beings, such as cattle, as an accessory of the earth."⁵⁰ This inclusion of the slave "laborer" and "labor" within the *conditions* of production, in part, offers a familiar relief against

⁴⁷ This includes the individual apperception of capacity/capacities, both conscious and unconscious. Recall Wynter's analysis of individuals' self-apperception as belonging to "mankind," in Chapter 1 above.

⁴⁸ While engagement with Marx within Black Studies has taken diverse forms and approaches nearly since the field's emergence, many influential approaches over the past two decades have (1) focused on Marx's *Capital vol. I*—e.g. Fred Moten's elaboration of "the commodity that speaks" (Moten 2003), and/or, (2) stressed the absence of a sufficient theorization of slavery in Marx, and therefore the need to think *outside* of "Marxist" methodologies. While the present study certainly benefits from Moten's and others' productive engagements with *Das Kapital*, and while I do not necessarily *disagree* with the second point above, there still is much material in Marx and Marxist thought whose engagement within the context of Black Studies holds great—as yet unexhausted—potential. To my knowledge, the passage from the *Grundrisse* analyzed here has not been engaged in the service of thinking slavery and antiblackness.

⁴⁹ Marx 1973, 489.

⁵⁰ Marx 1973, 489; emphasis in original. Marx offers this characterization for both the "slave" and the "serf," a distinction that I will not pursue here, but to simply observe that the distinction between the two is not rigorously given. Were serfdom another historical institution of fundamental accumulation, my overall argument would not be significantly challenged (see below).

which Marx will theorize the development of production and property into relations of production and capital proper within the capitalist mode of production, in which the separation of the preconditions of production from social production itself “is completely posited only in the relation of wage labor and capital.”⁵¹ This is the scene before primitive accumulation has prepared the ground for the creation of the value form.

Contextualizing this passage, Marx momentarily insists that it is not this “*unity*” of social production with its inorganic preconditions that “requires explanation, or that is the result of a historic process.”⁵² Nevertheless, he proceeds to offer a brief prehistory of slavery, showing how it *becomes integral* to the inorganic preconditions of production. Marx posits that the preconditions of production “appear as natural presuppositions, natural conditions of the producer’s existence just as his living body, even though he produces and develops it, is originally not posited by himself, but appears as *the presupposition of his self*.”⁵³ The preconditions of production are therefore “natural conditions of *existence*,” which manifest both subjectively and objectively: subjectively, the producer exists always within a social milieu, “he finds himself a member of a family, clan, tribe, etc.,” which develops and is transformed historically via dynamics of “intermixture and antithesis with others;”⁵⁴ objectively, the producer exists in relation “to a specific nature,” that is, to the earth, “as his own inorganic being.” “Still earth, land, soil” constitutes the objective “condition of his production and reproduction.”⁵⁵ The producer thus subjectively and objectively constituted is a “natural member of the community,” whose relation to these “natural presuppositions of his production as belonging to him, as *his*,”

⁵¹ Marx 1973, 489.

⁵² Marx 1973, 489; emphasis original.

⁵³ Marx 1973, 489-90; emphasis modified.

⁵⁴ Marx 1973, 490; emphasis modified.

⁵⁵ Marx 1973, 490.

constitutes the originary form of *property*. Conversely, the producer's property of the rightful relation to the preconditions of production is "mediated by his being himself the natural member of a community."⁵⁶ Obversely, the slave "stands in no relation whatsoever to the objective conditions of his labour..." That is, the slave "as an inorganic condition of production," does not herself produce, and therefore does not generate or develop (new) capacities for herself, does not produce a self.

The outer limit to this basic social arrangement—the commune as defined by communal relation to the preconditions for production—comes in the form of conflict with other communities over the originary property, which results in "warfare." And, Marx reasons, "[i]f human beings themselves are conquered along with the land and soil as its organic accessories, then they are equally conquered *as one of the conditions of production*."⁵⁷ Slaves, for Marx, are therefore not as much tools to be used in production, as they are non-members of the community that as such contribute natural, inorganic preconditions of social metabolism; slaves are a "natural condition of the producer's existence" or a precondition for the "presupposition of his self." This describes well fundamental accumulation as the simultaneous prohibition and accumulation of human capacity. And its emergence is, for Marx, retroactively immanent, simultaneously erasing its entrance into the scene, so that at the historical moment of its "arrival," the process already has a fundamental ontological function: slavery "corrupts and modifies the original forms of all communities, and itself becomes their basis." Prohibition of the slave's capacity, the slave's presupposition of selfhood ("presupposition of his self") is the

⁵⁶ Marx 1973, 490. Marx notes that "[t]he abstraction of a community, in which the members have nothing in common but language etc., and barely that much, is obviously the product of much later historical conditions."

⁵⁷ Marx 1973, 491; emphasis added.

simultaneous precondition for the creation of capacity, its *originary corruption*: “*The simple construction is thereby negatively determined.*”⁵⁸

The slave, as dispossessed of her own relation to the preconditions of production—her presupposition of self, or capacity—precisely by becoming a part of those “inorganic” preconditions herself—thereby *negatively* determines the inorganic body of capacity. The prohibition of capacity is thus immanently located as capacity’s own precondition. While Marx seems to understand this basic social mechanism of fundamental accumulation (as manifested in the communal institution of slavery) to have been dissolved by the historical development towards capitalism, we should learn from later Marxist theorists of primitive accumulation, and think its persistence. Based on numerous theorizations, we know that precapitalist events and institutions of primitive accumulation were actually internalized over the historical emergence and development of capitalism, thereby enduring as an immanent and necessary *process* for the self-reproduction of later capitalist social formations—even in the contemporary absence of its local manifestation as an event or social institution. Antiblackness as fundamental accumulation mirrors this dual historical-ontological form, and thus it does not require Wilderson’s “iconoclastic claim” that “Blackness is coterminous with Slaveness”⁵⁹ in a transhistorical sense—from the eighth century through the present. Chattel slavery *and* contemporary historical instances and events of antiblack violence are manifestations of fundamental accumulation (just as both the historical enclosures *and* contemporary instances of anti-woman domestic violence are manifestations of primitive accumulation). These events and institutions enable and engender the creation, reproduction, and development of human capacity as a process—just as in primitive

⁵⁸ Marx 1973, 491; emphasis added.

⁵⁹ Wilderson 2020; 102, 225-26.

accumulation the process of the creation of value relies upon a simultaneous devalorization. Fundamental and primitive accumulation thus operate in a parallel way, even while fundamental accumulation is ontologically prior to primitive accumulation, since capacity as the precondition for productive power or production itself is necessarily primary vis-à-vis wealth, capital, and value.

Contrary to afropessimism's locating of antiblackness in the symbolic register, (antiblackness understood as) fundamental accumulation issues directly from the material ground of real production. Marx makes this plain in his specification of both the subjective and objective appearances of originary property. On one hand, property is the "conscious relation" of the individual "to the conditions of production as *his own*, so that the producer's being appears also in the objective conditions *belonging to him*." This appearance "is only realized by production itself"—that is, through social metabolism.⁶⁰ Property is also "posited in regard to the individual by the community, and proclaimed and guaranteed as law," thus suggesting a symbolic structure from which the "conscious relation" emanates. However, Marx specifies that "[t]he real appropriation takes place not in the mental [conscious or unconscious] but in the real, active relation to these conditions—in their real positing as the conditions of [the producer's] subjective activity."⁶¹ The slave's incorporation into the inorganic body tapped for communal-individual capacity is first and foremost part of the real productive process, enabling the "development of human mastery over the forces of nature, those of so-called nature as well as of humanity's own nature," the "working-out of [the human's] creative potentialities."⁶² But, to reiterate, this inorganic body is not here tapped directly as a means of production, but as a resource for the

⁶⁰ Marx 1973, 493; emphasis original.

⁶¹ Marx 1973, 493.

⁶² Marx 1973, 488.

accumulation of capacity, which in turn is the precondition for production. Antiracism as fundamental accumulation thus complicates Wilderson's assertion that "[w]hat the Marxists do with slavery is they try to show how violence is connected to production, and that means they are not really thinking about the violence of slavery comprehensively." Fundamental accumulation shows how the violence of slavery is connected to *capacity*, that it is indeed directly generative of this precondition for production, and that it is a material/ist concern. When Wilderson continues that "[t]he violence of social death (slavery) is actually subtended to the production of the psychic health of all those who are not slaves, something that cannot be literally commodified or weighted on an actual balance sheet,"⁶³ he accurately critiques most Marxist analyses. But this ignores Marx's equation of production with social metabolism, a principle which, in combination with Marx's commentary on slavery in the *Grundrisse*, implies slavery as the fundamental accumulation of the preconditions for social metabolism (the creation of capacity), that is, as a real material process that indeed "subtends" both production and "psychic health."

In his discussion of primitive accumulation, Nail notes how, for Kant, the transcendental conditions—time and space—"resemble what they conditioned: the human subject."⁶⁴ Kant's critique thus forms a kind of tautological logic that justifies itself in and as the human. For Marx, on the other hand, beginning with primitive accumulation and analyzing the development of the capitalist value form,⁶⁵ the conditions for capitalism do not resemble that which they condition: the value form and capitalism itself. Neither in terms of the historical events of primitive

⁶³ Wilderson 2020, 224.

⁶⁴ Nail 2020, 78; emphasis original.

⁶⁵ This is in terms of the *analytic* Marx elaborates, not in terms of the *presentation* in *Capital Vol. I*, which of course, begins with an analysis of the commodity and only later proceeds to an examination of primitive accumulation. See discussion in Nail 2020, among others.

accumulation, nor in terms of primitive accumulation as a process contained within the value form, does *conditioning* primitive accumulation resemble *conditioned* capitalist value. Marx thereby gives a non-tautological, *historical* account of value,⁶⁶ explaining why “there is no rational or formulaic proportion between labor (which has no value) and value.”⁶⁷ This absence of commutation between labor and value prompted Deleuze and Guattari to describe value itself as a “cosmic swindle,” an incommensurability that provides the “interior limit” for capitalism, immanently facilitating the expansion of its social field.

While it cannot be denied that Marx tends to understand the definition of slavery, especially in *Capital*, in “purely” political-economic terms, nevertheless, the inaugural thinker of the critique of political-economy cannot help but recognize the slave in her fundamental ontological role as enabling—by means of her differential privation—the creation and development of capacity necessary for social metabolism. Moreover, once we understand that for Marx *production* is the same as *social metabolism*, the perceived a priori division between Marxian critique and the critique of antiblackness as social death begins to fade (this division is the same as the “bifurcation” Wilderson make vis-à-vis political economy and libidinal economy).⁶⁸ The implications of Marx’s account, scandalously perhaps, for the Marxist hater of afropessimism (and vice versa), begin to accord with Patterson’s and Wilderson’s paradigmatic analysis of slavery and antiblackness, respectively, as social death. When we follow the history

⁶⁶ Nail writes: “Capitalism emerges from the historical conditions of the noncapitalist process of direct appropriation, murder, theft, colonialism, demineralization, and so on... Capitalist value is dripping with the blood of all the indigenous people it killed and with all the minerals it stole from their land” (Nail 2020, 78; emphasis original). He quotes directly from Marx: “Capital comes dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt” (Marx 1990, 926).

⁶⁷ Nail 2020, 78.

⁶⁸ The theme of the dissolution of distinctions persists throughout this dissertation’s following chapters.

of slavery's global consolidation into the modern targeting of African people who thereby become *black*, we observe the becoming antiblack, in modern racial terms, of fundamental accumulation. And insofar as humanism develops alongside capitalism as one of its most effective and enduring ideological projects, antiblackness may be understood as the humanist mode of fundamental accumulation; as enslavement between warring "civilized" communities becomes a violation of "the rights of man," blackness becomes the shared resource upon which the prohibitive force of capacity's creation may ethically be applied. Consolidating globally around the Black first as slave (via the trans-Saharan and trans-Atlantic trades) and then as subject (via legal "emancipations," civil rights movements and anti-colonialist "victories," etc.),⁶⁹ fundamental accumulation continues its long history as the process by which capacity is created, developed, and maintained—reproducing the preconditions for production, period (for social metabolism, period).

Fundamental accumulation and primitive accumulation thus operate in parallel to each other, sometimes overlapping in historical manifestations as events or institutions (i.e. slavery), but also as distinct processes that both presuppose and reproduce their respective "objects:" capacity and value. And as explained above, just as Marx's critique provides not merely a "theory of capitalist economics," but "a theoretical description of the *conditions* for capitalist economics,"⁷⁰ fundamental accumulation as event and process provides a way to theorize the *conditions* for human sociality and production itself, from early social formations through contemporary capitalism, without totally disarticulating the critique of antiblackness from

⁶⁹ Warren writes: "In neither [the antebellum period, nor the postbellum] period did emancipation eradicate antiblackness and restore being. The postbellum period, I would argue, is merely the extension of ontological terror to the entire black population" (Warren 2018, 91).

⁷⁰ Nail 2020, 77.

Marxian critiques of capitalist value. Nevertheless, in view of the relation between fundamental accumulation and primitive accumulation, the demand of the slave or the Black that Wilderson articulates as a demand for *a total stop to production* far exceeds the call to abolish value, by definition. To return to the three calls articulated above (afropessimism’s call to destroy the world, the Marxist-revolutionary call for an end to the value form, and the slave’s call for an end to production): the concept of fundamental accumulation allows us to understand the end of the world in terms equally materialist to those in which we understood the end of production and the end of the value form—they are all three materialist calls. However, Marx’s understanding of production *as* social metabolism allows us to see the equivalence between the call for the end of the world and the slave’s demand to end production itself. And the realization of this call would require the *lysis* of its precondition; the abolition of fundamental accumulation (abolition of the historical-ontological process that is prior to and conditions value creation).⁷¹ As I show in the following chapters, the abolition of fundamental accumulation, of capacity and its prohibition, amounts to the abolition of *differentiation* as basic to the security of the self and the social.

Aesthetic ontology as methodology

In theorizing fundamental accumulation, we return to the scene of Kant’s first critique—time and space as the conditions for the human (or for human subjectivity). For Kant, cognition—knowledge of a given object—requires both the faculties of *understanding* and *intuition*. But as Kant puts it in the first paragraph of the Transcendental Aesthetic: “[o]bjects are given to us by means of sensibility, and it alone yields us *intuitions*; they are *thought* through the

⁷¹ “We are aiming for a complete lysis of this morbid universe” (Fanon 2008, xiv).

understanding, and from the understanding arise *concepts*. But all thought must, directly or indirectly, ... relate ultimately to intuitions, ...because in no other way can an object be given to us.”⁷² As the two *forms* of sensible intuition—upon which thought itself is conditioned—Kant posits time and space, which together provide the faculty of sensibility, or what I will term *aesthetic capacity*. Space, according to Kant, provides “the pure form of all outer intuition,” while time “condition[s] all appearances whatsoever,” including those of “inner sense.”⁷³

For Kant, both components of this foundational aesthetic capacity are “necessary,” “*a priori*” conditions, that is, essential and immutable. And in the Preface to the first edition of the *Critique*, Kant cautions that

...the chief question is always simply this: - what and how much can the understanding and reason know apart from all experience? Not: -how is the faculty of thought itself possible? The latter is, as it were, the search for the cause of a given effect, and to that extent is somewhat hypothetical in character (...).⁷⁴

In other words, any inquiry into the *conditions* for intuition, of the preconditions of forms of time and space, would be a betrayal of Kant’s *critical* project and constitute irresponsible speculation. Such an inquiry would express “the liberty simply of expressing an *opinion*, in which case the reader would be free to express a different *opinion*.”⁷⁵ But this is precisely the aim of theorizing fundamental accumulation as the creation of capacity—not as a matter of mere “opinion,” but rather by adopting, appropriating, and extending Marx’s historical theorization of capitalist value and primitive accumulation (and with the caveat that, while Kant frames “the faculties” in terms

⁷² Kant 1965, 65.

⁷³ Kant 1965, 77.

⁷⁴ Kant 1965, 11-12.

⁷⁵ Kant, 1965, 12, emphasis original.

of reason, moral action, and judgment—in the first, second, and third Critiques, respectively—the present analysis frames capacity in terms of human social individuation, coherence, and difference). So whereas for Kant the transcendental conditions of human subjectivity, and human subjectivity itself, resemble each other to the point of identity in time and space, in an aesthetic ontology of fundamental accumulation the “transcendental” condition for human aesthetic capacity (its antiblack prohibition) and human aesthetic capacity itself (temporality, spatiality, motility) emerge as heterogeneous, even while together they make up the process of fundamental accumulation.

Theoretical reference to Kant’s Transcendental Aesthetic presages the second major aspect of this dissertation—the theorization of antiblack prohibition as, at its most basic level, the prohibition of *aesthetic capacity*. Aesthetic is understood here, more or less with Kant in the first Critique,⁷⁶ to signify the nature and processes of the human’s most fundamental intra-worldly engagements: the temporal, spatial, and motile, without which all other capacities—such as mnemonic, historical, and labor capacity—would remain impossible and unthinkable. Aesthetic capacity thus provides the ground for both experience and becoming, and in the following chapters I work to theorize the aesthetic capacities and their antiblack prohibition as immanent, material (and so historical) processes (as opposed to Kant’s characterization of the faculties as necessary and a priori). This centrality of the aesthetic in terms of its original Greek sense—the sense of *aesthesis*—distinguishes the approach of this dissertation in analyzing film, literature, and video from that of other important literary and art critics within contemporary Black Studies.

⁷⁶ In his third critique Kant accede’s, in a sense, to the “vulgar” usage of *aesthetic* to describe the judgment of taste (but, in keeping with his earlier stance in the first critique, not as a “science of the beautiful”). See Osborne 2013, 38-43.

For example, in her 2021 book *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See*, Tina M. Campt examines “a group of artists whose creative practice produces radical forms of witnessing that reject traditional ways of seeing blackness—ways of seeing that historically depict blackness only in a subordinate relation to whiteness.”⁷⁷ Campt’s approach shares with my own a two-pronged conceptualization of, first, the ubiquity of antiblack violence, and secondly, black refusal of that violence. For Campt, as for many theorists of anti/blackness over the last two decades—not only afropessimist ones—the latter cannot be thought in isolation from the former, insofar as blackness and black people exist within this immanently antiblack world. Across her work, Campt’s intervention has been to explore, through novel formal-structural analyses, how a variety of black images work to subvert antiblack apparatuses of subordination and hierarchy. In *A Black Gaze*, Campt argues that a group of contemporary black visual artists including Deana Lawson, Arthur Jafa, Kahlil Joseph, Dawoud Bey, and Okwui Okpokwasili challenge the overdetermining *white gaze* of the camera and of the social. The work of these artists foregrounds the presentation of black people as artistic subjects, variously utilizing both portrait and quotidian staging, constructed and “natural” scenes, formally choreographed and improvised movement, via a variety of mediums including photography, video, film, and sculpture, dance, and performance, and placing black subjects in articulation with both urban and rural landscapes and environments. According to Campt, the work of these artists successfully intervenes against the white gaze by picturing black bodies and black people in a variety of ways that disallow passive consumption of the image. They “make audiences *work*. They refuse to create spectators... Their work requires *labor*—the labor of discomfort, feeling, positioning, and

⁷⁷ Campt 2021, 17.

repositioning—and solicits visceral responses to the visualization of Black precarity.”⁷⁸ For Campt, the black gaze that is produced via these works converts “viewers” and “consumption” into “witnesses” and “confrontation.”⁷⁹ This new gaze thus enables “new ways of visualizing Black struggle and transcendence,” and “offer[s] a different trajectory for Black sociality.”⁸⁰ By denaturalizing and even impossibilizing the passive consumption of images of black people, the artworks Campt explores enliven the viewer with an active, oppositional vision.

While Campt convincingly describes the ways these works combat passive consumption, a major shortcoming of her formulation is its failure to provide any material criteria according to which the gaze her book names might be understood, in itself, as either *new* or *black*. Activating the audience, challenging spectatorship, subverting consumption with diverse manifestations of discomfort or confrontation—these are tried and true strategies of visual, performance, installation, and other genres and practices of art-making that have circulated since the (early) twentieth century, put into practice by artists of various races (most famously, though not always most importantly, white artists), and in the service of a variety of political-social projects. Is all that is required to counter the white gaze with an autonomous black one the application of more-or-less historically avant garde strategies by black artists picturing black subjects? In other words, while the artists and the subjects of the artworks Campt examines all are black, this does not seem a sufficient criteria to judge the gaze her work theorizes as singularly such. Moreover, Campt acknowledges that “[i]t doesn’t matter if a Black person is behind the camera or not, because the camera itself functions as an instrument of the White gaze.” Nonetheless, she insists on the inherent blackness of the gaze produced via these works—through on the one hand,

⁷⁸ Campt 2021, 17.

⁷⁹ Campt 2021, 39.

⁸⁰ Campt 2021, 47.

problematization of the spectatorial consumption of images of blackness, and on the other, depiction and celebration of black life-worlds. Campt is thus forced to admit that “it may seem as if I want to have it both ways.” Nevertheless, she “would still argue that Jafa’s statement [on the irrelevance of the blackness of a filmmaker, given the whiteness and antiblackness of the camera itself] is accurate and yet, at the same time, does not preclude the emergence of a Black gaze, even in his own work.”⁸¹

I would concur that Campt does indeed seem to want to have it both ways, and farther, I would suggest that it *also* does not matter whether a black person is *before* the camera or not, antiblackness being, as Campt acknowledges, immanent to the camera and the gaze themselves. What remains after the irrelevance, in the last instance, of a contingently black subject or object, is the gaze itself—the camera and the (cinematic or photographic) apparatus it conjoins with. And while Campt has shown the gaze produced in the work of her artists to be anti-spectacle and anti-consumption (in the popular sense), as well as having compellingly described the profundity and beauty of her artists’ photographic and cinematic representation of black sociality and black life, she has not described, explained, or analyzed the gaze’s blackness as such, nor its anti-antiblackness (its specific antagonism to the white/antiblack world and its White gaze), as such. To do so would mean analyzing *how* the black gaze, or the artworks that give rise to it, work “in themselves,” *how* they present images—and not merely to explicate the subjects and objects of the works, and the resulting representations and identifications. In other words, what is missing from Campt’s formulation is an *aesthetic* analysis of the ontology of the artwork.

⁸¹ Campt 2021, 23-24.

The analysis of artworks given in this dissertation also has resonances with the work of the Liquid Blackness Collective (LBC), whose examination of contemporary black artistic strategies stands out from within the intersection of Black Studies and art-theoretical disciplines. Highly attuned to formal and structural elements of the works they examine, LBC foregrounds *forms* of black being as they are presented in artworks, and theorizes these forms for their subversive, liberatory, or conservatory potentials. As the name of the collective suggests, privileged are those forms of blackness that take on or present qualities of *liquidity*, *flow*, *suspension*, and *continuousness*.

For example, in their 2017 article “Freeing Black Codes: *liquid blackness* Plays the Jazz Ensemble,”⁸² LBC members Lauren M. Cramer and Alessandra Raengo theorize the *interactivity* manifest between works by filmmakers Larry Clark (*Passing Through*, 1977), Arthur Jafa (*Dreams are Colder than Death*, 2013), and Kahlil Joseph (*Until the Quiet Comes*, 2013; *Video Girl*, 2014). Borrowing from Fred Moten, Cramer and Raengo theorize these filmmakers’ presentation of “fugitivity:” as Clark’s film “render[s] blackness in multiple spaces and times;”⁸³ as Jafa’s video “[m]ov[es] freely between an image of Saturn to overlit facial details...,” creating “yet another implied movement from the cosmic to the molecular, and thus the suggestion of a capacity for blackness to freely travel across scale;”⁸⁴ and as within Joseph’s films, “characters and camera remain in almost constant motion, even if in reverse.”⁸⁵ Within these works, blackness, as *liquid*, flows and overflows, saturating and dissolving borders of period, medium (Clark and Joseph both shoot on film, Jafa works with video), discrete senses (the visual and the

⁸² Cramer and Raengo 2017.

⁸³ Cramer and Raengo 2017, 9.

⁸⁴ Cramer and Raengo 2017, 17.

⁸⁵ Cramer and Raengo 2017, 18.

sonic), and disciplines (cinema and music; but also at a higher level of abstraction: *liquid blackness* is taken to describe both the artistic-aesthetic qualities of the works and practices under examination, and the critical project the authors and their collective are in the process of formulating). Cramer and Reango highlight the intermingling of images with sound and black music from jazz to hip hop—in terms of artistic influence, subject matter, genre, and composition⁸⁶—which “confers to the image the malleability of sound, the intensity of a live performance... and the complex dynamics of group creation and interaction.”⁸⁷

If Clarke realizes a kind of cinematographic aesthetics of “liquid blackness” along these lines, characterized by motion, malleability, interactivity, and flow, then the elaboration of that aesthetics by the tripartite lineage of Clark, Jafa, and Joseph can be said to “‘hol[d] blackness in suspension,’ so to speak, by establishing interactivity between artists, genres, and narratives that shift the ground beneath black visuality and thus refuse to adhere to the rationality of pre-existing black codes.” This is not an immaterial procedure. On the contrary, this aesthetic strategy, titled “black coding” by Cramer and Raengo, proceeds via “assemblage and construction. Indeed, in order for black coding to appear unattached to the dictates of race and racism, it must improvise using these same [material] programming languages with no less precision.”⁸⁸ In naming this aesthetic strategy *black coding*, Cramer and Raengo signify what is always a black re-coding, the excessive, “fugitive movement” of “black socio-aesthetic

⁸⁶ “If jazz improvisation is a model for the praxis of a black imagination that refuses to be stopped, confined, or limited to prescribed genres or forms, then what happens when this impulse toward endless mobility is preserved in the finite and ultimately fixed form of a film?” (Cramer and Raengo 2017, 13); both Jafa and Joseph make both “films” (Joseph) or “video art” (Jafa), and “music videos;” Clarke’s and Jafa’s works both demonstrate a complexity of sound editing that Cramer and Raengo trace to the intricacies of jazz improvisation, while Joseph has collaborated extensively with musicians.

⁸⁷ Cramer and Raengo 2017, 12.

⁸⁸ Cramer and Raengo 2017, 12.

activity,”⁸⁹ that dis- and re-connects “*bodies and objects*.” Black coding as a kind of black digitality thus operates at a formal and structural level, altering *connections* and thereby re-ordering narratives and social and political affordances, and Cramer and Raengo go so far as to claim that this process of material reconnection constitutes a “logic of digitality and connectivity” inherent to blackness itself.⁹⁰ Black coding thus engages the digital in an inherently paradoxical manner: a black digitality that is “decidedly non-digital” in its “possibility... to remain in-progress, and thus defy rigid classificatory systems,”⁹¹ a continuous flow that suspends and connects nodes in combinations alien to the ostensibly discretizing narratives and structurations of antiblack violence.

The work of Liquid Blackness Collective is generative, and salutary in its utilization of a variety of theoretical perspectives and tools with which to think blackness and aesthetics. Specifically, the attention of LBC theorists to the formal and structural aspects of black artworks is a fresh divergence from previous generations’ focus on representational and identificatory processes, a focus that the approach of this dissertation shares. However, while LBC generally registers the ubiquity of antiblack structures and forms as the “aesthetic” world within and against which innovative black art intervenes, they fall short of a conception of antiblackness at the level of the aesthetic itself. As a result, their innovative readings tend ultimately to fetishize specific aesthetic *forms*. For example, Cramer and Raengo incisively write that “[i]n *Passing Through*, black coding suspends the matter of film form: light, sound, and celluloid,” citing “Clark’s efforts to beautifully render black skin on film” as “an intervention against the constraints of sensitometry that are visible in the careful manipulation of light in the opening

⁸⁹ Cramer and Raengo are here quoting from Moten, “The case of blackness” (2008).

⁹⁰ Cramer and Raengo 2017, 8; emphasis added.

⁹¹ Cramer and Raengo 2017; 9, 8.

sequence [of shots of pianist Horace Tapscott and ensemble],” for which “Clark conducted secret screen tests to identify the type of film stock that would best record black skin against a deep black background.”⁹² Similarly, in Jafa’s *Dreams are Colder than Death*, “movement and sound are central to the film and often exist in tension or in unexpected synchronization.” As the connections between figures pictured on screen and their voices or sounds are denaturalized and undone, “the film’s disarticulation of image and sound performs a critique of the very properties of self-possession that constitutes ‘the existential issue for Black Americans.’”⁹³ Clark disrupts the norms of sensitometric discreteness, while Jafa undoes the common sense of property produced through the naturalized synchrony of movement and sound. But Cramer and Raengo read these important aspects of these works always in the service of a valorization of certain forms, for a re-formation and re-structuration in the terms of “liquidity,” “malleability,” “productive non-linearity and indeterminacy,” etc.⁹⁴ Are not these terms, these forms, also descriptions, par excellence, of whiteness and antiblackness? Absent within Cramer and Raengo’s critique is an awareness of the inherent antiblackness of the camera itself (per Camp’s and Jafa’s admission), and the implied antiblackness of the most basic materials out of which the camera engenders forms and structures, gazes and codes: time, space, movement. Thus, they overlook the registration of aesthetic antiblackness that is offered by the works they examine.

The result of this inattention to transcendental-aesthetic antiblackness is that while LBC incisively reads black life and sociality in the formal and structural interventions of artworks, any would-be liberatory affordances thus gleaned remain enmeshed within a dialectical version of

⁹²Cramer and Raengo 2017, 12-13.

⁹³ Cramer and Raengo 2017, 17. The quote here is taken from Jafa’s film.

⁹⁴ Cramer and Raengo 2017, 13.

“the social life of social death.”⁹⁵ The black reconnections of Clark, Jafa, and Joseph, on Cramer and Raengo’s reading, do not oppose the process of fundamental accumulation but rather facilitate the materialization of blackness through a proliferation of novel aesthetic forms and structures—flow, the continuous, suspension, motion, the informal; coding, overflowing, interactivity, etc. While LBC fetishizes these as somehow superior to or affording a higher degree of liberatory potential than their opposing counterparts (the discrete, metered, multiple, static, formal, etc.), their status as such seems unavoidably historically contingent. This fetishization is ultimately inseparable from an aesthetics and politics of the reclamation of aesthetic capacity, as exemplified in Cramer and Raengo’s reading of the importance of *movement* in Kahlil Joseph’s films: “The fact that motion continues in these works, after death and destruction, is an affirmation of black coding in the face of black codes.”⁹⁶ Cramer and Raengo understand black coding as a form of *resistance*, which re-orders temporal-spatial matter along new lines and in dialectical relation to antiblack forms. In contrast, utilizing methodologies that are not dissimilar to those of LBC, in the following chapters I theorize *antaesthetic* strategies of black artists (including a reading of Joseph’s film *Until the quiet comes*, which differs from those given by both Campt and Cramer) that work to liquidate the aesthetic itself, outright— aesthetic capacity and its antiblack prohibition being the basis of antiblackness.

The figure of thought who draws all this together, providing *the* inspiration for, it seems to me, the binarism basic to Wynter, Patterson, Spillers, and Hartman; for afropessimism’s theorization of the antiblack world and psyche, and its resulting call to *destroy the world*; for my

⁹⁵ Sexton 2011.

⁹⁶ Cramer and Raengo 2017, 18.

own *stretching* of Marxism to produce a theory of antiblackness as fundamental accumulation; and for the theorization of the latter—*with* and *as presented by* black works of film, literature, and video—as the prohibition of the faculties of temporality, spatiality, and movement; is of course Frantz Fanon. Specifically, in “*L’expérience vécu du Noir*,”—the fifth chapter of *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952), probably the most enduringly polarizing of his writings—Fanon narrates his own encounter with “the white gaze” in a way that catalyzes the thinking of antiblackness as aesthetic prohibition. Moreover, Fanon also offers an analytical methodology that I echo below in Chapters 2 and 3. Writing in the mid-nineties, during a previous “rediscovery” of Fanon by largely “poststructuralist” and culturalist academics and intellectuals, Stuart Hall noted how “the strategy of Fanon’s text [*Black Skin, White Masks* (1967)] is to engage with certain positions which have been advanced as part of a general ontology, and then to show how this fails to operate or to explain the specific predicament of the black colonial subject.”⁹⁷ This is especially clear when it comes to the fifth chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*, as Fanon steadfastly describes his black body’s immobility and incapacity to cohere within time and space—the aesthetic precondition or realization of “ontological resistance.”⁹⁸

For Hall and his contemporaries, there is an urgent need to confront “the as-yet deeply unresolved question in so-called ‘post-colonial studies’ as to how to reconcile—”

or at least hold in a proper balance—in its paradigm of explanation and reading, *both* Fanon’s spectacular demonstration of the power of the racial binary to fix, and [Homi] Bhabha’s equally important and theoretically productive argument that all binary systems of power are nevertheless, *at the same time*, often if not

⁹⁷ Hall 1996, 27.

⁹⁸ Fanon 2008; 90-93.

always, troubled and subverted by ambivalence and disavowal. Our dilemma is how to *think together* the overwhelming power of the binary, which persists despite everything in all racially inflected systems of power and representation (and certainly survives their endless theoretical deconstruction); *and simultaneously* the ambivalences, the openings, the slippages which the suturing of racial discourse can never totally close up.⁹⁹

If, for many theorists of Hall's and Bhabha's generation (and the subsequent one), this problem between the fixity of oppressive form or structure and the ambivalences of its inherent and anoriginary failure, indicates *the cultural* as the mode of *resistance* par excellence,¹⁰⁰ then Afropessimism's re-reading of Fanon, if nothing else, rejects the ambivalent solution of "culture" as insufficient for the real political project of destroying the antiblack structure of the world—that is to say, for the real political project of black liberation.

Indeed, reading Fanon *after* afropessimism's intervention, it is difficult to locate Hall's desire for "balance" between structural analysis and ambivalent suturing in Fanon's original text (not to even take into account Fanon's more explicit *political* orientation in *The Wretched of the Earth*). Nevertheless, Hall describes well the Fanonian analytical methodology of *Black Skin, White Masks*, which I appropriate in my demonstration of Deleuzian cinematic aesthetics' insufficiency when it comes to describing or explicating the ontology of black film and video works, as well as the insufficiency of a Deleuzian ontology of immanent time and space for explaining the ontological condition of blackness under the prohibition of aesthetic capacity. I also retain the afropessimist insistence that Fanonian ontological diagnoses engender the means

⁹⁹ Hall 1996, 27-28.

¹⁰⁰ See, most famously, Bhabha 1994.

for real political confrontation, where the binary has an essential, unambivalent function only to be destroyed along with the material forces of immanent antiblackness itself.

However, while Wilderson and Marriott have generally expanded and intensified Fanon's critique of the white antiblack world through the appropriation of a structuralist Lacanian-psychoanalytic lens or framework, it is the work of Gilles Deleuze who, more than any other thinker, I put in conversation with Fanon in the chapters that follow. Deleuze, as the preeminent twentieth century thinker of materialism and immanence, provides extremely useful concepts for thinking time, space, and movement as both material and immanent processes (their insufficiency for understanding blackness notwithstanding), which I utilize below in my theorization of fundamental accumulation's antiblack prohibition of aesthetic capacity.

A Deleuzian approach also lends itself to and helps shape my *aesthetic* reading of artistic and literary works—the methodological orientation of *aesthetic ontology*. Perhaps best exemplified by Deleuze's two books on cinema, which lend direct pronounced methodological direction to both Chapters 2 and 4 below, Deleuze's and Guattari's shared and collaborative focus on processes of subjectivation, and on the material processes of virtualization and actualization, brings the aesthetic into foreground.¹⁰¹ Deleuze and Guattari's exploration of the ways cinema, art works and practices, literature, and other cultural forms intervene into processes of subjectivation via “affects” and “percepts,” before and with priority over their signifying or conceptual aspects, demands an ontology of the work at the level of the aesthetic. As Guattari puts it, “[t]he artist—and more generally aesthetic perception—detach and

¹⁰¹ This is perhaps most explicitly shown in Guattari's late text *Chaosmosis: an ethico-aesthetic paradigm* (1995), with its theorization of machines of aesthetic creation, processes of subjectivation, and proto-aesthetic paradigms.

deterritorialize a segment of the real in such a way as to make it play the role of a partial enunciator. Art confers a function of sense and alterity to a subset of the perceivable world.”¹⁰² As Stephen Zepke has noted, this is in contrast to hegemonic contemporary art criticism, which, mirroring the historical development of art practice since 1989, tends to reject the privileging of the aesthetic within art. According to critic and theorist Peter Osborne, contemporary art and its criticism is “post-conceptual art,” defined by the demotion of the aesthetic aspects of the work with respect to its newly privileged “de-materialized” conceptualities, occasioning a “distributive ontology” of the art work—the “distributive unity of the relations between a materially embedded virtuality and an infinite multiplicity of possible visualizations”¹⁰³—that is shared with digital technologies, globalization, and finance capital.¹⁰⁴ If the role of a Deleuzian-Guattarian aesthetic ontology of the artwork is thus questionable within contemporary art practices and analyses, I agree with Zepke that it remains highly relevant and useful for the critique of contemporary processes of subjectivation (which would include the mostly-digital apparatuses through which contemporary art and art criticism circulate),¹⁰⁵ or for the examination of forms of *power* or *violence* more generally. The cinematic, literary, and video works read in this dissertation have been selected, then, undeniably, in part for their (non-contemporary, in the sense outlined above) engagement and privileging of the aesthetic (time, space, movement)—in alignment with the aforementioned materialist commitments of this project. But they deploy and engage the aesthetic in novel, antagonistic, paradoxical ways quite distinct from the processes and interventions elaborated by Deleuze and Guattari.

¹⁰² Guattari 1995, 130-1; quoted in Zepke 2022, 603.

¹⁰³ Osborne 2018, 139; quoted in Zepke 2022, 615.

¹⁰⁴ Osborne 2013; Zepke 2022, 615.

¹⁰⁵ Zepke 2022; see also Guattari 2019.

Specifically, it is Deleuze’s concept of *the virtual* and *the actual* which I use to re-think both time and space—in the following Chapters 2 and 3, respectively—in tandem with Fanon’s auto-theorization of the liquefaction of his “body schema” under the weight of the antiblack past and present. While Fanon’s influence on the theoretical argument of Chapter 4—on *black motion*—is more implied than direct (i.e. the *movement* of decolonization in *Les damnés de la terre*), his effect on the artistic works and political texts discussed in that chapter is, when not referenced directly in those sources, easily felt. In many ways, then, this project—an aesthetic ontology of the antiblack prohibition of aesthetic capacity, and of black political-artistic strategies of antagonistic struggle—is an attempt at a rigorously materialist Fanonism. As demonstrated below, such an approach must substitute the vulgar fetishization of *matter* or the *physical* with a foregrounding and analysis of *forces and processes*, which latter become the prime “objects” of a materialism adequate to the analysis of time and space, capacity, and antiblackness.¹⁰⁶

The process of *fundamental accumulation*, as outlined above, provides an overarching historical-ontological context with which to understand the prohibitive force of antiblackness, as antiblack prohibition works immanently and simultaneously to engender the faculties of temporalization, spatialization, and movement. Via a triangulation of 1) close readings of works by Sarah Maldoror, Dionne Brand, the We Still Outside Collective, and Kahlil Joseph; 2) exposition and critique of philosophical and critical theories of cinema, literature, time, space, movement, and the political; and 3) a materialist development of Fanon’s inaugural formulation of antiblack aesthetic prohibition, the chapters that follow develop this understanding by elaborating analyses of the prohibition of each of the capacities for the temporal, the spatial, and

¹⁰⁶ On the privileging of forces, see Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1983).

the motile. Growing out of each of these analyses, and still grounded in my reading of the black artistic work(s) under examination, is a corresponding elaboration of black struggle against aesthetic prohibition, against this fundamental accumulation. I theorize these forms of struggle as following the strategy axiomatized by Fred Moten as *to refuse that which has been refused*,¹⁰⁷ that is, black antagonistic struggle against both the prohibition of capacity *and* (so) against capacity itself. In Chapter 2 this is the *black persistence* I read in Maldoror's presentation of the ceaseless, caring yet antagonistic search of the figure of Maria, the black Angolan mother, widow, and becoming-revolutionary centered within the film *Sambizanga* (1972). In Chapter 3, I develop the concept of *black literary antaesthetics*, drawing out the implications of formal, structural, thematic, conceptual, and aesthetic aspects of Dionne Brand's books *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001), and *Ossuaires* (2010). And in Chapter 4, I read the We Still Outside Collective's 2020 video *On the black leadership and other white myths*, and Kahlil Joseph's

¹⁰⁷ This formulation makes appearances in Harney and Moten (2013), especially in the chapter titled "Fantasy in the hold." Moten makes it clear in a conversation with Saidiya Hartman: "What's interesting to me—but it's hard to think or talk about—is that we can recognize that absolute horror, the unspeakable incalculable terror and horror that accompanies the necessity of not leaving a trace of human inhabitation. And then there's the whole question of, what would a life be that wasn't interested in leaving a trace of human habitation? So fuck the human, human-inhabitation! I think of a phrase I often use—and I always think of it in relation to Fannie Lou Hamer, because it's just me giving a theoretical spin on a formulation she made in practice: *to refuse that which has been refused to you*. And that's what I'm interested in. And that doesn't mean that what's at stake is some kind of blind, happy, celebratory attitude toward all the beautiful stuff that we've made under constraint. I love all the beautiful stuff we've made under constraint but I'm pretty sure I would love all the beautiful stuff we'd make out from under constraint better. But there's no way to get to that, except through this. We can't go around this. We gotta fight through this. But, by the same token, anybody who thinks they can come even close to understanding how terrible the terror has been without understanding how beautiful the beauty has been against the grain of that terror, is wrong. There is no calculus of the terror that can make a proper calculation without reference to that which resists it. It's just not possible. So this is the key thing to me" (Chimurenga 2018, emphasis added).

short film *Until the quiet comes* (2013), to develop a concept of *black motion* as movement against movement, a movement that implies and engenders a politics against the political.

These chapters share in the development of a kind of *anti-Deleuzian* principle:¹⁰⁸ antiblackness as fundamental accumulation—that is, as the necessarily simultaneous prohibition and creation/development of capacity—hinges on differentiation, distinction, difference itself. The immanence of difference, then, is perhaps the clearest way to conceptualize the immanence of antiblackness, and this statement of my thesis is exemplary of the “immanentizing afropessimism” methodology employed throughout. It follows that the black refusal of immanent prohibition manifests immanently also, but as an immanent antagonism, what others have called an “antagonistically downward movement.”¹⁰⁹ Thus, I conceive of black persistence, black antaesthetics, and black motion, as the ongoing, material struggle for the dissolution of difference, as *antimmanent*—the antimmanence of black struggle against the antiblack world. At the “smallest” scale, this black antimmanence works to liquefact the *difference* constitutive of the virtual field itself (Chapter 2); next, the distinctions integral to processes of actualization and/as spatialization, the differentiation inherent to flesh, bodies, and stratification (Chapter 3); and finally, it liquefacts the distinctions inherent to movement: situation and action, self- and other-motion, the discrete and the continuous (Chapter 4).

Although it does not receive its own chapter, perhaps the “largest” of differentiations targeted here, implied throughout the following chapters but gestured to most strongly at the end

¹⁰⁸ By which I do not mean to disavow a love for Deleuze’s work. But we shouldn’t let love mythologically stand in for the real of determination-in-the-last-instance (Marx/Althusser/Laruelle/Wilderson/Warren/et. al, contra all the authors of the late twentieth century who, usually in the advanced stages of their intellectual itineraries, make their own *love-turns*).

¹⁰⁹ Barber 2017; see Chapter 2 below.

of Chapter 4, is the distinction between the political and the ethical, which also was mentioned in the preceding introduction. While this opposing pair, as noted above, is symptomatic of that of humanism and binarism, or is another manifestation of *the One* and *the rule of two*, within the lived experience of twenty-first century capitalism the antimony of the political and the ethical outlines the disappearing horizon for contemporary politics; or rather, as a prime antinomy of the contemporary, the undecidability of the political and the ethical seems to herald the impossibility of political action. What black antimmanence signifies, then, is not another turn away from (the return of) structure to an *ethics* of the (black) immanent, but rather, in/as the same movement as the abolition of fundamental accumulation, the (antaesthetic) dissolution of the distinction between the ethical and the political (between *the One* and *the rule of two*).

Two

Prohibition of temporality and black persistence

“The aloneness of a woman and the time it takes to march.”¹ This is how Sarah Maldoror (1929-2020) described her 1972 film *Sambizanga*,² which has been recognized as the first feature-length film made by a black woman.³ Set a decade before its making, during a moment of coalescence in the Angolan struggle for independence, the film adapts José Luandino Vieira’s historical novel *The Real Life of Domingos Xavier*, elaborating a modernist illustration of anticolonial resistance through the journey of Maria, its black Angolan protagonist.⁴ While *Sambizanga* contextualizes the disclosure of Maria’s revolutionary consciousness within the incipient militancy of the underground resistance to Portuguese colonialism, the form of movement presented in the film’s images is less one of resistance than of persistence. Rather than an image of solid opposition or alternative temporality, *Sambizanga* presents an image of the liquefaction of time and a movement of antagonistic downwardness.

¹ Maldoror cited in Ramanathan 2006, 100

² Maldoror, Sarah, 1972. After decades of unavailability, *Sambizanga* was restored in 2021 by the African Film Heritage Project and released by the Criterion Collection as part of *Martin Scorsese’s World Cinema Project No. 4*. Unfortunately, in addition to restoring the film’s color and sound, large sections of the film’s final sequences have been deleted for the new edit. This cut material, for the most part lingering shots of spaces and groups of people without dialogue, is crucial to the film, and to its analysis in the present chapter. Therefore, all citations are to the original 1972 version of the film. This original version can still be found online.

² Gugler 2003, 50-56.

³ Harvey 1974.

As Maria searches Luanda's jails for her abducted husband, discovering his clandestine political activity and then his murder via police torture, her persistence displaces a predominantly male image of anticolonial political militancy. Because it presents black anticolonial struggle in images of an African woman's caring, searching, and mourning, *Sambizanga* has been noted as one of a handful of feminist films in its era of anticolonial African cinema.⁵ Moving below that anticolonial feminist reading, in this essay I consider what Maldoror's film tells us about the most basic components of the cinematic image, and how the faculty for those basic components is distributed differentially in the antiblack world. Utilizing Fanon's auto-theorizing on time and space in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952/2008) to critique Deleuze's conception of time, the essay denaturalizes temporal capacity itself and argues for its fundamental antiblackness. And by appropriating Deleuze's approach to film—which foregrounds cinematic images of movement and time, grounded in the most elemental temporal processes—this reading of *Sambizanga* develops the film's demand for a new kind of image, of a new kind of movement. This demand takes the form of two related images of blackness: the image of incoherence and the image of persistence. *Sambizanga* materializes these images, as Maria and her comrades animate a movement that negatively exceeds the bounds of the temporal and the spatial.

While *Sambizanga*'s images exceed the material conditions of the (Euromodernist) cinema, Maldoror's cinematic techniques are not at all alien to postwar European cinema practice, including, in very basic terms, long shots, abstracted lines and spaces, and new

⁵ See for example Petty 1996, 72-88; Ramanathan 2006, 99-102; and Dembrow. In fact, centering on the situation of a black African mother under the Portuguese colonial regime, Maldoror presents a cinema of black female positionality that parallels American black feminist discourse and cultural production, such as the Combahee River Statement that was composed five years after *Sambizanga*. *Sambizanga*'s presentation of black care also presages by more than four decades Christina Sharpe's recent thematization of black care: "to think care in the wake as a problem for thinking and of and for Black non/being in the world." See Sharpe 2016, 5.

relationships between image, sound, narrative, and voice. *Sambizanga* was composed more or less at the apex of the historical-cinematic period during which Deleuze locates the modernist proliferation of what he calls the time-image and its any-space-whatevers, and Maldoror herself cited Agnes Varda, Anna Karina, Alain Resnais, and Chris Marker as European directors with whom she shared some filmic sensibility.⁶ As such, in addition to working representationally to provide a politically motivated reflection back on an earlier period of black Angolan revolutionary solidarity (by the making of the film in 1972 the struggle for independence had already become more segmented and internally divided, presaging the civil war that followed the Carnation Revolution and Angolan independence in 1974),⁷ *Sambizanga* could be understood as a black aesthetic intervention into the conventions of modernist cinematic composition.

However, although *Sambizanga* may seem to present a (black) image of time, if we follow Deleuze's thinking on time rigorously while at the same time heeding the insights made by contemporary authors of afropessimism, then the formulation of a direct image of black time proves paradoxical at multiple levels. As a result, Maldoror's film presents an internal contradiction that is deeper than the one Deleuze outlines as the relation between film and money. While Maldoror's own description of *Sambizanga* (above) names time itself as a necessary precondition for marching (read "the voyage" for Deleuze), the film presents an image of temporal incoherence in which that necessary condition can never be met. *Sambizanga* is a time-image that illustrates the prohibition of the temporal faculty, of aesthetic capacity.

In some obvious and important ways *Sambizanga* is an anticolonialist film, and it may be argued that any aesthetic intervention the film makes should be considered as such. Maldoror

⁶ Maldoror 1974, 75.

⁷ See Marcum 1969.

describes her intention as filmmaker to raise international awareness of the revolutionary struggle against Portuguese colonialism,⁸ and the social-political scenario in which the film's narrative unfolds, as well as the specific performances of violence depicted in the film, are explicit manifestations of colonialism. While disputing none of this, I nevertheless will not analyze the images of *Sambizanga* as colonial (or anticolonial) in nature, but rather as images of blackness (and antiblackness).

Afropessimism posits an asymmetrical duality of global structures of violence or “grammars of suffering:” the “contingent violence” of human conflict, resolution, and the potential for restoration, and the “gratuitous violence” of antiblack antagonism upon which the former relies for its precondition⁹—what I have elaborated in materialist terms as fundamental accumulation. This conflict/antagonism duality that describes the structure of the antiblack world, and which can be translated as the relation between the fundamental accumulation of capacity and the primitive/capitalist accumulation of value, can be utilized to understand the way the dual registers of meaning within a film—the dramatic, representational register on the one hand, and the asignifying presentation of movement, time and affect on the other—can produce competing “readings.” Put differently, while it is common to critique the ways a film operates representationally to (re-)produce subject effects, a film can also be analyzed for the ways in which it materializes temporal and spatial images, and how those images might be used. My claim is that *Sambizanga* replicates the ontological duality between human *conflict* (accumulation of value) and antiblack *antagonism* (accumulation of capacity), hence dramatically representing Angolan anticolonial struggle while simultaneously presenting images

⁸ Maldoror 1974.

⁹ Wilderson 2020.

of the (antiblack) prohibition of the faculties and of black persistence. Its engagement with antiblackness at the non-narrative level of cinema is especially evident, precisely because of the way *Sambizanga's* modernist compositional tendencies pull apart the representational and “optical” poles from each other.¹⁰ It is this second register of the film, that of its images, that I examine in this chapter.

I have referenced Wilderson’s *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* above, solely for its theoretical analysis of antiblackness. But in this volume Wilderson also makes an intervention into canonical film theory, applying a powerful analysis of the essential antiblack structure of political ontology to the narrative framing performed through the cinematic apparatus. Critiquing Stephen Heath’s *Questions of Cinema*, Wilderson argues that in narrative cinema,

Composition is the effect of a capacity to stamp space and time with coherence, to both assert and be hailed by a “logic of movement” which can compose “eventful” chronology out of endless time, and by a logic of cartography which can compose determinate place out of nameless space. In this way, Heath informs us, the seen is converted into scene, and narrative can literally take (possess) place. But can the Black be framed if the Black, by definition, has no capacity to take place? How can composition “organize the frame in function of the human figures” who have no humanity? In point of fact, the compositional

¹⁰ I do not mean to deny that film narratives may themselves address antiblackness at the level of what Wilderson calls the “essential antagonism.” But, as I argue below, antiblackness is *always* present in the cinema’s non- or pre-narrative signalitic material.

effects of Heath's cinematic frame are not available to the Black unless the Black has been structurally adjusted within the frame, made to *appear* as "man," "woman," "proletarian," "child," "gay," or "straight," and so on.¹¹

Wilderson's intervention into cinematic representation is radical, and essential for understanding how compositional methodologies contribute to and shape antiblack and white supremacist reproductive functions of progressivist film narratives. One could apply his argument to analyze the "structural adjustment" manifested in *Sambizanga* that "upgrades" the black characters and antiblack antagonism whose images the film comprises, to appear as revolutionary subjects struggling against the violence of colonialism. However, this analysis leaves crucial aspects of the "cinematic apparatus" off the hook. Considering aspects of the cinematic image only insofar as they are subsumed under the function of producing "narrative arc"—the chronology consisting of equilibrium, conflict, and resolution, and its variations—Wilderson's critique of narrative does not attend to those components of the cinematic image that are irreducible or previous to narrative.

In his *Cinema* books Deleuze, on the other hand, attends to the cinematic image itself as a direct presentation; his analysis of cinema examines the image as, in the first instance, "signaletic material," as "neither a language system nor a language. It is a plastic mass, an a-signifying and a-syntactic material, a material not formed linguistically even though it is not amorphous and is formed semiotically, aesthetically, and pragmatically. It is a condition, anterior by right to what it conditions. It is not an enunciation, and these are not utterances. It is an *utterable*."¹² So, while Wilderson and those he critiques are concerned with the cinematic production of chronology

¹¹ Wilderson 2010, 281.

¹² Deleuze 1989, 29.

from time, and place from space, Deleuze's theorization focuses on cinema as the creation of direct images of movement, time, and space, themselves. This is the difference between narration and signification on the one hand, and aesthetic materiality, asignifying semiotics and forces on the other.

In order to extend Wilderson's critique of cinematic narrative, to indict the most basic material components of the cinematic image as it exists and acts on viewers in "the irreducibility of a present living under the present of narration,"¹³ I will appropriate Deleuze's approach to cinema while reorienting it via afropessimist protocols, resulting in an immanent, material conception of the images of antiblack prohibition and black persistence. This *anti-Deleuzian* analysis enables me to locate within *Sambizanga* a problematization of the cinematic image, and of the temporal itself, that is manifested through the film's material composition, "prior" to the intersection of signifying chains with vectors of desire.¹⁴ Moreover, this problematization, recognition of which would be foreclosed by analytic devotion to the grammar and syntax of film narrative and framing, leads to radical possibilities that issue from the film's attempt to present the material conditions of blackness in its images.¹⁵

¹³ Deleuze 1986, 206.

¹⁴ I am referring, of course, to Lacan's "graph of desire" (*Écrits*), taken up by Jacques-Alain Miller in his conceptualization of the "suture," introduced into film theory by Jean-Pierre Oudart, and reinterpreted and developed by countless other film theorists, including Laura Mulvey and Stephen Heath. For a basic differentiation between psychoanalytic, i.e. "traditional" or "canonical" (Wilderson, 2010) film theory, and Deleuze's approach to cinema, see Pisters (2003, 3-4). Generalizing on the practical relation between these two approaches to analyzing film, we should say that contrary to the focus of psychoanalytic film theory, films do more than suture the signifier and the signified, and all that this implies. Moreover, it is the case that for at least some films, the cinematic operations performed outside of the signifying/suturing register are primary. For my reading, this is the case with *Sambizanga*, hence my appropriation of a Deleuzian methodology, even if my aim is to critique and transfigure that approach.

¹⁵ Of course, Deleuze's philosophy of cinema includes no consideration of race, taking for granted the transparency of the white/European subject and structure of cinema. But while I

In the process of reorienting Deleuze's cinematic approach to analyze the images in *Sambizanga*, this chapter thereby also continues to draw a general critical position from which to engage Deleuze and Deleuzian modes of analysis that takes seriously black feminist and afropessimist interventions, as Deleuze rightly continues to exert influence within the critical humanities (even if Deleuzian cinema studies continues as a minor contingent within film theory at large); as will be glimpsed in this chapter and the next, Deleuze's oeuvre constitutes a profound critique of political-libidinal economy *and* ontology (and their nexus). My position in these chapters contrasts with the infrequent encounters between afropessimism and Deleuze that have occurred thus far. For example, on the one hand, in *Afropessimism* (2020) Wilderson briefly discounts "the faux-politics" of Deleuze, as characterized by his recounting of a "Deleuzian intervention... whose arguments were theoretical accompaniments to neoliberal individualism rather than a blast of social iconoclasm that Deleuze and his spiritual progenitors anoint

maintain that, in spite of this error on the French philosopher's part, his thinking is still invaluable for an understanding of cinema, and of time and space, I do not wish to argue for a modification of Deleuze's analysis in order to render it more racially inclusive. I think Deleuze was accurate, although also ignorant (and ethically oblivious) in his implicit linking of the movement- and time-images to whiteness. One might even note Deleuze's lack of "racial" consideration when he describes, elsewhere, the intensive variations within and between the univocity of being as "like degrees of [W]hiteness" (1994, 39). Deleuze's theorization of cinematic images is useful not just despite his unfailing tendency to exclude non-Western and non-white cinema, but also *because* through that exclusion he unintentionally suggests and initiates the theorization of the movement- and time-images (and so perhaps the contemporary images that follow genealogically from these) as images of whiteness, or more precisely, of non-blackness. As I argue below, insofar as the cinematic image comprises structures, orientations, or schemas that are fundamentally temporal and spatial, it functions at the most basic level to reproduce the antiblack world, or to safeguard what may be understood as antiblack immanence.

"Centering blackness" in the cinematic image, which necessitates an analysis of antiblackness, leads to the adoption in this essay of "non-black" over "white" as the name of the dominant ontological category. On the historical movement of the color-line from an arrangement of white/non-white to non-black/black, see Jared Sexton (2008). For an application of Deleuze's cinematic philosophy to largely non-white "world cinema," see David Martin-Jones, *Deleuze and World Cinemas* (2011). In Martin-Jones's book, cinema of Africa and the black diaspora are conspicuously absent.

themselves as having.”¹⁶ On the other hand, Daniel Barber’s 2016 article “The Creation of Non-Being” articulates a potential common critical space between afropessimism and (a non-affirmationist) Deleuze by arguing that Deleuze and Guattari’s theorization of immanence as non-being finds its historical materiality in the experience of blackness.¹⁷ This would seem to agree with most readings of Fanon’s invocation of the “zone of non-being,” which identify that “real hell” that Fanon describes as the ontological location of blackness. Barber thus argues that afropessimism’s claims “vertiginously intensify Deleuze’s theorization of non-being,” and that Deleuze’s work “may be deployed by and for the articulation of Afro-Pessimist claims.”¹⁸ However, a close reading of the passage in which Fanon invokes the “zone of nonbeing” suggests the non-identity of non-being with blackness. It is worth quoting the entire passage from *Black Skin, White Masks*:

At the risk of arousing the resentment of my colored brothers, I will say
that the black is not a man.

¹⁶ Wilderson 2020, 182-83. Of course, I do not wish to defend those celebratory, joyous, affirmationist Deleuzians (Culp, 2016). But to transfer the well-deserved critique of their complicity with neoliberal capitalism to Deleuze himself is to miss what recent commentators have understood as the most important or useful characteristics of his oeuvre—a radical negativity, laboring to unground the most basic transcendental structures. See Culp (2016), and Lapoujade (2017). Besides this recent claim of a *darker* Deleuze, European critics have, more readily than American ‘critical theorists’, utilized his thought to analyze changes in the capitalist social formation since the 1960s. In America, until recently, his short text “Postscript on the Societies of Control” has been by far his most frequently utilized work in this respect. For a valuable American exception to this trend, see Jason Read’s *The Micro-Politics of Capital: Marx and the Prehistory of the Present* (2003), which uses Deleuze and other European contemporary Marxist philosophers to illustrate the extension of Marx’s own critical thought, developing an analysis of “the production of subjectivity” in contemporary capitalism.

¹⁷ Barber is drawing from Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s *What is Philosophy?* (1996, 48).

¹⁸ Barber 2016, par. 16.

There is a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born. In most cases, the black man lacks the advantage of being able to accomplish this descent into a real hell.¹⁹

Fanon is a more sophisticated reader of ontology than most of his interpreters give him credit for. He is here acknowledging the generative ontological function of “nothingness” or “nonbeing” as the source of the new, the novel, the “authentic upheaval.” “Man,” the human, must access nonbeing, in all its sterility and naked declivity, in order to, as Deleuze will put it a decade or two later, *create the possible*.²⁰ The black is “not a man,” that is, not a human, by the very fact that he is prohibited access to this generative zone of nonbeing. For Deleuze, another name for non-being is *the virtual*. And as I argue below (in this chapter and in the next), antiblack prohibition of the virtual is integral to the antiblack prohibition of temporal and spatial capacity.²¹

In contrast to both these approaches, the *antimmanent* orientation with which this essay proceeds neither discounts Deleuze’s critique of capitalism nor seeks to forge an articulation between Deleuzian immanence and blackness as non-being. Rather, I extend the line of afropessimist arguments vis-à-vis the exteriority of blackness to the world of political-libidinal economy: in its ontological prohibition, blackness “negatively determines”²² immanence itself.

¹⁹ Fanon 1967, 10.

²⁰ See Zourabichvili 2012, 11; see footnote below.

²¹ I owe this insight into Fanon’s meaning vis-à-vis the “zone of nonbeing” to Calvin Warren. He speaks about it on the *Being and Event* podcast (2023), episode 6, hosted by Alexander Galloway and Andrew Culp (Warren repeats the standard interpretation of the passage in his 2018 *Ontological Terror: blackness, nihilism, and emancipation*).

²² Marx 1973, 491.

Put differently, economies of presencing, or the play of being and non-being, take as their precondition the prohibition of blackness from that immanent scene.²³ Nevertheless, *Sambizanga* points towards the persistence of blackness in no-time and no-space, a persistence that moves “interminably downward.”²⁴ With such antagonistic downwardness for a horizon, I give a reading of *Sambizanga* which identifies a crisis of the image deeper than that analyzed by Deleuze.

THE CRISIS OF BLACKNESS OF THE CINEMATIC IMAGE

Set in the early 1960s, during the emergence of the black Angolan struggle against Portuguese colonial rule, *Sambizanga* unfolds around the journey of Maria, a young Angolan mother whose colonial quarry-worker husband Domingos has been arrested and detained for his involvement as an underground conspirator. Ignorant of her husband’s political activity, Maria journeys on foot with her son wrapped on her back, from their country worker barracks to Luanda. Moving from prison to prison in search of Domingos, at each new location she is re- or misdirected by another colonial authority. While Maria is the clearest protagonist, the film moves between three perspectives: Maria’s perspective, in which she searches for her husband, learns of his murder, and joins his comrades at the end of the film; the perspective of Domingos, in which he is taken to prison, interrogated, and beaten to death; and the perspective of a network of underground insurgents, including a young boy, an old man, and a handful of operatives, showing their work to identify the comrade who has been captured, and make plans for a

²³ On “economies of presencing,” see Reiner Schürmann 1990.

²⁴ Sexton 2016a.

concentrated attempt to free all captive insurgents. But unlike the novel it is based upon, the film foregrounds Maria's perspective and her journey.²⁵

Near the middle of *Sambizanga*, after being denied information at one jail and commanded to leave, Maria is guided onto a bus by a sympathetic police. He tells Maria, "Go to the Luanda police. You'll find him. Maybe the secret police," and directs her to a Madame Tete, who will help Maria navigate the city.²⁶

As the cop leaves Maria on the bus, a haunting, repetitive melody begins. The singing continues, and the image cuts briefly to an obstructed view of a large palm against the sky, then the view from a prison patio we subsequently see occupied by Domingos, alone, against a bare white wall. Shots then alternate quickly: a modernist composition comprising the tops of prison walls and a dark window with metal bars, from which the camera moves down to show Domingos still captive; Maria with her baby in her arms on the bus, trees and pure light passing by outside the window; Domingos and a single male companion in the same prison space, the camera then moving back up to the same modernist-prison angular plane; Maria and other passengers watching the windows of the bus, as they pass a large stone church; prison guards atop a tower, overlooking prisoners below who walk in a continuous circular line; looking up and past Maria's face, into the window through which a blinding white light obscures the image. As the bus unloads its passengers and Maria steps out with her baby again wrapped on her back the singing fades, and the diegetic sounds of Luanda saturate the image of Maria's movements. She walks through a maze of empty, unpopulated scaffolding structure (an empty market at evening), the sounds of the city only slightly muffled and the voice of a woman, out-of-field, contributing

²⁵ Gugler 2003, 50-56.

²⁶ Maldoror 1972, 45:58.

to the dispersion achieved through this mixture of montage and abstraction of images. Then the scene cuts to night—first near, and then total darkness, the sounds of insects populating the blacked out image with only the faint silhouette of Maria visible. She bangs on a door, calling for “Mama Tete!” and once inside the house the sequence returns to dialogue.

Foregrounding the quality of voyage that animates *Sambizanga*—the “aloneness of a woman and the time it takes”—this sequence flaunts its Deleuzian characteristics, seeming to exemplify what Deleuze describes as the crisis of the classical cinematic image. That image is explained by Deleuze as a direct image of movement, and is perhaps typified by the action-image, where the link between a situation and an action (or an action and a situation), and so between perception and movement, are presented directly.²⁷ In the decades following World War II, the action image undergoes crisis, in correlation with postwar social and political-economic crises around the world. In short, the link between situation and action is broken; the cinematic image no longer articulates perception with movement. As the action-image manifested certain dominant tendencies of the direct image of movement, its crisis occasions the emergence of another image—the direct image of time. Deleuze delineates several characteristics of this cinematic crisis/emergence: the dispersive situation, deliberately weak character links, the voyage form, consciousness of clichés, and “condemnation” of the plot.²⁸ *Sambizanga* exemplifies these characteristics, but with an overarching essential difference manifested in each case.

Sambizanga unfolds around Maria’s meandering yet interminable journey in search of her abducted husband, and in doing so the film exemplifies a form privileged within the postwar

²⁷ Deleuze 1986.

²⁸ Deleuze 1986, 207-211.

cinematic crisis. According to Deleuze, in such images “the sensory-motor action or situation,” which characterizes the movement-image of classical cinema, “has been replaced by the stroll, the voyage and the continual return journey.” These indeterminate movements, perhaps most easily observed in the films of Antonioni, “[have] become detached from the active and affective structure which supported it, directed it, gave it even vague directions.”²⁹ Maldoror’s statement that her intention in *Sambizanga* was “to show the aloneness of a woman and the time it takes to march” seems to perfectly characterize the Deleuzian voyage.³⁰ Maria continually returns to another policeman, another jail, her strolling from prison to prison takes on a circular shape, even if this circle, which was drawn earlier by the prisoners’s orbital marching (in the sequence described above), seems to spiral in on itself and downward. And when Maria learns of Domingos’s murder, rather than any sense of an end to this voyage, we see her search become a voyage of mourning and then persistence, through her absence in the film’s final scene, as waves foam in pools near the sea’s shore, an oceanic return-journey.

However, the voyage in *Sambizanga* differs from the voyage image described by Deleuze. It does, per Deleuze’s delineation, demonstrate a kind of detachment from “active” or “actional supports,” as Maria’s unyielding need to go and find her husband is unable to connect perception to movement; proceeding chronologically from the early scene of Domingos’s capture, the images of Maria’s journey disconnect themselves from that prior “action” by directly presenting the “time” of Maria’s search. But this voyage cannot claim the separation from *affective* structures that Deleuze requires of the “new” image. The absence of the active in

²⁹ Deleuze 1986, 208. The quintessential films of Antonioni in this regard are, of course, the trilogy composed of *L’Avventura* (1960), *La Notte* (1961), and *L’Eclisse* (1962), as well as *The Passenger* (1975).

³⁰ Maldoror cited in Ramanathan 2006, 100.

Maria's journey is itself the product of the most intense and affecting structure. For while the history of colonial violence in Angola might serve narratively as a "cause" for the African insurgents' organizing, it is the gratuitous violence of antiblackness that serves as the images' constant background and assumption, effectuating the initial event of Domingos's capture and his subsequent murder as well as Maria's encounters with the police. It should be noted that this effectuation is not a cause. By saturating the image materially and affectively, as it saturates the world, antiblackness constitutes an immanent violence, and the film does not suggest, narratively or optically, that Maria can act in the face of such a structure; nevertheless, she must persist in her search.

Sambizanga unfolds what Deleuze calls a "dispersive" reality. In Maria's wanderings, the viewer can make sense of "[l]inkages, connections, [and] liaisons" with as little definitiveness as Maria herself. Characters' actions do not lead to modified situations, nor do "defined situations derive appropriate actions. "Reality is lacunary as much as dispersive."³¹ Maldoror herself describes this in uncannily Deleuzian terms as "the perspective of a woman caught up in a situation she does not understand."³² Even the plot devices that have survived the adaptation from Vieira's novel—the story of the boy and old man's surveillance work and their covert communication with movement operatives—seem entirely beside the point, delinked from the images we are presented with.

But the difference, again, between Maldoror's dispersive image and that of the French new wave, Italian neorealist, or American new-Hollywood, is the overdetermining presence of immanent antiblack violence, which is ultimately responsible for the "weak links" that would tie

³¹ Deleuze 1986, 208, 207.

³² Dembrow.

Sambizanga's characters and events. *Sambizanga*'s reality is lacunary not because of the breaking of links, but due to their absence. The antiblack effectuation of "weak links" between characters is another way of describing what Wilderson calls the absence of relationality that is characteristic of the black's ontological condition in the antiblack world.³³

The wanderers of the European time-image materialize a *disconnection* of events, characters, and spaces whose momentum seems to originate in an excess of self-possession (i.e. the totalization, generalization, and internalization of capitalist relations). The black Angolans of *Sambizanga*, on the other hand, exist in antagonistic relation to both the *connection and disconnection* of such linkages. The violence of *connection* is represented at the beginning of the film, as the event of Domingos's abduction by colonial police from the place and space (colonial barracks) that confined his and Maria's family in abject poverty, and then later as the event of his torture and beating in prison. As effectuations of antiblackness, these sequences connect the film's actions, characters, and situations under a gratuitous plane of duress, thereby implicating connection; these are *direct images of antiblack movement*. But antiblack movement always enforces the absence of (black) connections. The effect of the connection established by Domingos's capture and murder is the simultaneous *absence* of links in the images of Domingos's imprisonment and death, and Maria's journey and mourning, in which plot is nearly indecipherable, dialogue is incidental, and the chronological order of events seems largely arbitrary. The reality that *Sambizanga* unfolds, rather than either connective or dispersive, is gratuitous.³⁴

³³ Wilderson 2010, 42-43.

³⁴ I here borrow the term *gratuitous* from Frank Wilderson's description of the slave's "grammar of suffering" as one of "gratuitous violence." See Wilderson (2010).

In Deleuze's formulation, it is clichés, with their ubiquity and film-consciousness, that maintain a semblance of "totality or linkage" within a world in which the latter have undergone global political and cinematic crisis.³⁵ In Robert Altman's *Nashville* (1975), clichés comprise the spaces of the city, as they "are redoubled by the images to which they give rise—photos, recordings, television," not to mention the verbal clichés that populate the film's speech. In *Taxi Driver* (1976) Martin Scorsese "makes a catalogue of all the psychic clichés which bustle about in the driver's head, but at the same time of the optical and sound clichés of the neon-city that he sees filing past along the streets." Deleuze observes that after the breakdown of the sensory-motor link, the individual must reconstruct or reorient herself and the world using clichés as the only tools at hand.³⁶ This is true of both society and cinema, and cinema is one important media through which society performs this reconstruction. So in cinema after the prewar period, "the current clichés of an epoch or moment, sound and visual slogans," work to consolidate, if not integrate the image, in all its dispersiveness and relative unintelligibility. Cliché as formal characteristic of the modernist image thus establishes *equivalence* between pairs whose connections have been torn apart: society and the individual, situation and (in)action. Ultimately, such equivalence enables "misery [to] reach the inside of consciousnesses and the inside [to] be like the outside" in order for "people to bear themselves and the world."³⁷ That this reconstruction is at its core a dissimulation constitutes one formulation of the paradox of modern cinema. And the immanent critique of that paradox is the only hope, according to Deleuze, the cinema gives.

³⁵ Deleuze 1986, 208.

³⁶ Deleuze 1986, 155-59. The sensory-motor link is the schema that connects, reliably if reversibly, perception and movement, situation and action, cause and effect. See Deleuze 1986.

³⁷ Deleuze 1986, 208-209.

While antiblackness oftentimes defies recognition as cliché because of its structural ubiquity within both modernity and the cinematic,³⁸ it nevertheless can be understood as a cliché precisely for the way in which it circulates throughout society in the form of “floating,” “anonymous,” and ubiquitous “sound and visual slogans.”³⁹ These constitute a spectrum of phenomena whose examples include but are not limited to microaggressions, slurs, poverty, captivity, police brutality, and lynchings—from the subtle to the spectacular.⁴⁰ *Sambizanga* shows, in its visual portrayals of colonial lifescapes, the small talk between Maria and the police, and the interrogation and beating of Domingos, the animation and grounding of local optical and sound clichés by antiblackness. These antiblack clichés are gratuitous iterations of the immanence of antiblackness.⁴¹

To put it in Deleuze’s words, antiblack clichés “circulate in the external world, but...also penetrate each one of us and constitute [our] internal world.”⁴² That is to say that antiblack cliché allows the white to continually reconstruct herself; exuding from an ontological position “prior” to that of money, it acts as a “balm” to heal over, among other things, the existential cracks that accrue under ever expanding and intensifying capitalist forces, the multitudinous forms of deterritorialization and alienation.⁴³ While, for Deleuze, the reconstruction of links performed by clichés functions by establishing *equivalence* between consciousness and world, the self-(re-

³⁸ See Wilderson (2010), as well as Sylvia Wynter (1992).

³⁹ Deleuze 1986, 208.

⁴⁰ Martinot and Sexton 2003. On antiblack lynching, see Marriott (2000).

⁴¹ The identity this essay traces between the immanent and the (antiblack-)gratuitous should by now be obvious.

⁴² Deleuze 1986, 208.

⁴³ Wilderson writes, “Why is anti-Black violence not a form of racist hatred but the *genome* of Human renewal; a therapeutic balm that the Human race needs to know and heal itself?” (Wilderson 2020, 17). See also page 200: “I knew, if only intuitively, that love had already been conquered by violence. But I refused to believe that anti-Black violence was a healing balm for the Human mind.”

)construction performed through antiblack cliché functions, as Wilderson argues, via *contradistinction* of non-black from black,⁴⁴ and as an occasion for the human's apperception of her fundamental accumulation.

While Maria searches for her husband, riding the bus and walking the road, we see what seem like examples of Deleuze's "pure optical and sound situations."⁴⁵ These materialize as a series of spaces that, at a visual level, have much in common with the "any-space-whatevers" of his modernist cinema. However, when compared closely with Deleuze's description of the image-in-crisis, the no-space-whatsoever in *Sambizanga* appear to hold within themselves something like a radical deficiency, betraying characteristics alien to Deleuze's description, and appearing to result from something other than the "international conspiracy of money" at the basis of the time-image. *Sambizanga* is remarkable insofar as it nearly exemplifies Deleuze's time-image—which ultimately offers an implicit critique of money's omnipresence within the temporal—while nonetheless also directly presenting antiblackness.⁴⁶ This difference signals a more radical discontinuity at the basis of modern (cinematic) temporality, and calls for a more detailed comparative analysis between the images of modern cinema and those of *Sambizanga*.

⁴⁴ On the necessary enabling relation of black absence for white coherence, see the work of Wilderson generally, especially *Red, White & Black* (2010).

⁴⁵ Deleuze 1986, 120.

⁴⁶ Insofar as it comprises a direct presentation of antiblackness, it presents the temporal and spatial aspects of blackness (that is, as I argue below, their prohibition and incoherence) indirectly. *Sambizanga* is remarkable in this way, but not unique. A very long list can easily be made of black-diasporic films that utilize modernist techniques in the service of presenting images of blackness and of the antiblackness of the world.

IMAGES OF INCOHERENCE: PROHIBITION OF THE TEMPORAL AND NO-SPACE-WHATSOEVER

Deleuze described the any-space-whatevers of classical and modernist Euro cinema as *before* and *after* spaces: spaces of “virtual conjunction, grasped as pure locus of the possible” or spaces of disconnection and emptiness, in which a set has been emptied of its occupants or actors.⁴⁷ These spaces make frequent appearances throughout classical cinema, and are later derived during the crisis of the action-image in the work of directors such as Godard, Antonioni, or Altman, where “pure optical and sound situations” yield spaces that function less as settings for “sensory-motor ‘motivating situations,’” and more as emptied sets for “strolling, ...sauntering or ... rambling.”⁴⁸ As such, the any-space-whatever is always tied, through its *before-* or *after-ness*, to a virtual presence, whether past or future. The any-space-whatever, the quintessential space of European cinema, is therefore a manifestation of time, as time is understood by Deleuze via Bergson, with respect to Augustine: a perpetual forking into the two flows of “presents which pass, [and] pasts which are preserved.”⁴⁹ It is the latter which take precedence and priority in the material composition of the any-space-whatever.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Deleuze 1986; 109, 120. According to Deleuze, the any-space-whatever was first “invented” by Ozu, as “a perfectly singular space” minus “the connection of its own parts, so that the linkages can be made in an infinite number of ways” (109).

⁴⁸ Deleuze 1986; 109, 120-21.

⁴⁹ Deleuze 1989, 98.

⁵⁰ In *Cinema 1* Deleuze specifies cinematographic methods through which the any-space-whatever may be composed—shadows, lyrical abstraction, color—in classical films by Bresson, Sternberg, Dryer, Griffith, Eisenstein, Varda, and Minnelli. But he also names two other “influences” that produce a proliferation of any-space-whatevers: the demolished spaces and reconstruction of post-war reality, and cinema’s proliferation of “pure optical and sound situations” resulting from the crisis of the action image (120-121). Additionally, he acknowledges their construction in experimental cinema. Deleuze (1986) 111-119, 120-121, 122, respectively.

However, it is necessary to complicate this initial understanding of time and of the any-space-whatever. For Deleuze, it is not enough simply to understand the forking of time as the way we move forward (and via memory, backward), that is, as a kind of modified chronology still within the purview of succession. Rather, the cinematic image, insofar as it puts into crisis naturalized perceptions of movement and perception and approaches a direct perception of time, must be understood to “organize the order of *non-chronological* coexistences or relations.”⁵¹ The non-chronological nature of time implies movement from one present to another as intensive, qualitative change, a “constant augmentation of dimensions;”⁵² rather than change through chronology, this is change through accumulation, as the jump from one present to another amounts to the addition or actualization of a new dimension.⁵³ The ongoing “succession” of presents is therefore really an “infinite proliferation” of dimensions. Furthermore, the present, strictly speaking, does not “become” past. The past must rather be understood as the a priori past, the very field *in which* coexists “every dimension capable of being actualized, and not merely those which were formerly present.”⁵⁴ As such, this *past in general* or *virtual past* is “the very field of difference in kind,” the field of relations between disparate dimensions or presents. Not at all some representational reservoir of “empirical memories,”⁵⁵ this field constitutes “the synthesis of all time:” the virtual. And in it, not every dimension (every present) *exists*, but all *insist*.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Deleuze 1989, 111; emphasis added.

⁵² Deleuze 1994, 81.

⁵³ Zourabichvili, 2012, 99-100.

⁵⁴ Deleuze 1994, 81.

⁵⁵ Zourabichvili 2012, 100.

⁵⁶ Deleuze 1994, 82.

As an image that presents, and is composed from, this temporal arrangement, the any-space-whatever is the spatial inhabitation of the exchange between actual and virtual, where actual refers to an existing present, and virtual refers to the field of all (possible) *insisting* presents.⁵⁷ Any-space-whatevers present possibility evacuated or purified of succession and action: they are spaces that present a present *as* one insisting dimension of the virtual. They thereby yield “direct images of time,” exceeding the “sensory-motor schema” presented by images of movement and action.⁵⁸ Following Bergson, Deleuze specifies that “larger” relays between virtual and actual make up “longer” experiences (or images) of time, and the instantaneous exchange between the two terms comprises the core of time as experience, and also the core of the cinematic image.⁵⁹ Shuttling between these two poles are “all the circles of the past constituting so many stretched or shrunk *regions, strata, and sheets,*” each with its own “tones,” “aspects,” “singularities,” etc.⁶⁰

We should also understand the process of cinema’s rendering any-space-whatevers in terms of the way Deleuze and Guattari describe processes of deterritorialization within their historical periodization of capitalism. In prestate societies, earthly spaces undergo a collective

⁵⁷ Zourabichvili 2012, 100. The latter are intensive but not substantial dimensions.

⁵⁸ Deleuze 1989, 99. By equating the presentation of the any-space-whatever with that of a direct image of time (a time-image), I may, arguably, be exceeding a strict reading of Deleuze’s schematization in the *Cinema* books, since he locates any-space-whatevers throughout the history of cinema, in both the regimes of the movement-image (classical cinema) and of the time-image (modernist cinema), as well as in experimental films. However, a thorough understanding of the internal structure of the any-space-whatever, based in Deleuze’s overall thinking on time, points towards the conclusion that even within the regime of the movement-image, any-space-whatevers function locally to present time directly.

⁵⁹ Deleuze 1989, 68-97.

⁶⁰ “Peaks of present” and “sheets of past” are the two forms of such cinematic time treated by Deleuze. The first is illustrated by the collaboration of Robbe-Grillet and Resnais, *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), as well as by the later films of Luis Buñuel, while the quintessence of the second Deleuze sees in Orson Welles, and also in Resnais.

investment along with bodies and organs, instilling collective meanings that function globally or universally to construct collective memories through ritual and “writings on the body.” These social codes are the inaugural territorializations. In “barbarian” despotic societies the earth undergoes further territorializations, while social subjection traces specifically the link between the body of the despot and the signifier. An initial deterritorialization also occurs within this epoch of social organization, as the despot/signifier is the first and only entity to accumulate surplus value by “personally” subsuming the social codes of this system.⁶¹ In capitalism, however, the body, organs, the earth, are all “liberated” from older collective social meanings and readied for individual ownership and the extraction of surplus value. General and multiplicitous deterritorialization is always accompanied by reterritorializations, so that the breaking of codes is always an “over-coding,” and social subjections are not eliminated altogether but fragmented and multiplied.⁶² In accordance with this sense of deterritorialization, the de-placing of space(s) renders the cinematic space as “no longer [having] co-ordinates,” but also as “pure potential, [showing] only pure Powers and Qualities, independently of the states of things or milieu which actualize them.”⁶³ Such an understanding of the “potential” of any-space-whatevers provides a way to understand Deleuze’s comments on the cinematic image as internally conditioned by capital (the “international conspiracy” of money).⁶⁴ And since it is the

⁶¹ Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 192-222.

⁶² Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 222-271.

⁶³ Deleuze 1986, 120.

⁶⁴ “The cinema as art itself lives in a direct relation with a permanent plot, an international conspiracy which conditions it from within, as the most intimate and most indispensable enemy. This conspiracy is that of money; what defines industrial art is not mechanical reproduction but the internalized relation with money. The only rejoinder to the harsh law of cinema – a minute of image which costs a day of collective work – is Fellini’s: ‘When there is no more money left, the film will be finished.’ Money is the obverse of all the images that the cinema shows and sets in place, so that films about money are already, if implicitly, films within the film or about the film. (...) [T]here is not, and there never will be, equivalence or equality in the mutual camera-money

money/capital relation which animates with *potentiality* both the “disconnection” of any-space-whatevers and the “-power” or “-capacity” of modern labor, the any-space-whatever characterizes the lived experience of spatiality for the subject of modern capitalism generally, whether under local conditions of accumulation or privation.

Any-space-whatevers do not appear in *Sambizanga*. Rather, moving in a register below the temporal relays of modernist cinema, the film presents indirect images of *no-space-whatsoever*. In order to elaborate this idea, I will first formulate an initial Fanonian argument against the naturalization of the spatial and temporal faculties.⁶⁵

In the fifth chapter of *Black Skin White Masks* (1952/2008), Frantz Fanon analyzes the ontological condition of blackness as determined by the white gaze. This is a non-dialectical non-relation produced through the global processes of slavery and antiblackness. Fanon’s famous quotation, “Look, a negro!” cannot be taken to indicate a mere case of Althusserian interpellation concerning subjection, performance, and (dis)identification.⁶⁶ Rather, as the literature of afropessimism has argued, for Fanon, that enunciation of negrophobia/negrophilia indicates an economy that shapes the world at the most basic and material levels of life and death.

Fanon grounds his analysis of this dynamic in the body: “In the white world, the man of color encounters difficulties in elaborating his body schema. The image of one’s body is solely negating.”⁶⁷ “Body schema” refers here to “[a] slow construction of my self as a body in a spatial

exchange. This is the old curse which undermines the cinema: time is money.” Deleuze (1989), 77; see also 78.

⁶⁵ This formulation is *initial* in the sense that I return to the same passage from Fanon in the following chapter (3), where I develop a subsequent elaboration of the crossing of Fanon’s incoherent body schema with Deleuze’s actual and virtual.

⁶⁶ Fanon 2008, 93

⁶⁷ Fanon 2008, 90.

and temporal world.”⁶⁸ He sketches the experiential actions necessary to smoke a cigarette: “I shall have to stretch out my right arm and grab the pack of cigarettes lying at the other end of the table,” the matches “are in the left drawer, and I shall have to move back a little.”⁶⁹ But according to Fanon’s analysis, under the force of the racial antagonisms of the white (antiblack) world, “the body-schema, attacked in several places, collapse[s], giving way to an epidermal racial schema:” that fleshly hieroglyphics that “signifies” “cannibalism, backwardness, fetishism, racial stigmas, slave traders,” and “equate[s] me with my ancestors, enslaved and lynched.”⁷⁰ Under such epidermal-racial determination, “the Black,” as Fanon narrates his “lived experience,” must “g[i]ve [him]self up as an object.” That is, prevented from “enter[ing] our world young and sleek,” he is dispossessed of the capacity for temporal and spatial coherence. Within this context of ontological prohibition, “the Black” is “unable to discover the feverish coordinates of the world,” while “the Other, evasive, hostile, but not opaque, transparent and absent, vanishe[s].”⁷¹ Fanon is describing, not the *objectification* of “the Black,” but the aesthetic *incoherence* of blackness, and the transparency and aesthetic capacity of whiteness.

Deleuze describes the cinematic image as “the situation of an actual image *and* its own virtual image, to the extent that there is no longer any linkage of the real with the imaginary [read actual and virtual], but *indiscernibility of the two...*” However, this indiscernibility relies nevertheless upon a preexisting differentiation between the two terms actual and virtual; as a precondition for their subsequent indiscernibility, the actual and the virtual are related through

⁶⁸ Fanon 2008, 91.

⁶⁹ Fanon 2008, 90-91.

⁷⁰ Fanon 2008, 92. My use of the terms “fleshly” and “hieroglyphics” refers to, of course, Hortense Spillers’s canonical essay “Mama’s Baby Papa’s Maybe; An American Grammar Book.” See Spillers 2003.

⁷¹ Fanon 2008, 92.

difference at the levels of both the concept and the real. Thus, it is always possible to differentiate conceptually between (this) one present, and the ensemble of “every dimension capable of being actualized.”⁷² Fanon’s analysis of blackness, on the other hand, indicates a basic non-differentiability or non-differentiatedness between the past and present, actual and virtual.

In Fanon’s “the lived experience of the black man,” *history* is undifferentiated from the present, not only in the sense in which Sartre understands the role of history for inauthentic being,⁷³ but in the sense that “the Black’s” own “body schema” is replaced with a marker for the historical-social insistence of antiblackness, and its enforcement. The body is replaced “objectively” with the fleshly absence of temporal and spatial capacity—what Fanon calls the “historical-racial schema”—which is enforced historically via institutional and structural manifestations of antiblack violence.⁷⁴ To retain a bit of the existentialist tinge that informs Fanon’s text (and turn it slightly), the flip side of this historical-racial schema is white presencing, since whiteness takes blackness, as incapacity, for its necessary condition.⁷⁵ The material assemblage of the black body exists then, as Lewis R. Gordon puts it, as “a body turned inward in conflict with itself, devouring itself.”⁷⁶ It exists for and as its own antaesthetic no-being, a body signifying its own incapacity, thereby enabling the capacity and coherence of non-

⁷² Deleuze 1989, 273.

⁷³ That is, since Fanon’s most immediate or obvious discursive target is French existentialism—first Merleau-Ponty (see Chapter 3) and then Sartre. “The Lived Experience of the Black Man:” *expérience vécue* is the French translation, popularized by Merleau-Ponty, of the German *Erlebnis*, as used in early Heidegger. On the immediate discursive targets of Fanon’s critique (or, rather, of his “*lysis*”), see Gordon 2015, 139.

⁷⁴ Fanon 2008, 92. I understand the term *objectively* in this passage as indicating neither the polar opposite of *subjectively*, nor of the ideological. Rather, I understand “objective” here as indicating *material*. This is the basis of an analysis of “political ontology” (Wilderson 2010) that ultimately takes an immanent, rather than psychoanalytic orientation. As noted above, the practice of taking a Deleuzian methodology into afropessimist analysis is oriented to this point.

⁷⁵ See Barber’s (2016) elaboration of this point.

⁷⁶ Gordon 2015, 139.

black being by serving as its fundamental opposite or absence.⁷⁷ From this perspective, the past seems to overstep its bounds and fully engulf any possibility of black actuality within a sea of (white) potential.

On the other hand, determined categorically by the “historicity” behind the white gaze,⁷⁸ “the Black” lacks a past in general of her own from which to draw. In her frequently cited essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Hortense Spillers implies the absence of the past-in-general when she explicates the “zero degree of sociality” produced in the African slave with the no-event of the middle passage. Spillers argues that the “cultural unmaking” that was the condition for the shipping of slave-commodities, as the emergence of modern world-capitalism, effectively attenuates the slave’s capacities for sexuality, gender differentiation, and sociality.⁷⁹ This implies the attenuation of the faculty of temporality as well.⁸⁰ However, by locating such reduction as a direct result of the Middle Passage and the

⁷⁷ See Wilderson 2010 and 2020.

⁷⁸ Which is to say, in Wilderson’s terminology, positioned in the antiblack world in accordance with the structure of racial antagonisms. See Wilderson 2010.

⁷⁹ Spillers 2003, 214-215.

⁸⁰ As Wilderson argues, the human faculties, which he implicitly refers to under the terms *coherence* and *relationality*, are replaced by the properties of fungibility and accumulation. Wilderson builds on Saidiya Hartman’s insight regarding “the fungibility of the captive body.” See Hartman 1997, 19; Wilderson 2010, 88-89; and Wilderson 2003, 225-240. Historian Stephanie Smallwood corroborates this point, writing that for captured Africans onboard slave ships, “time was lived in motion, but at no discernible rhythm by which Africans could orient their movement in time or readily measure time’s passage.” The middle passage formed a rupture in Africans’ narrative and existential orientations, in their capacities for historical memory and relationality. As Smallwood asserts, this rupture would repeat itself, forming the very structure of “life and death in diaspora” (202). In the seventh chapter of *Saltwater Slavery* (2007), titled “Life and Death in Diaspora,” Smallwood writes, “The individual stories of saltwater slavery form the antithesis of historical narrative, for they feature not an evolving plot of change over time but rather a tale of endless repetition that allows no temporal progression. Every protagonist was a pioneer, blazing a trail on the same ground traveled by predecessors in saltwater slavery, but without the benefit of historical memory. It is a narrative in which time seems to stand still” (202). Following the strategy of the present essay, which offers a critique of Deleuzian temporality, I understand “temporal progression” here not as

“slave estates” of the Americas, such a view leaves itself open to criticisms of privileging U.S. or “New World” racial histories and dynamics, neglecting or treating as less relevant or secondary the conditions of blackness and black people on the African continent and within other (post)colonial arrangements east of the Atlantic.

Afropessimism’s insights, however, suggest an accounting of antiblack capacital attenuation *not* as unique or specific to diasporic conditions and histories of trans-Atlantic/ “New World” slavery, but as proper to blackness as a global condition. In early works, afropessimism initially credited American chattel slavery and the trans-Atlantic trade with consolidating if not creating the relation of identity between blackness and slaveness. But Wilderson’s more recent writing has acknowledged the singular and much earlier role of the trans-Saharan/Arabic slave trade (beginning ca 8th century CE) in constituting blackness through slavery, and distributing that paradigmatic antiblack violence into the Arabic, Mediterranean, European, and Asian worlds.⁸¹ Eight centuries after the beginning of the Arabic trade in black Africans, the trans-Atlantic trade would intensify this circulation and reproduction of antiblackness through an initiation and conditioning of the development of a properly “global” capitalist world-system.⁸²

“chronological progression,” but rather in the terms of Deleuzian temporality as outlined above: qualitative change and accumulation in the virtual realm.

⁸¹ See, for contrast, Wilderson 2010 and 2020.

In a 2013 text, Wilderson reminds us that “whereas nearly every group of people across the globe have been touched by slavery at some point in history, Black people are the only social formation *constituted* by slavery—which is to say that social death and Blackness cannot be disimbricated.” Wilderson, “‘Raw Life’ and the Ruse of Empathy,” 205.

⁸² Thus, antiblackness became global in nature—or, fundamental accumulation became globally antiblack, alongside capital, manifesting globally in diverse institutions and practices, but at the same time, as a process, remaining unlimited by any specific historical manifestations. The fact of national, regional, institutional, and personal variation in the registration, manifestation, and experience of antiblackness does not in the least disprove its global presence as modern fundamental accumulation. On the contrary, such diversity speaks to the ground ontological-material level at which antiblackness as fundamental accumulation sustains human life, and from

As noted in the Introduction above, one of the main lines of afropessimist argumentation has been to appropriate Orlando Patterson’s historical-sociological work in *Slavery and Social Death* (1982), in which he elaborates three “constituent elements of slavery” found throughout historically and geographically diverse (formally) slaveholding societies, and to show how these elements describe the singular ontological or “paradigmatic” condition of the black or of blackness within the modern and contemporary world. According to the afropessimist argument, while slavery was found in almost every pre-modern society, at a certain point in the emergence of the modern world—and directly related to the consolidation of its most fundamental figure, the “human”—blackness came into being as a global marker for slave status. *Domination, natal alienation, and general dishonor* (Patterson’s three constituent elements of slavery), afropessimism argues, have thus come to globally define the generic ontological condition of blackness as slaveness (anti-humanness) through the modern era and into the contemporary conjuncture.⁸³

Here, I will make a similar use of Patterson’s work, revisiting his observations of historical slaveholding societies. In the introduction of *Slavery and Social Death*, Patterson discusses the connection between violent coercion as an integral element of enslavement, and the condition of the individual slave as absolutely powerless and dependent upon the master—“an

which it develops and effectuates (in) the world and experience. Furthermore, while both Patterson and Wilderson make the important point that forced labor is not at all a necessary constituent of the institution of slavery or the condition of the slave, it should register as unsurprising that many if not most of the historical intersections between antiblack events and institutions and expanding world-capitalism would involve staggering aggregates of coerced labor, as well as “innovations” of that labor with respect to both absolute and relative surplus value. See, for instance, the labor “innovations” of Southern U.S. cotton production as elaborated in Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*.⁸³ Importantly, afropessimism does *not* argue that these constituent elements define or describe the *experience* of blackness, nor the identities or subjectivities of (all) black people or persons.

extension of his [sic] master's power." He cites studies of both Ahaggar Taureg Berber and ancient Greek societies to make this point, and then writes in summary:

Not only was the slave denied all claims on, and obligations to, his parents and living blood relations but, by extension, all such claims and obligations on his more remote ancestors and on his descendants. He was truly a genealogical isolate. Formally isolated in his social relations with those who lived, he also was culturally isolated from the social heritage of his ancestors. He had a past, to be sure. But a past is not a heritage. *Everything has a history, including sticks and stones.* Slaves differed from other human beings in that they 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. *That they reached back for the past, as they reached out for the related living, there can be no doubt. Unlike other persons, doing so meant struggling with and penetrating the iron curtain of the master, his community, his laws, his policemen or patrollers, and his heritage.*⁸⁴

This passage is important because it ties Patterson's three "constituent elements of slavery" to the prohibition of temporal capacity—the capacity to "[reach] back for the past." Over the introduction of Patterson's study, he outlines how total *domination* in the form of violent coercion and reduction to an extension of the master's power simultaneously dispossesses the slave of any "socially recognized existence outside of his [sic] master," thus implying the

⁸⁴ Patterson 1982, 5; emphasis added.

slave's *genealogical isolation* or *natal alienation*.⁸⁵ And then how these two elements generate the third constitutive element of slavery as "general dishonor."⁸⁶ These elements are thematized throughout afropessimist literature. But in the passage quoted above Patterson makes a further claim: in addition to natal alienation (in connection with domination and general dishonor), slavery means that any attempt to *reach back for the past*—we might say, *to make use of the past in general*—will be met with the violence of the master, the police, the community, and heritage (in general). This is the prohibition of temporality. The inclusion of the prohibition of temporality as constitutive to the condition of slavery, across historical and geographical variations (i.e., both prior and posterior to the trans-Atlantic trade and the modern slave estate) de-exceptionalizes Spillers's account of the Middle Passage. Rather than uniquely resultant from the Middle Passage, the capacital reduction Spillers theorizes should be understood as one specific or local example in which antiblack prohibitions were reproduced, perhaps intensified. Albeit this specific effectuation is importantly located at the historical moment when *slaveness as blackness* (antiblackness) was transforming (with capital, or while carrying capital) from a more provincial globality centered around the use of sub-sarahan Africans by humans oriented mainly around the Mediterranean, to a more intensified global or *planetary* paradigm.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ "This brings us to the second constituent element of the slave relation: the slave's natal alienation. Here we move to the cultural aspect of the relation, to that aspect of it which rests on authority, on the control of symbolic instruments. This is achieved in a unique way in the relation of slavery: the definition of the slave, however recruited, as a socially dead person. Alienated from all 'rights' or claims of birth, he ceased to belong in his own right to any legitimate social order. All slaves experienced, at the very least, a secular excommunication." Patterson 1982, 5.

⁸⁶ "Here we move to the sociopsychological aspect of this unusual power relationship. The slave could have no honor because of the origin of his [sic] status, the indignity and all-pervasiveness of his [sic] indebtedness, his [sic] absence of any independent social existence, but most of all because he [sic] was without power except through another." Patterson 1982, 10.

⁸⁷ The literature of afropessimism implies, if it does not explicitly argue, that this expansion of antiblackness is simply the reflection of the expansion of the figure of the Human. See especially Wilderson 2020.

Nevertheless, the prohibition of the faculties that accompanies and conditions Spiller's "cultural unmaking" to "zero-degree sociality" is already located by Patterson across pre-modern slave societies. Following the afropessimist argument then, among the features of the consolidation of global blackness as global slaveness—which is identical with the becoming globally antiblack of fundamental accumulation—is the prohibition of temporality, and that prohibition should be detectable in contexts on both sides of the Atlantic.

As evident in the "voyage" sequence described above, *Sambizanga*'s spaces betray a sense of not-quite-anonymity, not-quite-any-space-whatever, disclosing their animation by the ubiquitous presence of antiblack domination—a presence of duress, coercion, and ontological violence that determines these no-spaces, violently if sometimes subtly. At the same time that these spaces appear undetermined when compared to the particular spaces of classical cinema—in other words, at the same time that there *is* a crisis of the movement-image unfolding in *Sambizanga*—they are prevented from lapsing into direct images of time, into pure optical and sound situations. This is the product of the prohibitory nature of antiblack violence. And this prohibition of the spatial-temporal constitutes another "international conspiracy" (besides money) which grounds cinema at a more foundational level, and of which Deleuze, when he names "money [as] the obverse of all the images that the cinema shows and sets in place," remains ignorant.⁸⁸

Because the cinematic image comprises, at its core, a shuttling back-and-forth between the actual and the virtual or the past and the present, it is incapable of directly presenting the

⁸⁸ Deleuze 1989, 77.

prohibitory privation of spatiality that determines blackness. How could the prohibition of all these terms—actual, virtual, past, present—be presented in an inherently temporal image, if not indirectly. As Fanon puts it, such “disorientation” is incapable of entry into “our world” of time and space. And when “the Black” attempts a “construction of [his] self as a body in [the] spatial and temporal [white] world,” the incompatibility of blackness and the world results in ontological-material violence: “[m]y body was returned to me spread-eagled, disjointed, redone, draped in mourning on this white winter’s day.”⁸⁹

We can trace this incompatibility with more detail. Deleuze sees how the composition of the cinematic image out of the materiality of time results in “circles of the past” that reach “between the past as preexistence in general and the present as infinitely contracted past,” forming “so many stretched or shrunk *regions, strata, and sheets*.”⁹⁰ But within the Fanonian schema, these strata undergo a catastrophic *liquefaction*, resulting in a radical mix of the past-in-general and the “infinite contraction” of the present, and everything in-between.⁹¹ The space composed as a direct image of black (a-)temporality would thus be a real no-space-whatsoever, a no-space of no-potential, in which past and present, actual and virtual, would not be just indiscernible, would not even be non-differentiated, but rather would be incoherent terms. Strictly speaking, then, *Sambizanga* does not present a direct image of black (a-)temporality or no-space-whatsoever. The very materiality of (modernist) cinema, which we could say Maldoror “borrows,”⁹² is incapable of directly presenting such a materially black image, an image of

⁸⁹ Fanon 2008; 91, 93.

⁹⁰ Deleuze 1989, 99.

⁹¹ My formulation here suggests a further critique of Deleuze’s thought, especially his theorization of the “ground” and its collapse or eruption. Such a critique, which I postpone for a further study, would surely engage David Lapoujade’s (2017) exploration of Deleuze.

⁹² A form of “borrowed institutionality.” See footnote below.

radical incoherence. The latter's internal ontological liquefaction and the onto-aesthetic vertigo it would produce exceed the limits of "modernist" readability, and to the extent that the human faculties of temporality and spatiality are bundled with that of language, the limits of readability in general. A direct image of blackness would exceed the limits of sense.⁹³

⁹³ An exploration of this implication that would treat Deleuze's theorization of *sense* is beyond the scope of this essay.

One should expect an objection to the characterization of blackness as the prohibition of capacity: *How can such a "totalizing" approach both maintain ontological incoherency for blackness—of the temporal, spatial, and historical, the aesthetic in general, as well as labor-capacity—and account for the fact of 'actual' everyday practices of black resistance, black achievement, and black progress?* But the implied contradiction relies on a confusion of individual *ability* of a concrete occupant of a subject position with material-ontological capacity and coherence (the drama of value with fundamental accumulation). Hartman observes that in the pre-emancipation Southern U.S., if "small-scale and everyday forms of resistance interrupted, reelaborated, and defied the constraints of everyday life under slavery and exploited openings in the system *for the use of the enslaved*," then such "agency of the enslaved is only intelligible or recognizable as crime." Accordingly, the discursive recognition of such agency, "rather than challenging or contradicting the object status and absolute subjugation of the enslaved as chattel, reinscribes it in the terms of personhood" (Hartman 1997, 62). Under a regime of antiblackness, when the dispensation of the faculties grants the temporal and the spatial to (non-black) subjects while paradigmatically denying it to blacks, black use of the faculties is always either criminal or exceptional (or both). In other words, as Spillers puts it in another of her essays, to the extent that the faculties (in her example linguistic capacity – speech and literacy) are "understood as *the right to use*," then they simultaneously insist "as prohibition, as the withheld" (Spillers 2003, 400-01). Use and prohibition are the two sides of the dispensation of the faculties, the two simultaneous movements of dispensation. Hartman and Spillers show how black use is by definition improper use, always criminal capacity and stolen possibility, and always positioned below proper (white and non-black) use of the faculties and its integral withholding. Such criminal capacity, when wielded with worldly ambition and/or ample discretion, can culminate in "borrowed institutionality," albeit under perennial exposure to the possibility of revocation and retribution, or it may even be utilized for political intervention. However, criminal use of the faculties remains powerless to challenge the incoherency and incapacity that the antiblack world enforces; criminal use cannot alter its own condition as inherently criminal. *Borrowed institutionality* is a term coined by Jared Sexton and cited by Wilderson (2010, 38), and also used by Wilderson in *Afropessimism* (2020). Sexton also uses the term in *Black Men, Black Feminism: Lucifer's Nocturne* (2018).

As Maria continues her journey, making the rounds of the police stations, the film returns to an image inside the jail in which Domingos is imprisoned.⁹⁴ The images that follow would present no-space-whatsoever directly if they could. Connecting to shots from the earlier montage described above, the prisoners walk slowly, aimlessly in a circle, in a scene that lasts nearly one minute, intercut with a quick shot of two prison guards slouching absentmindedly atop a gun tower. While the prisoners stroll around the center of the prison yard in silence, loud voices carry in from some other space, noisily unintelligible. But both the prisoners and the guards show total disinterest in their situation, and display no acknowledgement of their proximity to each other, while Domingos's casually gesticulating arms gesture distraction, preoccupation, talking to themselves. This disinterest and distraction deflect the eye to the surfaces of the space—peeling paint, cracked concrete walls and floor, shallow pools of water, with some kind of shoddy apparatus of metal piping (maybe for group showering) in the center of the coffer. The circularity of the prisoners, enclosed by the generically decrepit space, enacts a sense of the gratuitous world, concrete determination of the present that does not pass, in the absence of past and future; this space has been stripped of its connections *and* its virtualities. Rather than a space of pure potential (Deleuze), it is a pure space of no-potential. And while it retains coherence at the level of the image, its deadened spatiality constitutes an indirect presentation of the prohibition of the faculties.

As noted above, it is possible to give a reading of *Sambizanga* very different from the present one, by highlighting the dramatic and representational moments in the film where an anticolonial Marxist analysis of class antagonism is offered, and perhaps also by citing

⁹⁴ Maldoror 1972, 59:30.

Maldoror's own commitment to cross-racial anticolonial struggle.⁹⁵ However, the force of *Sambizanga*'s images of antiblackness and incoherence, as they unfold at the non-narrative level of the images' direct presentations, undercuts such narrative moments and ideological aspects. One seven-minute sequence near the middle of the film exemplifies this dynamic. Miguel, a member of the underground who has information on Domingos's arrest, hitches a ride on the back of a truck on his way to brief Mussunda, a leader in the underground. Riding in the open cabin, loaded down with bananas and men headed for the city, another passenger complains, "I don't understand life anymore. Bananas, manioc, everything is so expensive."⁹⁶ Cut to the tailor's workshop of Mussunda before Miguel arrives, as Mussunda lectures two of his revolutionary students: "You should know there are no Whites or Mulattoes or Blacks, only the rich and the poor. The rich are the poor's enemies." The students receive a brief introduction into the theory of surplus value and the exploitation of labor-power as they are interrupted by Miguel's arrival. After hearing the details of the arrest of "one of our own," Mussunda assigns Miguel a mission to "contact the group chief" and get the name of the prisoner (the comrades do not yet know it is Domingos who has been captured), while eluding the surveillance of the colonial authority. These details are more or less inconsequential for the film, offering a pretense of plot that neither motivates nor animates the images. But Mussunda's class based ideological discourse and the preceding registration of political-economic exploitation and alienation offers a Marxist ideological strawman whose inadequacy will be demonstrated by the images in the scenes to come.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Maldoror 1974.

⁹⁶ Maldoror 1972, 1:01:00.

⁹⁷ Again, my argument here is not about Maldoror's authorial intention nor her own political ideology or position, nor about the positions of the MPLA at any stage of its history. I am analyzing the images that make up *Sambizanga*.

If the revolutionaries' ideological orientation is grounded in a Marxist understanding of "the rich and the poor," neither the violence perpetrated by the Portuguese colonialists nor its motivation is reducible to class based exploitation or violence. In prison, Domingos is led to his two interrogators, a "mulatto" PIDE official (International and State Defence Police) and his white bad-cop second. When Domingos refuses to offer any information whatsoever, the white's verbal lacerations betray explicitly the racial antagonism at play: "Talk, you animal!" The official insists, "Who's the white man? The one who helps you?" Domingos persists, "Don't know any whites." To which the white cop specifies the situation: "filthy nigger." When Domingos persists further in silent defiance of his torturers, he is beaten mercilessly, and then taken to a cell. In a subsequent scene, brought before the officials for what will be his final interrogation, he suffers an introductory beating, and then continues to refuse the chief's question of "Who's the white man?" The white police thrashes him with a huge metal tool.⁹⁸

Domingos's dying, bloody body is deposited in a darkened cell where other black bodies seem overlaid as in the hold of a ship, as if this space is bounded by and contains the liquefaction of present and past.⁹⁹ The other prisoners arrange Domingos's body as he passes on, "he looks like he's asleep," and then as they clean him with scraps of fabric, they mourn, "He was our friend, our comrade, who's gone off into the night." And then in song, "He is dead / Let us never forget him." Having challenged the prohibition on black space-time coherency, Domingos's body is "returned ... disjointed, redone, draped in mourning."¹⁰⁰ The space in which he and his

⁹⁸ This short sequence, as Domingos is led to his final interrogation, amounts to its own small voyage within the larger form of the film – a voyage within a voyage, to play on Deleuze's arrangement that a film within the film expresses the "infernal circuit between image and money." See notes 7 and 59 above. The final beating is not shown.

⁹⁹ Maldoror 1972, 1:18:38.

¹⁰⁰ Fanon 2008, 93.

comrades are held, compared with the prison yard pictured earlier, is a cramped enclosure, ceilinged, dimly lit, with the same peeling and cracked concrete walls and floor. The dimensions of the space cannot be grasped, as the camera highlights its claustrophobic quality by moving around the room in close proximity to the prisoners, showing their faces, limbs, and torsos resting against the walls, laying on the floor, slowly sitting up from stillness, sleep, or unconsciousness to witness Domingos's passing and sing his mourning. The absence of the a priori past, figured in the claustrophobic enclosure of this ship's hold reappeared as colonial prison, implies the preclusion of the temporal strata out of which the cinematic image must be composed. This is the source of the scene's cinematic deep feel (and that of the jail yard scene described above)—its images utilize temporal and spatial material to gesture towards the suspension of time and space.

IMAGE OF BLACK PERSISTENCE

Within the modernist cinematic image, and throughout historical social formations of modern capitalism, “movement is no longer simply aberrant, [but] aberration [is] valid in itself and designates time as its direct cause.”¹⁰¹ Spatial coherence is thus disavowed in order to directly reveal, or commodify, time. The interchange of actual and virtual continues, if at shrunken or stretched scales, and the possible continues to be created via spatio-temporal acts of creation.¹⁰² But beneath such a temporal dispensation, as Wilderson writes, at “a crossroads

¹⁰¹ Deleuze 1986, 41.

¹⁰² According to Zourabichvili's reading of Deleuze, the possible is created by way of a two-part process in time and space: “On the one hand, the event brings about a new sense of the intolerable (virtual mutation).” On the other hand, this change in the virtual “calls for an act of creation,” “*a novel collective spatio-temporal assemblage*” including new social practices that correspond to the virtual mutation to “literally create[e] the possible (actualizing mutation)”

where [subjective and objective] vertigoes meet,” blackness exists as “*constituted* by disorientation rather than [as] life *interrupted* by disorientation.”¹⁰³ Put differently, in no-space-whatsoever, spatial and temporal incoherence is less a matter of disavowal or dispossession than of ontologically conditioned inexistence—an ontologically prior deflation, liquefaction, incoherence with respect to time and space, the result of neither the “revelation” nor the commodification of time, but of its prohibition. And if time’s commodification yields the time-image, then its prohibition yields images of radical incoherence. These images, which include the jail scenes in *Sambizanga* described above, present the apophatic constitution of blackness under the prohibition of the faculties. Nevertheless, radical incoherence in itself does not account for the *movement* of blackness.

For Deleuze, while the present can be said to *exist*, the past-in-general, which “is” in only a formal sense, *insists*—it is insistent. Indeed, as I have argued above, the insistence of the past (the formal existence of all dimensions of the virtual within the a priori past) constitutes the basis of whiteness and non-blackness by serving as the form of the temporal and the condition of the spatial. Insistence is thus the material ground of antiblackness, always insisting to the point of domination. Blackness, on the other hand, under the prohibition of the faculties, neither exists nor insists (nor subsists). While whiteness and non-blackness exist, insist, and subsist, blackness

(Zourabichvili, 11; my emphasis). Thus, the possibility-creating dyad of virtual and actual mutation are saturated at every moment by time and space: the differentiation of a new dimension within the virtual past (time), the actualization manifest in action as the forging of an assemblage within the world (space). The literature of afropessimism, some of which I’ve drawn from in the pages above, argues convincingly that almost every term in this formulation is alien to blackness, which latter serves as those terms’ (event, spatio-temporal, social, collective) enabling absence.

¹⁰³ Wilderson 2011, 3; emphasis added.

persists. Black persistence names the movement, something like a *non-force*, that is carried by or carries through radical incoherence.

I borrow the term *persistence* from an interview with Jared Sexton, conducted by Daniel Colucciello Barber. In their conversation, Sexton gives an idea of the nuance of persistence that also describes the latter's presentation in *Sambizanga*:

Our [black people's] extimate negation is affirmation inside out, a negativity of the infinitesimal. Unbearable, interminable, unfathomable: I might call this blackness as persistence, which suspends the differences between life and death, and between life (and death) and non-life. Living things persist, non-living things persist, dead things persist, undead things persist.¹⁰⁴

Political, theoretical, and cinematic formulations of resistance work to refuse death, oppression, exploitation, or domination, and to reclaim and celebrate not only forms of intimacy and community, but life itself. On the other hand, by suspending difference (difference: that singular term that is basic to Deleuze's philosophy as well as to twentieth century continental thought broadly speaking), black persistence works to suspend all life as well as (social) death, pushing through or falling out for some below. This understanding of persistence as the suspension of difference suggests a formulation of negatively articulated immanence, "an antagonistically downward movement."¹⁰⁵ If the antiblack world exists at its most basic level as insistence, effectuating externally to itself the radical incoherency of blackness, then black persistence moves antimmanently through and below this duality.

¹⁰⁴ Barber 2017.

¹⁰⁵ Barber 2017. This second quotation from the interview is taken from a reply of Barber's to Sexton.

Black persistence is thus comprised of two bases. First, persistence is radically negative. Not to be confused with Hegelian or Marxist *negation* which is always a kind of relation or contradiction within being (and which Deleuze abhorred), it exerts as a force of generic negativity from without and *against* being (including being's oscillation with non-being), reaching from the largest to smallest scales.¹⁰⁶ Second, persistence is subtractive. It is not a product of the specification or modulation of an identity or positionality arrived at through addition, development, or dialectic (it is nothing to do with difference, a relation which would tie it again to being). It is rather the suspension of not only all these states and processes, but also the a priori capacities to which they correspond.¹⁰⁷ Persistence thus works against time itself, antagonistically, putting into play the suspension of the temporal, spatial, the capacital, not in order to transcend them but to do away with them.

Having finally located her husband, who has now been tortured to death in prison, Maria collapses into the jail lobby, screaming, and then out of the building into Luanda's streets, "My man!" They killed him!" "They beat him to death!" her moans piercing the gaze of onlookers.¹⁰⁸ A group of women help Maria away, aided by the old man and a boy who have been working with the underground comrades to identify Domingos after his arrest. They support her arms and body as she walks from the jail while crowds of women watch with disinterest and men continue

¹⁰⁶ On the intimacy or duality of being and non-being (as opposed to their opposition or antagonism), specifically within a Deleuzian framework, see Barber (2016), "The Creation of Non-Being." As noted above, Barber's formulations differs from mine in that Barber argues for the compatibility, or immanence, of non-being and blackness.

¹⁰⁷ In this sense, black persistence bears some resemblance to what different contemporary philosophers have called *the generic*. Alexander Galloway, drawing from Badiou in the process of exploring the philosophy of François Laruelle, writes that "the generic is not achieved by way of adding something to the real, adding a true life on top of a false one, an authentic existence on top of a profane one. On the contrary, the generic is achieved by subtracting the many definitional predicates that exist within reality." Galloway 2014, 198.

¹⁰⁸ Maldoror 1972, 1:25:25.

their card game, undisturbed. This street scene confirms, once again, the gratuitousness of Domingos's capture and murder. The sequence cuts abruptly to an interior in which Maria's wailing is joined by a vocal accompaniment from several other women, supporting and sustaining with the overlapping materiality of their cries. The "phonic substance" of these cries threatens to suspend the representational chains built upon the image. The scene ends with four of the women sitting on the floor of another room in this house, their cries and wails transitioned to a calmer singing or chanting, while a few feet away men at a table play at cards, seemingly unaware of the women's mourning.¹⁰⁹

Between the street scene and the second interior wailing scene, a transition has occurred within the image. In the street, Domingos's death and Maria's mourning were gratuitous details, neither causes nor effects, but effectuations of antiblackness whose incoherence within a temporal framework was acknowledged by the non-registration of passers-by and loiterers. But the images of the men playing cards in the street and in the interior scene each possess a different valence. Inside, the card game no longer operates to show the gratuitousness of Maria's mourning, and by extension, of Domingos's murder; there is rather a kind of integration, as the persistence of the women's mourning and caring animates the sociality of the card game. Presenting movement through the insistence and incoherence of the antiblack world, this scene constitutes a direct image of black persistence. Lighter than opposition, the women's singing is heard continuously, accompanying the shots of the men, which enables the image to show persistence penetrating or intermingling with the casual sociality at work around the table. The

¹⁰⁹ On "phonic substance," see Fred Moten's (2003) elaboration of Aunt Hester's scream and radical black aesthetics in *In the Break*.

scene lingers on the men as if to draw this point out, framing three of their faces, and then moves downward to close-ups of three of the women singing in meditation.¹¹⁰

Sexton's wording is strikingly descriptive here: the blend of mourning, caring, and play pictured in this sequence is presented as *extimate*, *infinitesimal*, and *interminable*—a complex image of black persistence in which the smallest gestures and particles of light seem correlated with the grossest of the film's visual gestures and their remotest implications, as persistence spreads in retrograde throughout the image like an inorganic contaminant travelling upriver. Within this image, the differences between the women's mourning and the men's card game have already been suspended. And if the image may seem to present persistence in a passive posture, that passivity's antagonistic face is reflected in the earlier scenes of Domingos's silent persistence in the face of his torturers (as well as in the future actions suggested in the dialogue of the film's final scene—the liberation of political prisoners held captive in the colonial jail).¹¹¹ We now also can see Maria's journey sequence, her movement through the confusion of incoherence, as an image of persistence. The film pictures Maria's searching as immanent with her subsequent mourning: the difference between Maria's search for her (abducted) husband, and her mourning for her (murdered) husband, falls away, while persistence remains, unlimited.

¹¹⁰ Thus, while (some) anticolonialist representational readings of *Sambizanga* have argued for its *feminist* perspective (as noted above), the film's parallel presentation of black persistence might be understood as *black-feminist*. See Douglass 2018 on the intersection of Black Feminist pessimism with afropessimism.

¹¹¹ Sexton ties *passivity* to Wilderson's idea of subjective-objective vertigo: "The more complete disorientation of an objective vertigo can not rely upon even those elementary distinctions of solid, liquid, and gas; [it is] a scale and register of passive activity, and eventually action, that one might describe as *astrophysical*." See Barber 2017.

The final scene of the film is a meeting on the shore between MPLA operatives, where they communicate a plan to free imprisoned comrades from jail, ostensibly the one in which Domingos was murdered. This historical liberation occurred on 4 February 1961, and was followed by a second attack on 10 February.

Maria's movement thus works against the difference that is basic to temporal dimensionality (the world 'before' and 'after' Domingos's murder).

Ultimately, Maria's movement is also pictured as immanent with the underground anticolonial militancy that frames and intersperses *Sambizanga*'s images. In the film's penultimate scene, MPLA comrades are enjoying themselves with friends, music, dance, and food. Maria arrives with a small entourage, relating the news of Domingos's murder to Mussunda, who stops the music and announces the tragedy of their comrade's death.¹¹² However, they pause only briefly to grieve, then the party continues, absorbing the mourning—music and dancing, “*mama uelele*,” comrades moving in the black persistence that moves in the context of radical incoherence. This scene shows the unity of Maria's “personal” voyage with the “political” movement of the MPLA militants. These are two effectuations of persistence, moving to suspend both the *temporal difference* that differentiates between virtual strata and between the actual and virtual, and the *atemporal difference* that differentiates at a higher scale, between insistent temporality itself and the incoherence of the no-space-whatsoever. Mussunda voices it: “let us continue because we are joyful,” then he abruptly begins a dance which his eyes tell us is moving in that persistent suspension of life and death; preparation and effectuation of the antimmanent antagonism, an image of black persistence.¹¹³

¹¹² Maldoror 1972, 1:30:00.

¹¹³ While *Sambizanga* contributes an early cinematic construction of the image of black persistence, the political events beginning just two years after Maldoror made *Sambizanga* (a decade after the events portrayed in the film) took a different turn. Following the Carnation Revolution that ended Portugal's wars of colonialism along with its domestic dictatorship, the initial coalition government between Angolan nationalist parties MPLA, FNLA, and UNITA, who already were rivals during the war for independence, spun out into intensifying violence (See James, 1992). The ensuing civil war, spanning most of the following three decades, comprised a knot of conflicting insistences, the bloodiest attempts to usurp capacity and coherence. Anti-intuitively, perhaps the Angolan civil war might be seen not as a period of

increasing incoherence, but rather as a reactionary manifestation of fear and hatred towards incoherence, as an ‘internalized’ antiblack violence—increasingly arbitrary and retaliatory—in preemption and reaction to movement of radical incoherence and black persistence that would imply the abolition of both colonial *and* postcolonial regimes. Indeed, the movement of black persistence would abolish any regimes whatever, including Marxist-Leninist, social-democratic, or neo-liberal (all of which terms have described the different Angolan nationalist parties and governments at various stages in their respective developments). To bend one last quotation from Deleuze, “when the violence is no longer that of the image [of incoherence and persistence] and its vibrations, but that of the represented [and representational politics], we move into a blood-red arbitrariness” (Deleuze 1989, 164).

Three

Prohibition of spatiality and black antaesthetics

“[O]ne senses a surreal space, an inexplicable space.” Dionne Brand writes in what has perhaps been her most commented-on work, “Our inheritance in the Diaspora is to live in this inexplicable space. That space is the measure of our ancestors’ step through the door toward the ship. One is caught in the few feet in between. The frame of the doorway is the only space of true existence.”¹ *A Map to the Door of No Return* mixes and juxtaposes spatial-political-ontological theorization with memoir and cultural critique to poetically present this “inexplicable space” of the black diaspora as the effectuation of immanent antiblack spatial prohibition; Brand’s insight that *inexplicable space* is the “true space of existence,” indicates this antiblack prohibition as inherent to and constitutive of the spatial itself. In other words, *A Map to the Door of No Return* presents antiblack prohibition as immanence, and vice versa, out of which the spatial develops.

The *map* that attempts to trace this inexplicable space begins with a recollection of the inability of Brand’s grandfather to recall the name of the African tribe to which their ancestors belonged: “He said no to all of them, saying that he would know it if he heard it.”² A memoiristic passage thus opens the book, and in it the *mutual disappointment-become-estrangement* resulting from her grandfather’s mnemonic incapacity leads Brand to the source of the “end of traceable beginnings.” It is “a rupture in history, a rupture in the quality of being. It was also a physical

¹ Brand 2001, 20.

² Brand 2001, 3.

rupture, a rupture of geography.”³ Read by Brand through the geo-historical lines of post-Middle-Passage diaspora, this world-creating rupture, *the Door of No Return*, is a metonym for the spatial ontology of (anti)blackness.

Brand’s later work, *Ossuaries* (2010), is a long poem in fifteen parts (fifteen *ossuaries*). Like *A Map to the Door of No Return*, *Ossuaries* is a kind of memoir, written from the perspective of *Yasmine*, a middle-aged former operative of a militant revolutionary group.

I lived and loved, some might say,/ in momentous times,/ looking back, my
dreams were full of prisons⁴

While the poem’s even-numbered ossuaries comprise a fragmented narrative of Yasmine’s personal experiences, revolutionary musings, and actions, the odd-numbered chapters elaborate an embodiment of spatial incoherence:

and tiny rooms, and in other people’s passports,/ in mathematical theorems of
trust,/ in her vigilant skin and feathery, feathery deceit/ it is not enough to change
the bourgeois state,/ this sentence slumbered in her, sleek,/ you have to bring it
down, winched to this

[ossuary II]⁵

without walls, without embrasures, no height at all,/ scatter bones, losing all
relation to myself,/ reified, common really, common the powdery skulls

[ossuary I]⁶

³ Brand 2001, 5.

⁴ Brand 2010, 9.

⁵ Brand 2010, 28-29.

⁶ Brand 2010, 48.

The alternating ossuaries thus juxtapose a subjectivity of political (social and spatial) struggle with an ontological condition in which relationality and organization are perpetually prohibited. An accumulation of memories is pitted against an account of relational incoherence and disorganization—the *spatiality* of a box of bones.

Rather than a common sense or scientific understanding of space as the mere extension of physical bodies within an empty container or coordinated within a multi-dimensional grid, Brand's texts demand a conception of spatiality that accounts for its immanence (its constant previousness and consistent distribution) and its materiality (and hence its inherent politicality), without positing the spatial as a transcendent form, strategy, or tactic. But Brand's texts also insist on the inherence of space to the violence of the antiblack world. Drawing on Brand's work as a theoretical-expressive interlocutor, I argue for an understanding of spatiality as immanent antiblack prohibition—the prohibition of spatiality to blackness—that simultaneously engenders spatial becoming as actualization, embodiment, the flesh, and stratification. I elaborate these four formulations of immanent space through the work of philosophers Gilles Deleuze (and his collaborator Félix Guattari) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and through a re-reading Fanon's critique of Merleau-Ponty with a Deleuzian formulation of the actual and the virtual. In this formulation, *prohibition* indicates less the *act* of an agent, or individual or institutional player within political-juridical discourse or practice, and more an ontological function or operation. By constellating black thinkers of space and antiblackness (Brand, McKittrick, Fanon) with philosophers of the spatial and becoming (Deleuze, Merleau-Ponty), this chapter charts the immanent location of the antiblack operation of prohibition, its always-prior enactment of a differentiation that enables and marks the spatial as (antiblack) process. Taking up Fanon's project in *Black Skin White Masks* (1952), Brand proceeds farther on, composing a poetics that

itself works against space and time. Subverting Bakhtin's concept of the *chronotope*, I theorize Brand's elaboration in *Ossuaries* as a literary *antaesthetics* that disorders and dismantles distinction, relationality, differentiation, and difference within the work, and implies the threat of the same radical disorganization beyond the scope of the literary.

By locating antiblack prohibition at the heart of the spatial—the spatial as an immanent process at the level of the real, rather than as a transcendent form issuing from within a structuralist topology of symbolic ordering—this chapter contributes to the immanentization of antiblackness as theorized by the afropessimist project. As noted above, while Wilderson's work has been decisive in exposing and analyzing the antiblack world as such, its eminently structuralist methodology deserves to be expanded upon if a theory of antiblackness is to prove sufficient for the critique of contemporary philosophies and practices of the material world, and this is especially tangible in the context of spatial concerns.⁷ While an easy objection to afropessimism's positing of antiblackness as global political-ontology is given by appeal to the diversity of black diasporan spatial identities and the charge of their reductionist treatment by afropessimism, such an objection confuses blackness as an individual-communal identity, with blackness as the “object” of antiblack violence.⁸ Following a logic of the fundamental status of political-ontology (its priority in relation to the “social constructions” and cultural performances of subjective experience), Afropessimism compellingly argues that the constitution of blackness

⁷ I have in mind here everything from the “spatial turn” of the 1980s, to so-called “new materialism,” “object oriented ontology,” and “speculative realism,” to contemporary strains of Marxian thought that incorporate the insights of Althusser, Deleuze and Guattari, et. al. In short, “theory” *after* what the anglo-academic world refers to as *poststructuralism*. For Wilderson's structuralist approach, see Wilderson 2010 and 2020; see below.

⁸ The clearest “real-world” clarification of this confusion is how, for the police (or vigilante), a (black) person's cultural *identity* remains absolutely irrelevant; what determines a person's treatment at the hands of the police (in many cases, that is, whether they are given assistance or murdered) is their *identification* as white (or non-black), or black.

through antiblack determination is prior to and preconditions blackness as identity, both historically and synchronically, thus providing the horizon or target for political projects of black liberation.⁹ But while Wilderson makes this argument with recourse to a structuralist understanding of ontology as reducible to the symbolic order,¹⁰ this chapter seeks to ground political-ontological primacy within the real material process of spatialization. To this end, Brand's work problematizes through illustration the inherent operation of antiblack prohibition within the spatial. In *A Map to the Door of No Return* this illustration takes the triangle trade and Middle Passage as its historically specific referent, while *Ossuaries* poetically expresses immanent antiblack prohibition through, on one hand a historically situated personal narrative, and on the other hand a de-subjectivated first-person account of antiblack prohibition. Without claiming that the historical specificities that frame and appear within either of these works adequately reference or account for the vast diversity of black spatial experience, this chapter thinks with Brand's texts in order to theorize antiblack spatial prohibition as a basic force of the antiblack world.

SPATIALIZATION AS ACTUALIZATION: ANTIBLACK SPATIAL PROHIBITION

A Map to the Door of No Return; Notes to Belonging articulates the catastrophic complexities engendered by the spatial world's grounding in antiblack spatial prohibition. Throughout *A Map*, Brand develops the figure of the titular Door as a threshold that leads out of the "old world" and into "nothing." This theorization of antiblack space mixes with scraps and

⁹ See Wilderson 2010 and 2020; Sexton 2011. As noted above in the introduction, Moten repeatedly makes a Derridean formulation wherein "anoriginary" blackness paradoxically calls forth antiblackness (as secondary), forming a characteristically *undecidable* antinomy (Moten 2008, 2013; Harney and Moten 2013). This dissertation breaks decisively with such logic.

¹⁰ In this way Wilderson derives his methodology most clearly from Lacan.

references of cartographic and navigational literature, personal and familial recollections, and cultural and literary critique of “life in the diaspora.” The concept of the Door of No Return is mainly developed over the first thirty pages of the book, followed by short sections with titles such as “*Maps*,” “*Water*,” “*Forgetting*,” “*Captive and Inhabited*,” “*Finding a Compass*,” “*Voyage*,” “*Beat*,” “*Copper*,” “*More Maps*,” “*October*,” and “*Town*.” These section headings summarize the text’s cartographic, geographic, and memoiristic streams, the developments of which unfold without adherence to any imposed formal or structural pattern. Brand’s map is a journal—not of natality or return, but of the personal, social, cultural implications and complications of the Door of No Return upon black diasporan life. That is to say that *A Map...* maps the effectuations of the Door of No Return as a metaphysics of antiblack spatial prohibition, drawing out diverse lines of memoir and human geography to illustrate its lived experience.

If read in isolation from the development of the concept the Door of No Return (found mainly at the beginning of the book), the text’s cartographic and memoiristic elements might be taken for something like a political-aesthetics of everyday practices in the diaspora—a text of the black production of space (pace Lefebvre) or better of black spatial stories (de Certeau). This is the approach that Katherine McKittrick takes in the most developed study to date of Brand’s *A Map to the Door of No Return*. McKittrick insists, fundamentally, that “black matters are spatial matters,” arguing that because “blackness is integral to the production of space”—since racial-sexual hierarchies connect black subjects to the production of space—then “black subjects have a stake in the production of space.”¹¹ In her study “Demonic Grounds,” McKittrick seeks to uncover “how the production of space is achieved across terrains of domination” by elaborating

¹¹ McKittrick 2006; xii, xiv.

“black women’s geographies” as the space and place of black women’s struggle.¹² This entails both elaborating the ways that “space and place give black lives meaning” in a world where “discourses” “erase and despatialize their sense of place”—a turn to the geography (space and place) of blackness as a means of countering racist *discourses* on blackness—and, in a converse sense, the denaturalization of geographical meanings that have been assigned to black lives—an extension of black studies into the discipline of human geography to counter geographical forms of racism, sexism, and capitalism.¹³ The problem, for McKittrick, is that “existing cartographic rules unjustly organize human hierarchies in place and reify uneven geographies in familiar, seemingly natural ways.” The solution follows to alter those cartographic rules, to expose the lie of “geography’s discursive attachment to stasis and physicality” and the alterability of existing geographic hierarchies, suggesting “a terrain through which different geographic stories can be and are told.”

McKittrick’s elaboration of cartographies of black female struggle is thus foundational for the study of blackness and space. However, in the reading that follows, I am more attuned to the ways in which Brand answers her own question “Why is all geography irony?”¹⁴ Indeed, troubling efforts to reclaim and revise human geography—even for “the imperative of a perspective of struggle”¹⁵—*A Map to the Door of No Return* registers, below spatial struggles against racist and otherwise biased geographies, the antiblack prohibition of the spatial itself. This prohibition is a more fundamental problematic than the reification of unjust human geographical hierarchies because it constitutes human spatiality itself. Without disavowing the

¹² McKittrick 2006, xiv.

¹³ McKittrick 2006, xiii-xv.

¹⁴ Brand 2001, 89.

¹⁵ Wynter, quoted in McKittrick 2006, xi.

immanent problematic of the prohibition of spatiality, then, I read the memoiristic and cartographic aspects of Brand's text as implicated and complicated by the former; Brand's memoir and cartography emerge from the Door of No Return as inherently paradoxical undertakings.

Brand's titular Door of No Return stems from the historical slave castles of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries along Africa's Gold Coast, the most famous of which, Elmina Castle (*St. George d'Elmina*) and the Cape Coast Castle, Brand mentions by name.¹⁶ These castles served as holding cells and ports of exit for ships carrying recently enslaved Africans, as they were shipped across the Atlantic as the key commodities that would fuel global capitalism's growing expansion. "The Door of No Return," then, is in one sense a literal, physical door through which enslaved Africans stepped, thereby transforming both their formal condition (from African to commodity) and their subjective orientation or consciousness: "What language would describe that loss of bearings or the sudden, awful liability of one's own body?"¹⁷ However, "[t]his door is not mere physicality."¹⁸ The image of the physical slave castle's door is a metonym for an *exit* that outstrips the registers of both the cartographic-navigational practices the book continually references as intimately articulating the slave trade with the production of modern space, and the historical-economic status the slave castle received as monument and tourist destination during the late twentieth century. In fact, *A Map to the Door of No Return* offers no less than a reading of modern global ontology as a metaphysics of the prohibition of spatiality.

¹⁶ Brand 2001, 20.

¹⁷ Brand 2001, 21.

¹⁸ Brand 2001, 1.

Space has been theorized variously, but most modern and contemporary spatial conceptions develop from their indebtedness to and/or their response against Descartes's and Kant's formative conceptualizations: space as an empty container for matter (Descartes), space as an a priori sensible form of subjective *outer* intuition. Descartes's *empty container* influenced Newton's *absolute space*, overdetermining spatial conceptions in modern science and western common sense into the twentieth century. Kant's a priori space enjoyed a profound influence through German idealism and its tributaries, including Hegelian, Marxist, phenomenological, and psychoanalytic thought, whose spatial conceptions all owe a debt to the spatial intuition of Kant's transcendental subject. In both cases space is thought as transcendent: first as the transparent *space itself* which transcends the objects that move within it, second as co-constitutive of the transcendental cogito itself; space is either transcendently *objective* or transcendently *subjective*.

As space became an increasingly important lens for criticism and theory over the twentieth century, oftentimes from an overtly or implicitly Marxian perspective, the connection posited between the spatial and the social opened up conceptions that differed from the inherited Cartesian and Kantian ideas of *pure* space. For their part, Lefebvre's *production of space* and De Certeau's *spatial practices* link the spatial to the social by considering the ways in which space is effected and/or utilized via socialization and everyday practices of the social. By focusing on space as the most material *product* of social relations in a way that analogizes space to the commodity, or as practices of agency in quotidian defiance of capitalist structures of *place* that are analogous to narrative or textuality, Lefebvre and de Certeau break with Kant while continuing the thought of transcendent space. In Lefebvre's influential account of the *production*

of space, social space is produced through the same capitalist dynamics by which commodities are produced, forming a “set of relations” that thus “implies, contains and dissimulates social relationships” in a way analogous if not identical to Marx’s commodity form.¹⁹ To read Lefebvre against himself, then, not only spatial metaphors but social space *itself* is fetish space, and the fetish, by definition, is created transcendentally as “a thing which transcends sensuousness” as if by magic.²⁰ For de Certeau, *spatial practices* “refer to a specific form of operations” that constitutes “another spatiality,” an “anthropological, poetic and mythic experience of space,” and “an opaque and blind mobility.” Via the spatial practices of, for example, the pedestrian within “the bustling city,” a “migrational, or *metaphorical*” spatiality “slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city.”²¹ “The long poem of walking manipulates spatial organizations, no matter how panoptic they may be... It inserts its multitudinous references and citations into them (social models, cultural mores, personal factors)...”²² While de Certeau credits the basis of his spatial formulations to the theorization of immanent space given by Merleau-Ponty in the *Phenomenology of Perception* (see below), he mystifies its immanence, rendering space transcendent through his insistence on spatial practice as linguistic, narrative, and *metaphorical*, and on the agency of the transcendent *subject* (the “trailblazers in the jungles of functionalist rationality”).²³

¹⁹ Lefebvre 2000, 82-83.

²⁰ Marx 1990, 163. Or as Deleuze and Guattari say of the violently enforced equivalency between use-value and economic value, *space* is “a pure fiction, a cosmic swindle” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 230). See also Neil Smith’s discussion of Lefebvre and space in *Uneven Development* (2008, 225-229).

²¹ de Certeau 1984, 93; emphasis altered.

²² de Certeau 1984, 101.

²³ de Certeau 1984, 34.

In his first *Critique*, Kant “liberated” time from the movement of objects, conceiving temporality as an independent, transcendental condition for the representation of the world, a basic intuition inherent to human subjectivity and therefore prior to the movement of bodies. Correspondingly, for Kant, where time is the *inner* sense of human a priori intuition of the sensible world, space is the *outer* a priori intuition. But whereas Kant liberates time from its determination by movement and reconceives it as “the form under which undetermined existence is determinable by the ‘I think’,”²⁴ Kantian space remains constrained to the dictates of a geometrical conception.²⁵ Moreover, while Kant conceives of time as an empty form independent from movement, as the subjective intuition of the *I think* it nevertheless remains essentially linear or chronological.

An heir to Kant’s *critical philosophy*, Gilles Deleuze, appropriating Bergson’s conceptual pair the *virtual* and *actual*, developed a compelling conception of non-chronological time.²⁶ As discussed in the previous chapter, Deleuze equates the virtual to what he calls the “past in general” or the “a priori past.”²⁷ This is the field of all temporal dimensions, which are qualitatively differentiated from each other via the *addition* of newly actualized dimensions (new *presents*). This virtual past is the field of pure difference, because in it “each dimension exists only in its difference from all others.”²⁸ On the other hand, time as the *embodied* experience of the succession of presents (*consciousness* of time, roughly corresponding to Kant’s faculty of temporality), is a matter of the *actualization* of elements of the virtual field, insofar as these

²⁴ Deleuze 1994, 86.

²⁵ Deleuze 1994, 231.

²⁶ I draw here mainly from Deleuze’s two books on cinema (1986, 1989) as well as *Difference and Repetition* (1994).

²⁷ Deleuze 1994 81-82; 1989 68-97.

²⁸ Zourabichvili 2012, 101.

actualizations constitute qualitatively distinct additions to the virtual field. “Every moment of our life presents the two aspects, it is actual and virtual, perception on the one side and recollection on the other...”²⁹

Along these Deleuzian lines, we may understand the faculty for temporality as the capacity to engage in the interchange between the virtual and the actual, *in the direction of virtualization*. From this perspective, the virtual (the a priori past) enjoys a kind of primacy over the actual, preceding and conditioning the latter, and supplying its source material (difference). The actual always *returns* to the a priori past—not only by contributing to its expansion via the actualization of a novel present, but also by drawing on it as the field of capacity from which any actualization must flow. The capacity to engage the process of virtualization may be understood as the capacity *to use* this temporalizing process, which ultimately is the capacity to use or participate in capacity itself (virtualization = temporality = capacity). Corresponding to non-chronological temporality, the faculty of spatiality may be understood as the engagement of the interchange between the actual and the virtual *in converse orientation*: the process of actualization, in which virtual multiplicities are differentiated into *actual* diverse elements or parts, actualized extensities, which thereby intrinsically relate to each other within a spatial field—the actual produced from the virtual as difference in relation to itself.³⁰ And, if the virtual (temporal) field tends towards pure difference, then the field of the actual (the spatial) is the field of *relationality*. The faculty of spatiality, as the capacity to engage the circuit of actual and

²⁹ Deleuze 1989, 79.

³⁰ See Dan Smith 2012, 252-53. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze utilizes the vocabulary of *differentiation* and *differenciation* to refer to, in the simplest possible terms, the production of difference within the virtual and within the actual, respectively.

virtual in the mode of actualization (the capacity *to use* the process of actualization), is the faculty to use or participate in relationality itself (actualization = spatialization = relationality).

But Brand shows how such a conception of immanent spatiality (and immanent temporality, both of which have been given above in introductory terms) remains inadequate for understanding the immanence of antiblack spatial domination and black spatial struggle. The Door of No Return intervenes decidedly into these capacities for virtualization and actualization: from one direction, the Door of No Return is the barring of the virtual past, the liquifaction of the territory ‘behind’ the door that, as the past, comprises temporality. “My grandfather could not summon up a vision of landscape or a people which would add up to a name. (...) Having no name to call on was having no past; having no past pointed to the fissure between the past and the present.”³¹ The Door of No Return is the erasure of “[b]eginnings that can be noted through a name or a set of family stories that extend farther into the past than five hundred or so years, or the kinds of beginnings that can be expressed in a name which in turn marked out territory or occupation.”³² From the other direction, The Door is the barring of the actual, the elimination of that which conditions and proceeds from passage—the barring of a spatial field of relation (this already implies the impossibility or conflictual nature of practices such as cartography and navigation). The Door of No Return, then, is not a door for passing through, but “a door which makes the word *door* impossible and dangerous, cunning and disagreeable.”³³ It is an exit and an entrance deprived of passage, depriving passage, “no way in; no return”³⁴—a state of passage deprived of *from* and *to*. “[There] is the sense in the mind of not being here or there, of no way

³¹ Brand 2001, 5.

³² Brand 2001, 5-6.

³³ Brand 2001, 19.

³⁴ Brand 2001, 1.

out or in. As if the door had set up its own reflection. Caught between the two we live in the Diaspora, in the sea in between.”³⁵

The metaphysics of the Door of No Return is therefore not a metaphysics of change, passage, or in-betweenness, as might be assumed of a metaphysics of the door or threshold generally. Nor is it a metaphysics of difference, since “passing through” the Door of No Return precludes the a priori past (the field of difference) and produces no actualization (differentiation of the virtual). “Imagining our ancestors stepping through these portals one senses people stepping out *into nothing*.”³⁶ The Door of No Return marks a metaphysics of transition only insofar as transition is cut off, detached from and deprived of the states that would frame it, the conditions that would precede and follow from it—*spaces*; there is no return to the spatial.

Brand’s *Map* thus presents the isolation of interstice and illustrates how the concretization of that process is historically elaborated into the very fabric of *spatiality*. The Door of No Return lies at the ground of modern *space*; space was indeed historically produced through diverse processes and practices at different registers, including production, navigation, cartography, (settler-)colonization—all practices and processes that relied for their emergence and development upon the historical setting up and (forced) passing through of the Door of No Return. Afropessimism’s basic insight is similar: antiblackness in the form of the institution of chattel slavery (reaching back past the trans-Atlantic trade to the trans-Saharan Arab trade in black Africans), and its modern and contemporary genealogical heirs, grounds the historical development of modern humanity and the structural topology of global and local libidinal-

³⁵ Brand 2001, 20.

³⁶ Brand 2001, 20, emphasis added. This *nothing* should not be confused with Fanon’s “nonbeing” (or, in the Sartrean terminology that Fanon sometimes picks up on, *nothingness*), as discussed briefly in the previous chapter.

political positionalities by creating and reproducing the abject figure and population of the black slave as humanity's antithesis.

But Brand's formulation traces the transformation of the historical Door of No Return into a real metaphysics of prohibition in a way that affords the translation of afropessimism's structuralist account into an immanentist one. The Door of No Return, according to Brand, "exists without prompting."³⁷ This is not to deny the Door's historicity, but to appreciate its material immanence—how it conditions human spatiality while at the same time inhering in it. It leads from space itself "into nothing," traversing the entire range of the real as within "the few feet in between."³⁸ Put differently, spatiality as the spread of space—spatialization—proceeds *up-facing* as a surface for the social, and *down-facing* in its prohibition: *above*, the spatial; *below*, no-space,³⁹ this fundamental accumulation in the spatial realm; spatialization manifests this duality in and as a real material process (and therefore should not be confused with the dynamic of *foreclosure*, which, by definition, is rooted in and issues from the symbolic).⁴⁰ To review the theorization of *fundamental accumulation* in Chapter 2, an analogy may be made to the creation of value within capitalism, which relies always upon a simultaneous "devalorization." In order for white men's labor to become *valued*, "women's work" must receive "non-value;" for the products of capitalist production to receive an exchange-value, the products of nature qua nature must be devalorized (and thereby become "freely" available as means of production to the capitalist).⁴¹ In a similarly material binarism, the prohibition of spatiality to blackness enables and conditions the world as a process of actualization. Brand gives us the task of recognizing the

³⁷ Brand 2001, 72.

³⁸ Brand 2001, 20.

³⁹ Here, the metaphor of *up-facing* and *down-facing* is, precisely, a metaphor.

⁴⁰ Grigg 2008, "Chapter 1: Foreclosure."

⁴¹ Nail 2020, 79.

Door of No Return for its prohibition, even while it appears as spatiality; “It exists despite all efforts to obscure it or change it or reinterpret it by its carpenters or its passengers... From it one may reflect, grasp.”⁴²

Prohibition is *prior* to process (the prohibition of spatiality *begins* the process of spatialization), insofar as antiblackness establishes the internal void or inexistant outside necessary for the auto-distinction of immanence from blackness. In other words, while prohibition and process exist in a relation of reciprocal presupposition, spatial prohibition marks the inaugural differentiation, the *beginning* of actualization/spatialization.⁴³ The elaboration of spatial capacity as *outer sense* and/or relationality is therefore a surplus secretion, an effect of its prohibition. Antiblack spatial prohibition: spatialization’s prohibitory arrogation of immanence to itself, the spatiality of no-space as *true* spatiality; “The frame of the doorway is the only space of true existence.”⁴⁴ *A Map to the Door of No Return* lays out the context and makes the case for struggle against space (and time), thus implying the *antaesthetic* character of such radical black movement’s literary manifestation.

While Brand’s theorization of The Door of No Return is one of spatialization at global registers, the space of the Door doubles as an interior *opening* within black subjectivity. “A small space opened in me. I carried this space with me.”⁴⁵ Linking black subjectivity to the Door of No Return, Brand describes how this opening is reproduced in the consciousness of the black diasporan subject, in turn revealing “a tear in the world... a rupture in history, a rupture in the

⁴² Brand 2001, 72.

⁴³ Eugene Thacker, in his study on philosophies of life and the living, comes to a similar conclusion at several points in his exploration of Deleuze’s philosophy of immanence (though antiblackness is not his concern). See Thacker (2010), especially pp. 251, 283.

⁴⁴ Brand 2001, 20.

⁴⁵ Brand 2001, 4.

quality of being... a rupture of geography.”⁴⁶ This rupture is neither the self-negation of dialectics nor the cutting (and suturing) of psychoanalysis. It is a rupture between the virtual and the actual, a tearing apart of their reciprocal presupposition that overdetermines black space(s) from the local to the global, as well as its lived experience.

SPACE AS BODY: PROHIBITION OF THE SPATIAL SUBJECT

I have argued that an immanent conception of space—which I derive above from Deleuze’s account of non-chronological temporality—is necessary for understanding Brand’s exploration the Door of No Return as of the prohibition of the spatial. The Deleuzian understanding of the immanent exchange between actual and virtual also allows for a productive revisiting of Frantz Fanon’s foundational and controversial intervention into Merleau-Ponty’s formulation of the “body schema”—the latter which is another account of immanent spatiality. Over the course of his oeuvre, Merleau-Ponty labors to give an account of perception and phenomena in which the subject-object split basic to Western thought—which he argues leads to the contrary and complimentary approaches of *empiricism* and *intellectualism*—is displaced by the “primacy of perception” in both epistemological and ontological realms.⁴⁷ Merleau-Ponty’s singular intervention into Western onto-epistemology is thus to render perception a genuine element in/of the world, belonging to being, and to insist on its ontological priority relative to the constitution of the subject-object dyad.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Brand 2001, 5.

⁴⁷ See Dillon 1997, especially pg. 55.

⁴⁸ In Merleau-Ponty’s most well-read book, *Phenomenology of Perception*, this ontological program is predominantly implicit. It becomes explicit if not thematic in his last, posthumously published work, *The Visible and the Invisible*. See Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*.

Within this context, Merleau-Ponty formulates his conception of space in the *Phenomenology of Perception* as inherently corporeal, explicitly aiming to preempt the Kantian transcendental passage in which *spatializing space*—the a priori capacity for tracing space out, thereby generating “geometrical space” and “pure positionality”—takes precedence over *spatialized space* or concrete space—“the... object and its concrete context” or “concrete relations.”⁴⁹ To reverse this fundamental ordering, Merleau-Ponty focusses on the “concrete context” of the body,⁵⁰ and here he distinguishes between the physically existing “actual body,” and the context-dependent or relational “virtual body” with which the former is always engaged: “my body as a system of possible actions, a virtual body whose phenomenal ‘place’ is defined by its task and by its situation.”⁵¹ The virtual body is, as Deleuze might put it, a *problematic*, a system of possibilities (a field of potential actualizations) providing the virtual material for possible actualizations or spatial possibilities.⁵² As such, the “virtual body displaces the real body,” thereby enabling the body’s inhabitation of the “spectacle” of the perceived world.⁵³ Merleau-Ponty calls this “setting up... a spatial level,” a “certain possession of the world by my body..., the spatial level [occurs] at the intersection of my motor intentions and my perceptual

⁴⁹ Merleau-Ponty 2012, 254.

⁵⁰ Merleau-Ponty draws evidence largely from late nineteenth and early twentieth century empirical and gestalt psychology, including the work of George M. Stratton and Max Wertheimer.

⁵¹ Merleau-Ponty 2012, 260.

⁵² See Deleuze 1994, 168-70. On Deleuze’s and Merleau-Ponty’s shared appropriation of Bergson’s philosophy (not only in terms of the virtual), and their convergences more generally, see Wambacq 2017. See also Deleuze’s formulation of the “potentialities” of space, which seems to correspond to a version of virtuality. “The Exhausted,” in *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Thanks to Phillip Thurtle for bringing this formulation to my attention.

⁵³ We should read “real” in this passage from Merleau-Ponty as synonymous with “actual.” Merleau-Ponty does not exercise Deleuze’s subsequent technical use of the term “real,” whereby Deleuze insists that “the virtual is opposed not to the real but to the actual. The virtual is fully real in so far as it is virtual” (Deleuze 1994, 272).

field, that is, when my actual body comes to coincide with the virtual body that is demanded by the spectacle, and when the actual spectacle comes to coincide with the milieu that my body projects around itself.”⁵⁴ This exchange between the virtual body and the actual body is constitutive of spatiality itself, insofar as it is “this gearing of the subject into his world that is the origin of space,” a space in which “each object has ‘its’ top and ‘its’ bottom, which for a given [spatial] level indicate its ‘natural’ place, the place that it ‘should’ occupy.”⁵⁵ Spatiality is the body’s concrete process of intertwining virtualizations and actualizations.

Furthermore, by occupying the exchange between virtual and actual bodies, the spatial subject maintains the capacity to continually “set up” varying spatial levels, switching through their diversity as a matter of *corporeal ownership*: “The possession of a body brings with it the power of changing levels and of ‘understanding’ space...”⁵⁶ This “knowledge” or awareness of one’s body constitutes the “body schema,” a bodily self-possession that Merleau-Ponty conveys by adopting an auto-analytical writing that occurs throughout his text: “If my arm is resting on the table, I will never think to say that it is *next to* the ashtray in the same way that the ashtray is next to the telephone.”⁵⁷ Not merely an object *in* the world, “body schema” signifies the existence of “my body... toward the world;”⁵⁸ the spatiality engendered through ownership of the body is a *lived* space.⁵⁹

Having reviewed Merleau-Ponty’s own elaboration of living space and the “body schema” in some detail, I can now build on the reading of Fanon given in the previous chapter.

⁵⁴ Merleau-Ponty 2012, 261.

⁵⁵ Merleau-Ponty 2012; 262, 264.

⁵⁶ Merleau-Ponty 2012, 262.

⁵⁷ Merleau-Ponty 2012, 100.

⁵⁸ Merleau-Ponty 2012, 103.

⁵⁹ Merleau-Ponty 2012, 293.

Recall that in “*L’expérience vécu du Noir*,” the fifth chapter of *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Fanon declares that “In the white world, the man of color encounters difficulties in the elaboration of his body schema. Awareness of the body is a uniquely negative activity.”⁶⁰ For Fanon, the self-embodiment of the black body manifests not as an “in and toward the world,”⁶¹ but precisely as “an object among other objects.”⁶² Fanon openly mimics Merleau-Ponty’s auto-description of the *I can*: “All around the body reigns an atmosphere of certain uncertainty. I know that, if I want to smoke, I shall have to stretch out my right arm and grab the pack of cigarettes lying at the other end of the table. As for matches, they are in the left drawer and I shall have to move back a little.”⁶³ His body is included within this plan, *alongside* the cigarettes and matches, one of a multiplicity of objects in physical space, and Fanon “make[s] all these moves, not out of habit, but by implicit knowledge.”⁶⁴ That is, he knows the position of his arm not through a world-gearing “indivisible possession” of his body,⁶⁵ but via implication and deduction based on his knowledge of the location of the objects in question (including himself) on the grid of geometric or objective space. Fanon’s body is unfree to navigate the world by setting up a spatial level, it is instead “woven... out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories;” a “bodily curse.”⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Fanon 1952, 108. All references to this publication indicate my own translation. References to Philcox’s translation are cited as “Fanon 2008.” While Fanon’s intervention into the conception the body-schema is widely read, his explicit engagement with Merleau-Ponty’s formulation is less appreciated outside critical phenomenology studies. See, for example, Weate 2001, Macey 2002, Ahmed 2006, Al-Saji 2013.

⁶¹ Merleau-Ponty 2012, 103.

⁶² Fanon 1952, 107.

⁶³ Fanon 2008, 90-91.

⁶⁴ Fanon 2008, 91.

⁶⁵ Merleau-Ponty 2012, 100.

⁶⁶ Fanon 2008; 91, 117.

Recall how Fanon's analysis here is anchored in the infamous exclamation of a white child: "Look! A Negro!"⁶⁷ No mere subjectivating interpolation, this passage illustrates the prohibition of spatiality as the demolition of the body: "Consequently, the body schema, attacked at several points, collapsed, giving way to an epidermic-racial schema."⁶⁸ Under an instantiation of the global regime of antiblack domination, Fanon is collapsed, disoriented, imprisoned, objectified—conditioned as social-spatially dead: "...Disoriented, incapable of being outside with the other, the White, who, ruthless, imprisoned me, I carried myself far from my being, very far, constituting myself as an object." "My body was returned to me laid out, disjointed, fatigued, all mourning on this white winter day."⁶⁹

Merleau-Ponty's formulation of the body schema is supplemented with his elaboration of *lived space* as the setting up of a spatial level through intercourse of virtual and actual bodies. The spatial level that is yielded through this corporeal exchange serves as an access point or link binding the spatial subject with the world (Fanon: "the body schema, attacked at several points... collapsed..."). Fanon's auto-theorization illustrates how antiblack prohibition enacts a liquefaction of the levels and differentiations at work in this process. First, below Fanon's body schema, a *historico-racial schema* is constructed, built from the antiblack "elements" of white culture.⁷⁰ This schema—*beneath* or *below* the body schema and thus implied as an inner layer, in closer proximity to his core—is created from clichés of the antiblack world, rather than "residues of sensations and perceptions of a tactile, vestibular, kinesthetic, and visual order"⁷¹

⁶⁷ Fanon 2008, 91.

⁶⁸ Fanon 1952, 110.

⁶⁹ Fanon 1952. 110, 111.

⁷⁰ Fanon 1952, 109.

⁷¹ Fanon 1952, 109. Fanon's description here is a quotation from Lhermitte, from whom Merleau-Ponty also appropriates the concept of *body schema*.

that constitute and define Merleau-Ponty's virtual body as a system of potentiality geared to "its task and by its situation."⁷² The virtuality of a "past in general" (Deleuze) is thereby displaced by "the fact of blackness."⁷³ Fanon wrongly assumed he had a virtual body: "I thought I was being asked to construct a physiological self, to balance space and localize sensations, when all the time they were clamoring for more."⁷⁴

Second is the violent replacement of Fanon's body schema with an "epidermic racial schema." While for Merleau-Ponty the actual body is displaced by the virtual body, in Fanon's account his actual body—already hardened from within by the historico-racial schema—suffers a total collapse and replacement from without, becoming indistinguishable from the clichés of antiblack ontology: "I was responsible not only for my body but also for my race, my ancestors. I cast an *objective gaze* over myself, discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics—and my eardrum was smashed by cannibalism, mental retardation, fetishism, racial defects, slaves..."⁷⁵ This displacement of the actual body, not by the virtual body but, again, by "the fact of blackness," causes Fanon to become literally disoriented, unable to coordinate himself spatially. His is constituted not only as an object, but with increasing spatial incoherence: "...it was no longer about knowledge of my body in the third person, but in triple... I was unable to discover the feverish coordinates of the world. I existed in triple: I occupied space."⁷⁶ Under the force of antiblack prohibition, Fanon's actual and virtual bodies, as well as the spatial levels they would

⁷² Merleau-Ponty 2012, 260.

⁷³ "The fact of blackness" is, of course, the non-literal translation of Chapter 5, "*L'expérience vécu du Noir*," from the first English translation of *Peau noire, masques blancs*. See Fanon, Markmann (1967).

⁷⁴ Fanon 2008, 91.

⁷⁵ Fanon 1952, 110; emphasis added.

⁷⁶ Fanon 1952, 110.

construct, are liquefacted in a material incoherence (*liquefaction*: “conversion of soil [i.e., the *ground*] into a fluidlike mass during an earthquake or other seismic event”).⁷⁷

Merleau-Ponty observes that the “lability” of spatial levels produces both an “intellectual experience of disorder” and a “living experience of vertigo and nausea.” This vertigo is “the consciousness of, and the horror caused by, our contingency,”⁷⁸ and it is overcome and forgotten only by erecting a spatial level through the exchange of actual and virtual bodies. Space, according to Merleau-Ponty, is thereby “established upon our facticity.”⁷⁹ But the *fact of blackness* in the antiblack world cannot be analogized with Merleau-Ponty’s facticity of existence; the demolition of the actual and virtual bodies and the liquefaction of spatial levels, under the antiblack prohibition of spatiality, engenders intellectual disorder and experiential nausea of a different kind and scale.

Wilderson describes this as the crossing of subjective and objective vertigoes, where black life exists as “constituted by disorientation rather than [as] life interrupted by disorientation.”⁸⁰ For Wilderson, this intersection of vertigoes occurs at the level of the subject and is a product of the black’s positionality vis-a-vis the structural topology of global and local political ontology.⁸¹ However, Merleau-Ponty positions the exchange between the actual and virtual bodies, as mentioned above, as a primordial process that is prior to the subject-object split, previous to the subject’s structural positioning. Fanon’s intervention, therefore, should be

⁷⁷ See entry three for “liquefaction,” *Miriam-webster.com*. My use of the term to describe the elimination, or de-differenc/tiation of Merleau-Ponty’s “spatial levels,” presages the discussion of *stratification* as immanent spatiality, and its suspension as gestured to within Brand’s *Ossuaries*, below.

⁷⁸ Merleau-Ponty 2012, 265.

⁷⁹ Merleau-Ponty 2012, 265.

⁸⁰ Wilderson 2011, 3.

⁸¹ Wilderson, 2010.

understood to bear on the same fundamental pre-structural process of corporeal-spatial composition. His nausea stems from the prohibition of the virtual and actual bodies themselves: the body schema collapses because its support structure, the terms of its inner architecture—actualization and virtualization—have been rendered incoherent and powerless, occasioning an *immanent vertigo* that I have also termed *liquefaction*.

It is worth making a slight detour here to demonstrate how a reading of Fanon that observes and builds upon the relation of his text and its responsiveness to the positions and arguments of his contemporaneous and textual interlocutors has direct and determining consequences for the spatial theory one may draw from it. McKittrick posits that “[t]he poetics of landscape allow black women to critique the boundaries of transatlantic slavery, rewrite national narratives, respatialize feminism, and develop new pathways across traditional geographic arrangements,” hence staging “reconceptualizations of space and place, positioning black women as geographical subjects who provide spatial clues as to how more humanely workable geographies might be imagined.”⁸² In this assertion, she flies over the antiblack prohibition of spatiality that frames Brand’s entire text and that pairs with spatialization and its practices to form the spatial register of fundamental accumulation. I would like to detail how, in order to make these claims for the reclamation of the spatial, McKittrick must give a deeply flawed reading of Fanon’s “*L’expérience vécue du Noir*.”

⁸² McKittrick 2006, xxi. It is unclear what McKittrick means when she calls for the “critique of the *boundaries* of transatlantic slavery” (my emphasis)—as if the institution’s boundaries are particularly conspicuous or are the element that determine or condition the need for its critique.

McKittrick appeals specifically to Fanon's juxtaposition of the *body schema* and the *historico-racial schema*.⁸³ Surprisingly, because in Fanon's text, "[h]is positionality and status shift from moment to moment... a black man, an intellectual, a writer, a psychiatrist, a black object, a black subject...," McKittrick reads this juxtaposition as a dialectic that exposes the "mutual construction of identity, self, and place" and "invites respatialization" along the lines of "a different sense of place."⁸⁴ According to McKittrick, that different sense of place is inherent within "a self who desires equality on several geographic scales, from the body and beyond."⁸⁵ At the same time, the "dialectic between Fanon's physical body and his world(s)... while flexible, also reveals how the imprisoning workings of colonialism and race are detrimental to the 'relation of coexistence' between the self, the body, and the world."⁸⁶ Conceiving of racial violence as an impediment to the spatial (and not of the spatial itself as a form of racial violence), McKittrick is determined to uncover within Fanon's text an indication for the reclamation of spatiality and the geographical.

McKittrick fixates on this phrase, "relation of coexistence," interpreting it as the invocation of spatialization, and therefore as a mark of black humanity, requiring "not only that black subjects be recognized as already human (...), but that their sense of place is different due to the ways this humanity is required, under racism, to be lived as objectification."⁸⁷ That is, she

⁸³ McKittrick cites the first English translation of *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), by Charles Markmann. My preferred translation varies from passage to passage, between the Markmann and the subsequent Richard Philcox translation (2008). However, I find it necessary at several points below (as above) to either alter the Philcox translation or to provide my own translation, as indicated.

⁸⁴ McKittrick 2006, 27.

⁸⁵ McKittrick 2006, 27.

⁸⁶ McKittrick quotes a passage from the Markman translation (Fanon 1967): "Between the world and me a relation of coexistence was established" (128).

⁸⁷ McKittrick 2006, 27.

reads this “relation of coexistence” between “the world and me” as preexisting racism and colonialism. However, Fanon’s text is much more complicated than McKittrick’s reading implies, and it elaborates a much less “optimistic” diagnosis. The statement that “Somewhere beyond the objective world of farms and banana trees and rubber trees, I had subtly brought the real world into being. The essence of the world was my fortune. Between the world and me a relation of coexistence was established. I had discovered the primeval One....”⁸⁸ is part of Fanon’s description of how the negritude movement, in *reaction* to racist colonialism, attempted to steal back the world by “subtly institut[ing] the real world” “above the objective world of land and banana or rubber trees.”⁸⁹ Fanon emphasizes the antagonistic nature of this institution: “My ‘speaking hands’ tore at this hysterical throat of the world.”⁹⁰ The image Fanon gives here is *not* one of preexisting dialectical coexistence between the black body, self, and world, a humanity prior to racism and only subsequently impinged upon by colonial (antiblack) violence. Rather, Fanon is describing negritude’s insistence on black worldly existence as a positive counterforce, in response or retaliation against the world’s immanent anti-black prohibition of the spatial. This is negritude’s (or Harlem’s) “Negro rehabilitated, ‘standing at the helm’, governing the world with his *intuition, rediscovered, reappropriated*, in demand, and accepted”—Fanon’s characterization of negritude as typified by Senghor (who quotes from Langston Hughes’s famous poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”).⁹¹

⁸⁸ Fanon 1967, 128.

⁸⁹ Fanon 1952, 125 (all citations of this original French edition are my own translation). It is curious that McKittrick misses, or ignores, Fanon’s tone as he characterizes—on the verge of parodying—negritude through these pages of *BSWM*.

⁹⁰ Fanon 2008, 107. The Philcox and Markmann (128) translations of this sentence are identical.

⁹¹ Fanon 2008, 106; my emphasis. On the previous page Fanon has quoted Senghor as emblematic of negritude: “The very nature of the black man’s emotion and sensitivity, moreover, explains his attitude confronted with objects perceived with such an essential violence... Rhythmic attitude: remember the word” (Fanon 1967, 106).

Moreover, Fanon goes on to argue that negritude's would-be dialectical triumph—the institution of a “*spatial coexistence*” whose cultural manifestation featured the trumping of the white man's “poetry that had nothing poetic about it” with a “poet[ry] of the world,” and the one-upping of European cultural-historical ‘evolution’ with an excavation of “black antiquity”⁹²—is unable to progress when faced with the blunt assertion and enforcement of the supremacy of whiteness over the inferiority of blackness. The antiblack assertion takes its evidence from everything and anything: *you are pre-industrial because you are black; you are unscientific and sensitive (anachronistic) because you are black; we are scientific and rational (progressive), and master, because we are white; you are a slave because you are black.* As Fanon puts it, “So they were countering my irrationality with rationality, my rationality with the ‘true rationality’.”⁹³

For Fanon, it is in the context of this non-progressive non-dialectic antiblack relation between whiteness and blackness that blackness's appeal to whiteness is expressed as what Wilderson terms a *negrophiliac* relation: “...from time to time when we are tired of all that concrete, we will turn to you as our children, our naive, ingenuous, and spontaneous children... those adorable expressive faces. In a sense you reconcile us with ourselves.”⁹⁴ And Fanon shows how Jean-Paul Sartre exercises a philosophical form of such racial-self-reconciliation via negrophilial mediation, in his instrumentalization of negritude within an ostensibly *broader* (whiter) dialectic: “...when I tried to claim my negritude intellectually as a concept, they snatched it away from me. They proved to me that my reasoning was nothing but a phase in the

⁹² Fanon 2008, 108-109.

⁹³ Fanon 2008, 111. “Lay aside your history, your research into the past, and try to get in step with our rhythm. In a society such as ours, industrialized to the extreme, dominated by science, there is no longer room for your sensitivity... You have to be tough to be able to live. It is no longer enough to play ball with the world; you have to master it with integrals and atoms.”

⁹⁴ Fanon (Phlicox), *Black Skin, White Masks*, pg. 111.

dialectic.”⁹⁵ Satre’s annihilation of negritude, via absorption into whiteness, marks the end of negritude’s challenge to global antiblackness. As Sartre puts it:

‘At a blow the subjective existential, ethnic notion of *Negritude* ‘passes’, as Hegel would say, into the objective, positive, exact notion of the *proletariat*... In fact, Negritude appears as the weak stage of a dialectic progression... Thus Negritude is dedicated to its own destruction, it is transition and not result, a means and not the ultimate goal’⁹⁶

Fanon reports, “When I read this page, I felt they had robbed me of my last chance... And there you have it; I did not create a meaning for myself; the meaning was already there, waiting.”⁹⁷

Leaving no doubt about the defeat negritude thus suffers, Fanon adds, “[t]his struggle, this descent once more, should be seen as a completed aspect.”⁹⁸

The inability of negritude to dialectically triumph over (antiblack) European philosophy and culture can be understood as what Fanon subsequently describes as blackness’s “self-adherence” or absence of dynamis. Contra McKittrick’s misreading of Fanonian blackness as flexible or dialectical, Fanon states clearly: “...black consciousness is immanent to itself. I am not a potentiality of something, I am fully what I am. I do not have to seek the universal. Within me no probability takes place. My black consciousness does not give itself as lack. It *is*. It adheres to itself.”⁹⁹ McKittrick incorrectly reads this rejection of lack as an insistence upon

⁹⁵ Fanon (Phlicox), *Black Skin, White Masks*, pg. 111.

⁹⁶ Quoted in Fanon 2008, 112. “Transition and not result” resonates with Brand’s elaboration of the Door of No Return as passage without terms. See above.

⁹⁷ Fanon 2008, 112-113.

⁹⁸ Fanon 2008, 114.

⁹⁹ Fanon, 1952, 132, my translation (emphasis in original).

In Fanon’s original French, the passage reads: “...la conscience noire est immanente à elle-même. Je ne suis pas une potentialité de quelque chose, je suis pleinement ce que je suis. Je n’ai pas à

recognition of black subjects as “already human,” as a black human plenitude.¹⁰⁰ But in the context of *Peau noire, masques blancs*’ extended and explicit engagement with European dialectical and existentialist thinkers including Hegel, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, and psychoanalytic interlocutors including Octave Mannoni and Jacques Lacan, blackness’s immanent self-adherence, its absence of *lack*, clearly names the non-dialectical character of blackness, its absence of *ekstasis*.¹⁰¹ A page earlier Fanon puts it slightly differently: “black consciousness gives itself as absolute density, full of itself, a stage pre-existent to any split, to any abolition of the self by desire.”¹⁰² By insisting on blackness’s self-adhering identity and absence of potentiality, Fanon is rejecting a basic aspect of what, for dialectical and existential

rechercher l’universel. En mon sein nulle probabilité ne prend place. Ma conscience nègre ne se donne pas comme manque. Elle est. Elle est adhérente à elle-même."

The sole English translation of *Black Skin, White Masks* at the time of McKittrick’s writing, Markmann’s translation of this passage reads: “...black consciousness is immanent in its own eyes. I am not a potentiality of something, I am wholly what I am. I do not have to look for the universal. No probability has any place inside me. My Negro consciousness does not hold itself out as a lack. It *is*. It is its own follower” (Fanon 1967, 135).

I believe neither Markmann’s nor Philcox’s (2008) translation adequately conveys Fanon’s meaning here.

¹⁰⁰ “This mutual construction of identity, self, and place is crucial because for Fanon it requires not only that black subjects be recognized as already human (my black consciousness is not a lack, it *is*), but that their sense of place is different due to the ways this humanity is required, under racism, to be lived as objectification” (McKittrick 2006, 27).

¹⁰¹ Regarding *Sartrean* dialectics, Fanon even states in a footnote, “Though Sartre’s speculations on the existence of ‘the Other’ remain correct (insofar as, we may recall, *Being and Nothingness* describes an alienated consciousness), their application to a black consciousness proves fallacious because the white man is not only ‘the Other,’ but also the master, whether real or imaginary” (Fanon 1967, 117). In Chapter 7, “The Black Man and Recognition,” Fanon argues that Hegel’s master-slave dialectic is inapplicable to antiblack antagonism: “We hope we have shown that the master here is basically different from the one described by Hegel. For Hegel there is reciprocity; here the master scorns the consciousness of the slave. What he wants from the slave is not recognition but work [sic]. Likewise, the slave here can in no way be equated with the [Hegelian] slave who loses himself in the object and finds the source of his liberation in work” (Fanon 1967, 195).

¹⁰² Fanon 1952, 131. Philcox translates *fente*, which I have rendered *split*, as *opening*. *Split* better characterizes the French existentialist and psychoanalytic concept that Fanon is targeting here. Additionally, my translation avoids confusion with Brand’s use of the term *opening*.

theory, characterizes human being. For continental philosophy, broadly speaking, the reality of human *self-negation* (Hegel) or *nothingness* (Sartre) is integral to being, prompting and enabling dynamic self-overcoming, freedom, responsibility, and dialectical development. And rejecting the existence of any *lack* or *split* within blackness (or black consciousness), Fanon is also distinguishing blackness from the psychoanalytic figure of the subject. *Lack*, for Lacan, is the basic relation between the subject and being, and is productive of desire as an unconscious force. The *split subject*, meanwhile, names the human subject's alienated constitution via the double bind—simultaneously tarrying in the imaginary (the mirror stage) and investing in the symbolic. But as absolute density, Fanon insists, blackness is both *absent* of these (human) dialectical or relational structures and *prior* to them—just as, for Brand, the Door's prohibition of the spatial is both immanent and prior to the production of space. *Absolute density* is thus another name for the prohibition of capacity, and it is the simultaneously produced precondition for the human spatiality that McKittrick would reclaim through a faithless reading of Fanon's text.

The work of Fanon and of Brand are both presented in this chapter, not only by nature of their similarity or complementarity in terms of theoretical-critical orientation and power. They also share a discursive or disciplinary methodological tendency—what I called above *auto-theorization*—that dissolves the borders by which we recognize “theory,” “memoir,” and “creative writing” as genres. Through an auto-theorization of his “lived experience,” Fanon furnishes us with a vivid account of the demolition of the spatial body under antiblack prohibition, an immanent spatial incoherence and vertigo that engenders his physical nausea and incapacity for spatial coordination. In *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Brand utilizes a similar

methodology of literary-critical auto-theorization, to illustrate another mode of antiblack prohibition's actualization.

Recall that for Merleau-Ponty, the body schema and the setting up of spatial levels is contingent upon an “indivisible” bodily self-possession, which reciprocally presupposes the spatial subject's possession of the world. But under antiblack prohibition, worldly spatiality's vertiginous inaccessibility is reciprocally presupposed by a non-possession of the body. Historically effectuated in antiblack chattel slavery, this is the basis of afropessimism's insistence that blackness be understood as slaveness.¹⁰³ The subtitle of Brand's book, “Notes to Belonging,” must therefore be understood in a double sense: *belonging* as the relation of the individual to the whole or community—the sense in which belonging is for Brand, under the social-spatial prohibitions of the Door of No Return, an *unbelonging*; but also in the sense of *belonging* as the status of an object under relations of property ownership. Brand thus gives a sustained elaboration of social space as *captive space*, utilizing social commentary and literary criticism to chart how contemporary iterations of captive space link back to the slave castle as their genealogical and historical source, “as if [the Black body's] first appearance through the Door of No Return, dressed in its new habit of captive and therefore slave, is embedded in all its subsequent and contemporary appearances.”¹⁰⁴ Indeed, “captured in one's own body, in one's own thoughts, to be out of possession of one's mind; our cognitive schema is captivity.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ See Wilderson 2010, 2020. See also Harney and Moten's (2021) theorization of bodily self-possession as the inaugural instantiation of property ownership—which they elaborate via a critique of John Locke—in their essay “The Theft of Assembly.”

¹⁰⁴ Brand 2001, 37.

¹⁰⁵ Brand 2001, 29.

Recalling the *opening* formed inside Brand's subjectivity in parallel to the outward geographical manifestations of the Door, captive space is elaborated "as physically and psychically *open* space." It is "[a] space not simply owned by those who embody it but constructed and occupied by other embodiments."¹⁰⁶ The two-sided character of spatialization (above the spatial, below its prohibition) is reproduced here at the level of the social body in the form of possession—"[i]n the diaspora, as in bad dreams, you are constantly overwhelmed by the persistence of the spectre of captivity"¹⁰⁷—as captive space enables and engenders a kind of *jouissance* of capacity.¹⁰⁸ Corresponding to the spectacularized demolition of black bodies via contemporary police and vigilante lynchings, captive space is also effectuated in the *negrophilial* spectacle of virtuoso spatiality.¹⁰⁹ Illustrating this tendency within the realm of popular culture, Brand recounts an example of the mediatized *use* of blackness that unfolds within captive space:

He, my neighbour, is white, I don't know of what origin... We both watch the NBA championships. This is what I hear: Each time Shaquille scores a basket, he, my neighbour, makes an ecstatic, painful sound as if he is entering Shaquille's body, inhabiting Shaquille's powerful arms, his beautiful head, leaping into Shaquille as Shaquille leaps in the air. The sound my neighbour makes startles me. It is guttural yet it soars; it is sexual, it hits every register of passion. I stop

¹⁰⁶ Brand 2001, 38.

¹⁰⁷ Brand 2001, 29.

¹⁰⁸ The following section is obviously indebted to, and aims to productively supplement, Hartman's examination of black performance as determined by the master's pleasure.

¹⁰⁹ Wilderson (2010, 2020) juxtaposes and connects *negrophobia* and *negrophilia*, a conceptual dyad rooted in his reading of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*.

watching the game, halt my own dance into Damon Stoudamire's bouncy legs, his speed and fakes. This is entering the body valued.¹¹⁰

It may seem ironic that the black virtuosic athlete is presented as an example of the prohibition of spatiality. But in fact it is not contradictory, as O'Neil's athletic mastery, physical strength, and skill are not what is at stake. O'Neil's body is opened up to spatial-social construction and occupation, for ontological use, functioning as a *real fetish* object that occasions the supra-orgasmic expression of Brand's neighbor—the self *feeling* the simultaneous antiblack prohibition of, and fleshly reproduction of, capacity itself. O'Neil's body is thereby *also* opened up for use as a valuable *non-human* machinic component (constant capital) produced and utilized in the extraction of surplus value from the socially necessary labor performed by consumers/viewers.

Furthermore, the immanence of captive space implies that the black body may be occupied and used by both non-black and black subjects (both Brand's white neighbor and herself), since both must navigate social-spatial economies at the level of daily experience as subjects (despite spatiality's uneven ontological distribution). "Inhabiting [the Black body] is a domestic, hemispheric pastime, a transatlantic pastime, an international pastime;"¹¹¹ indeed, it is a global pastime. But the terms may not be inverted—the non-black body is not open for the same kind of ontological occupation and use, because whiteness is afforded, even prescribed, the use of spatiality—however fragmented or reified historically—and is therefore unavailable, already occupied. The inhabitation of the black body is in excess of the investment in or identification with the body of the non-black athlete and its performance, because the antiblack

¹¹⁰ Brand 2001, 38-39.

¹¹¹ Brand 2001, 28.

distribution of prohibition and prescription that enables the former is a matter of immanent differentiation, not a matter of individual or communal identity and cathexis.

SPATIALITY AS RELATIONALITY; PROHIBITION OF THE FLESH

In Merleau-Ponty's last writings, published posthumously as *The Visible and the Invisible*, not only is the "primacy of phenomena and perception" over the subject-object split rendered explicit, but the elaboration of that fundamental phenomenal moment undergoes substantial revision. The *lived body* is transformed into an exploration of *the flesh*; it is the body *as flesh* by which we are rooted within and belong to the world at an immanent, pre-subjective level. While various disciplinary formations have elaborated how the body anchors the subject within cultural and social intercourses, the flesh connects us to the world ontologically, prior to those levels and practices of subjection. And while our bodies *are* flesh, the flesh is not limited to our bodies. Rather, *the flesh* constitutes the world of pre-objective things at large; *bodies*, whether subjects or objects (or, of course, both), are fundamentally the flesh of the world.

It is tempting to think of the flesh as a primordial medium or media, a form of mediation through which we engage and intercourse with the world at the most basic level. However, Merleau-Ponty's description of the flesh as a *chiasm* and an *interlacing* or *intertwining* prevents this reading. Media, mediation, or medium, conceived of in terms of technical objects or prostheses, cultural technologies or practices (e.g., reading or *text*), or the material substrate of meaning or communication, exists as a third term between the subject and the world (or between subjects or objects). But the flesh extends, as *the flesh of the world*, from the worldly things that surround us and into our own bodies. In this sense the flesh is a *dehiscence* of our body into the

world, and vice versa.¹¹² “Flesh is, on the one hand, the body. On the other hand, the chiasm that connects us to the world, belonging to both.”¹¹³ At the same time, Merleau-Ponty is clear that the flesh is not a substance, nor is it a quality or characteristic of the body.¹¹⁴ It comes *before* the body, a “formative medium of the object *and* the subject,” through which body and world have already been “interlaced.”¹¹⁵ And, as the material of the sensible, the folding-over upon itself of the flesh *is* sensibility.¹¹⁶ “We have to reject the age-old assumptions that put the body in the world and the seer in the body, or conversely, the world and the body in the seer as in a box.”¹¹⁷

Merleau-Ponty elaborates this ontologically fundamental realm of intra-sensible materiality through the perceptual modes of visibility and tangibility. Visibility precedes the vision of the subject and the visible-ness of the object, the latter two being products of the former’s immanence: “There is vision, touch, when a certain visible, a certain tangible, turns back upon the whole of the visible, the whole of the tangible, of which it is a part, or when suddenly it finds itself *surrounded* by them...”¹¹⁸ As dehiscence, the flesh is therefore alternatively connective and differentiating; it forms an immanent visibility and an immanent tangibility through which the dehiscent exchange of seeing and the visible, feeling and the tangible, occur—an “intercorporeal being” or *fundamental relationality*.¹¹⁹ By formulating the flesh as an immanent sensibility of relationality, Merleau-Ponty draws a blueprint for a conception of immanent spatiality, even if *space* does not receive the same thematic attention in

¹¹² Merleau-Ponty 1968, 153.

¹¹³ Merleau-Ponty 1968, 137.

¹¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty 1968, 139-40.

¹¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty 1968, 147; emphasis added.

¹¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty 1968, 135-36.

¹¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty 1968, 138.

¹¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty 1968, 139.

¹¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty 1968; 153, 143.

The Visible and the Invisible as it does in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Immanent relationality of the flesh as manifest through bodies themselves (*bodies* in the sense of classical physics, or as the particles of quantum mechanics; and as prior to any specific sensible capacity of a given or subjected body) yields a generic immanent spatiality: the “continuity between my body and the things surrounding me in the world I inhabit,” my capacity to “touch worldly things precisely because I am myself a worldly thing,”¹²⁰ the generic relationality of the flesh itself “turned back upon” or “surrounded” by flesh itself.

What, then, is the valence of the flesh with respect to the actual and the virtual? The latter may be understood as *being* and *non-being*, respectively, or as the *given* and *not-given*.¹²¹ Since the *flesh of the world* is clearly not given, the relationality bestowed upon the body by the flesh therefore tends towards the virtual. Indeed, an immanent account of spatiality necessitates the inclusion of some minimal virtual component within the spatial, in order to account for spatiality’s given and ungiven aspects without relying on a transcendent version of space (Merleau-Ponty understood this already in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, hence his theorization of the *virtual body* that displaces the *actual body*). The spatiality of the flesh is therefore a relationality that is not given, but that nonetheless conditions and enables the relation of every body with(in) the world—the capacity for actualized and actualizing relationality. The flesh is thereby virtuality carried within actualization. Or in other words, just as virtualization (temporalization) carries within itself the potential for the actual, actualization (spatialization) retains its own virtual aspect as the capacity for relationality.

¹²⁰ Dillon 1997, 159.

¹²¹ Smith 2012, 42.

On a different line of intervention from that of Merleau-Ponty, but very much connected to the illustration of antiblack prohibition given by Brand, Hortense Spillers's well known theorization of the *reduction* of the body to flesh, via the enslavement of Africans and their transport as commodities through the Middle Passage, conceives of flesh as a realization of the "zero degree of social conceptualization." Spillers's *flesh* builds upon the *constituted object* of Fanon's intervention into the *lived body*, as the flesh is the point at which "biological, sexual, social, cultural, linguistic, ritualistic, and psychological fortunes converge," as well as an absolute abject status, that together enable widespread "pornotroping" of black flesh.¹²² For Spillers, while the flesh is the historical product of an unparalleled regime of violence, fleshly existence nonetheless ultimately yields social possibilities of a "different cultural text," wherein "the black American male... community" is "handed the specific occasion to learn *who* the female is within itself," and the black female, by "*claiming* the monstrosity" of a femaleness unencumbered by gendered political-ontological injunctions of *embodied* personhood, might gain an "insurgent ground."¹²³ Alexander Weheliye links Spillers's and Merleau-Ponty's respective conceptualizations of the flesh, outlining a figure that "operates as a vestibular gash in the armor of Man, simultaneously a tool of dehumanization and a relational vestibule to alternate ways of being."¹²⁴ Already present in Spillers's text, this is a (modified) historical materialist reading of the prohibition of the body, where the "reduction to flesh" provides the conditions for

¹²² Spillers 2003, 206.

¹²³ Spillers 2003, 228-229.

¹²⁴ Weheliye 2014, 44. See also Jared Sexton's comments on passages from Merleau-Ponty, highlighting the connection between Merleau-Ponty's flesh in relation to the mother, with Spiller's flesh in relation to the infant child (Barber 2007).

its own destitution: “to *subsist* in the force field of the flesh, then, might just be better than not existing at all.”¹²⁵

As Brand shows in a later text, however, antiblackness works to prohibit not only the body, but also the flesh; immanent antiblack prohibition affords no alternative between embodied *existence* and fleshly *subsistence*. Brand’s 2010 long-form poem *Ossuaries* utilizes different formal and structural strategies relative to *A Map to the Door of No Return*, crafting poetic fragments of a narrative only to serve as a foil of plenitude against which an immanent incoherence persists, and registering the antiblack prohibition of spatiality as relationality—the prohibition of the flesh. While Brand’s earlier *Map* is paradoxical—cartography and geography rendered ironic via the prohibition of actualization—the ossuary, a box for bones, intensifies the paradox as the embodiment of spatiality’s absence.

Ossuaries begins with a continuation of the theme of *captive space*, which now characterizes *outer intuition* itself: “so many dreams of course were full of prisons, mine were without relief... my every waking was incarcerated, each square metre of air so toxic with violence.” The carceral is the very mode of the experiential-phenomenal, animating the narrator’s relation to other bodies within the quotidian actual:

Some damage I had expected, but no one
 expects the violence of glances, of offices,
 of walkways and train stations, of bathroom mirrors

¹²⁵ Weheliye 2014, 45; emphasis added.

Especially, the vicious telephones, the coarseness of
 daylight, the brusque decisions of air,
 the casual homicides of dresses¹²⁶

Here, visibility and tangibility themselves (“the violence of glances,” “the brusque decisions of air, the casual homicides of dresses”)—Merleau-Ponty’s two case study examples of sensibility-in-the-flesh—are disclosed as manifestations of the carceral, manifesting antiblack violence in the smallest of relational instantiations. Indeed, “surely, gravity the jail guard, the commandante/ of surfaces,/ might relent someday, unpin us.”¹²⁷ And as in *A Map to the Door of No Return*, historical new world slavery is indicated as the origin of captivity.

let us begin from there, restraining metals
 covered my heart, rivulets
 of some unknown substance transfused my veins¹²⁸

Through Brand’s shimmering, economical stanzas, captive space functions as a theme that links the poem back to previous formulations of space in *A Map to the Door of No Return*, while grounding (historically and conceptually) the immanent no-spatiality the later work explores. The poem comprises fifteen “ossuaries,” each composed of a different number of three-line stanzas ranging in length from two pages (“ossuary IX”) to thirteen (“ossuary XII”),¹²⁹ and language, prosody, and style are consistent across the poem, establishing a foil against which a contrast in perspective between odd- and even-numbered ossuaries subtly emerges and persists. The even-numbered ossuaries comprise the fragmented narrative memories of “Yasmine,” a

¹²⁶ Brand 2010, 10.

¹²⁷ Brand 2010, 88.

¹²⁸ Brand 2010, 11.

¹²⁹ Over the course of the book, there are very few two- and four-line stanzas.

middle-aged underground revolutionary going into hiding in Canada. Yasmine is referred to in the third person as “she,” signifying her embodiment as a social-spatial subject within the world of personal and political conflict.¹³⁰ As rhythmic, wide-ranging in references, and surprising in their articulations and juxtapositions as the odd-numbered ossuaries, these stanzas include Yasmine’s analysis of class antagonism via the writings of Marx and Engels,¹³¹ self-constructed aesthetic and political *genealogies* that link diverse revolutionary and musical figures,¹³² amorous and libidinal investments,¹³³ her participation in militant actions and intra-organizational encounters with toxic masculinity,¹³⁴ and her eventual escape from U.S. government pursuit, into Canada, where she “steps into another country, another / constellation of bodies, / her compass reset to what reckonings.”¹³⁵ Here, Yasmine works at “Maple Leaf farms,” butchering chickens alongside other working class women. Narrating Yasmine’s experiences through memory, these sections engage coordinates, bodies, movements, nations, empires, genealogies, cultural-social expressions, struggles, and actions—all of which express and are preconditioned by temporality and spatiality. The temporal and geographical are figured in articulation with the personal—“all these coincidences, / the death of Robert Creeley, the bombing of Peshawar, / the habit of biting the lip”¹³⁶—as the intertwining of time and space in body and flesh is registered repeatedly at the base and fulcrum of aesthetic perception (in both senses—as *aisthesis* and in “artistic” terms):

¹³⁰ This usage of third person perspective to indicate spatial-social engagement differs from Fanon’s reference to third-person above, where it indicates the antiblack *objectification* of the subject.

¹³¹ Brand 2010, 40.

¹³² Brand 2010, 52.

¹³³ Brand 2010, 96-98.

¹³⁴ Brand 2010; 71, 41.

¹³⁵ Brand 2010, 120.

¹³⁶ Brand 2010, 56.

(...)

events happening in their order

a certain regularity,

which leads you to believe fancifully,

in coincidences

but which situate you at the apex of every

trajectory, composed irresolutely by you,

yet, only dimly recalled as consciously made by you

calculated, this flickering of light

in a specific meter of four four two,

the lone last light post on the street

the raised back of the stray cat,

at eleven every day,

resigned to hunger and random death

(...)

change chords, the four-note ending of her love,

slipped, dispassionate,

flared off, like Bird's exits¹³⁷

At the beginning of "ossuary XII" Yasmine's and her comrade's plan of escape after their Albany expropriation is rehearsed:

¹³⁷ Brand 2010, 56-57.

one will leave at Corinth, one will make a way at Utica,
 one at Syracuse, one split another highway,
 she'll take Utica, deluged in a thousand years of silt

It doesn't exist anymore, she knows
 its vertigo, its river sickness, its wars,
 its sodden coordinates

37 degrees, 3 minutes, 28.6 seconds,
 North,
 10 degrees, 3 minutes, 45.35 seconds East

and all its conquerors, up to the Vandals,
 its last walls devoured by esparto
 grass, and silt

she knows sulphur and iron and pumice stones,
 what's buried near the house of treasures,
 there's an archway there¹³⁸

These lines explicitly engage the temporal and spatial at multiple scales (the immediate future, the geological, the historical, the cartographic, and the sedimentary). The given geographical coordinates point toward the location of the remains of Utica, the first Phoenician colony in North Africa, near Carthage. In addition, though, these lines rehearse a plan of escape from the

¹³⁸ Brand 2010, 90-91.

State reaction to Yasmine's political action within her contemporary situation, thus registering the immediate interlacing of actual and virtual:

and this is how she disappears, this is where,
 into an ancient city, since no city here could offer
 anything but brutal solitudes, ashen mirrors

 fitting, phantom limbs, intermittent hearts,
 they'll all return to start this epoch again,
 catastrophes will swing their way

 she'll take Utica, pawn her bangles,
 her earrings, her school ring,
 the gun, welded to her grip and furtive

 (...)

 and so she will enter an earlier time,
 contrive to change the river's course,
 the forensic circumstances of her own¹³⁹

North Africa is suggested as an actual itinerary of escape for Yasmine, historical precedence for which can be found in the role of post-colonial North African states (especially Algeria) as places of sanctuary and planning for many revolutionary groups of the 1960s and early 70s—including members of the Black Panther Party and Black Liberation Army, as well as the Palestinian

¹³⁹ Brand 2010, 91-93.

Liberation Organization.¹⁴⁰ At the same time, this route’s strategic potential is tied, via the double-historical signification of *Syracuse*—a city near Albany, NY, and an ancient Sicilian city in proximity to Utica and Carthage—to a larger scale of historical sedimentation. Finally, this historical sedimentation is linked to the geological and thus the spatial, via the references to the historical silting of Utica’s port—a problem for the city during Roman rule—which eventually, due to deforestation and agriculture, erased the ancient site of the city.¹⁴¹ “Ossuary XII” thus illustrates relationality in its articulation of the historical and the spatial. But it is with some effort that Yasmine “embodies” the relationality of the flesh as innate to her condition, even if it accounts for her experience as a *subject*:

this is how she wakes each day of each underground year,
 confessions late and half-hearted pour from her sleeping
 mouth, beginning in the year of her disappearances

 the grateful rooms had to be gathered into their temporal
 shapes, the atmosphere coaxed to visible
 molecules, definite arrangements of walls and doors

 solidity lies beside her in its stigmatic shreds,
 I, the slippery pronoun, the ambivalent, glistening,
 long sheath of the alphabet flares beyond her reach

¹⁴⁰ See Malloy (2017); Lubin (2014), Chapter 4, “The Black Panthers and the PLO: The Politics of Intercommunalism.”

¹⁴¹ Stillwell 1976.

how then to verify her body, rejuvenate the blood-dead
 arm, quell her treacherous stomach, its heaving solar
 jumps, or seduce the preposition, where and where¹⁴²

Yasmine, much like Fanon, is thus a subject of innate paradox: her subjective spatial-social existence is at odds with, and occasions a nauseating awareness of, the immanent prohibition of spatiality to her. So while antiblack prohibition is executed at the level of the ontological, this has effects on the other side of the subject-object split, rendering subjectivity—the “I”—“slippery,” and the object in “shreds,” which also renders the discrete order of the alphabet’s terms in flames and inaccessible.¹⁴³

The odd-numbered chapters of *Ossuaries*, on the other hand, elaborate an “I” that is not the (self-contradictory) subject, but the very condition of incapacity and incoherence under the prohibition of spatiality. Neither an individual, a singularity, nor a *we*, the “I” in these ossuaries names the incoherence of all three terms, ultimately embodying the *perspective* of human remains, a spatiality of the death-produced-subject rather than the “death-bound-subject:”¹⁴⁴

without walls, without embrasures, no height at all,
 scatter bones, losing all relation to myself,
 reified, common really, common the powdery skulls
 (...)

¹⁴² Brand 2010, “ossuary II,” 22.

¹⁴³ “Language is a map, not a tracing” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 77).

¹⁴⁴ See JanMohamed 2005, which builds on Spillers’s formulation of black flesh, conceptualizing the death-bound-subject of blackness as *meat*.

the crate of bones I've become, good
 I was waiting to throw my limbs on the pile,
 the mounds of disarticulated femurs and radii
 but perhaps we were always lying there,
 dead on our feet and recyclable,
 toxic and imperishable, the ways to see us¹⁴⁵

Thus, as *Ossuaries* alternates between its first-person registration of spatial incoherence and its third-person narrative of lived resistance (resistance in a double sense: both subjective and political), the poem manifests the incommensurability of the two. Yasmine's militant political actions, cultural expressions and pleasures, and genealogical auto-locations cannot be *placed* within this *I* of incoherence (of antiblack prohibition). The temporal and spatial engagements of Yasmine's narrative are thereby always already undercut by the prohibition of spatiality—as in “ossuary XI,” which immediately precedes the excerpt from “ossuary XII” quoted above:

“reported missing” again, missing again, / missing, again missing, / a body out of
 time, moving at a constant angle // its paths through space under these forces, /
 flights impossible to correct, / the unnecessary barbed wire's twisted crosses //
 (...) perhaps but not now, cracked and crystalline, / this news lays on the soul's
 floor, / like numberless calendars // what does it matter, dates / by any reckoning
 dates don't count, / nor the sight of lilies that must bloom beyond the lines // to be

¹⁴⁵ Brand 2010, 48-49.

missing in all hemispheres, / is a great feat for some, disappearances are not /
uncommon, for the figure in the foreground¹⁴⁶

“Disappearance” and “missing” signal the condition of blackness under antiblack prohibition as both “out of time” and out of space. The “constant angle” at which the black “body” moves is thus a path without “anchor points” (Merleau-Ponty), disconnected from aesthetic capacity. If this disappearance might also, or alternatively, be read as an escape or exit from captive space, that escape would be realized as the evasion of *both* ossuaric existence *and* aesthetic capacity, not the reclamation of either. But as this passage continues, positing the possibility of and desire for respite from space-time’s inherent antiblack antagonism, it is not with a sense of triumph: “beyond this there must be oceans, there must be / (...) there might be the curve of snows and rains // the bends in roads, the horizons or the sunrises, / that is our hope behind this wire, / gravity must give up its hold on us //”¹⁴⁷ Rather, respite seems to imply an even farther distance from body, flesh, and bone:

surely, gravity the jail guard, the commandante
of surfaces,
might relent someday, unpin us
surely it will unhook our hearts,
anchorless we will scale our faithless
legs, shed jealous hours

¹⁴⁶ Brand 2010, 86-87.

¹⁴⁷ Brand 2010, 88.

someone will find us brittle-winged,
 beyond the punishments of leaves, of docile trees,
 of windows, of our own skeletons¹⁴⁸

The formal structure of *Ossuaries* thus registers, on one hand the inherently conflictual black spatial subject—whose subjective-political experience is oriented both within, against, in struggle for, and as deprived of, aesthetic capacity—and on the other hand the immanence itself of antiblack aesthetic prohibition. Only rarely in the poem does Yasmine’s narration acknowledge this underlying ontological tendency and its determining role:

this genealogy she’s made by hand, this good silk lace, / Engels plaited to Bird,
 Claudia Jones edgestitched / to Monk, Rosa Luxemburg braids Coltrane // as far
 as she’s concerned these names reshaped time / itself though time seems somehow
 set itself, / in time // in so few rooms that Yasmine herself is caught / and trapped
 in its coarse drenched net, / a blue crab angling and articulating // sideways, these
 names would help / here, but / such, such did not create the world or fix time // in
 that bulbous concentration, / of what matters, / what appears // Yasmine knows in
 her hardest heart, / that truth is worked and organized by some, / and she’s on the
 wrong side always¹⁴⁹

While the aesthetic and political performances of these “names” have shaped Yasmine’s identity, they fail to intervene at the level of her ontological condition; they may *refuse* but cannot *prevent*

¹⁴⁸ Brand 2010, 88.

¹⁴⁹ Brand 2010, 52-53.

the immanent prohibition of aesthetic-relational capacity. Yasmine is “caught,” “trapped” in the world of antiblack prohibition, neither “mattering” nor “appearing” as body or flesh, but only “articulating sideways” like a “crab” (a variation on “moving at a constant angle,” above). By constructing this bifurcated elaboration of immanent condition and transcendent identity, Brand deepens the intervention Fanon made by juxtaposing the *expérience vécue* of blackness with *lived space*; as the spatiality of dead bones, the ossuary names the absence of relationality effectuated (if asymptotically) in the prohibition of the flesh. And yet, as the immanence of spatiality and its prohibition is mediated throughout *Ossuaries* by the figure of the black revolutionary, the text also never ceases gesturing towards an antagonistic posture.

ANTAESTHETICS; STRATIFICATION AND THE LIQUEFACTION OF DISTINCTION

The Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin developed the concept of the *chronotope* (1937/1973) as a spatial-temporal glue, enabling coherence within the literary work itself and within generic and period distinctions. Within a work, the chronotope is composed by the fusion of spatial and temporal indicators into a concrete whole in which time “thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible,” and “space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history.”¹⁵⁰ The chronotope supplies the aesthetics of the work, genre, or period by “function[ing] as the primary means for materializing time in space” and acting “as a force giving body to the entire [work].”¹⁵¹ In other words, the chronotope integrates virtualizations and actualizations, materializing flesh and body and their relationalities.

¹⁵⁰ Bakhtin 1981, 84-85.

¹⁵¹ Bakhtin 1981, 250.

But in its elaboration of the violent incompatibility of immanent condition with transcendent subjectivity under antiblack prohibition, *Ossuaries* refuses spatial-temporal fusion, dissolving rather than developing the chronotope. The “spatial and temporal indicators” that accrue and “take on flesh” through Yasmine’s experiences are serially precluded and repeatedly cut down by the antiblack prohibition of aesthetic capacity and relationality in the odd-numbered ossuaries, rendering spatiality and temporality themselves incoherent, let alone *fused* and *whole*. As opposed to bodily or fleshly spatiality, the *I* of the odd-numbered ossuaries describes aesthetic apperception,

as if I’m gone, fingernails
 peeled back in salt,
 what it is, to lie down in water each night
 to feel the mouth full like drowning,
 the lungs like pinned butterflies,
 and then as if the heart was eaten out, cored
 this would do you no good to hear,
 that from one January to the next,
 nothing happened much that was not the same
 arteries of stone,
 capillaries of desolate cement,
 and no kisses¹⁵²

¹⁵² Brand 2010, 104-05.

These stanzas do express a specific mode of aesthetic—albeit one that does not conjure body or flesh at the literal level. But at the formal level, the opposition of this ossuaric aesthetic, to the aesthetic capacity expressed in the narration of Yasmine’s experiences, manifests an aesthetic suspension, as if the aesthetic movement of the poem is frozen, its components neutralized, and loosened up to be washed away. *Ossuaries* thus elaborates a black literary *antaesthetics*, an aesthetic strategy to undo the antiblack processes of spatialization and temporalization—*a painting that would combust canvases*.¹⁵³ Refusing body and flesh, the thickening of time and space, and dissolving the distinctions between actual and virtual, the poem works to liquefact aesthetic coherence—including its own.

Materializing the liquefaction of distinctions within itself, the antaesthetic implications of *Ossuaries* surpass the literary. Without attempting to represent it linguistically, *Ossuaries* gestures towards a radical disorder and disorganization with which black antaesthetics threatens the spatial-temporal world. In “ossuary XVIII” (quoted above) this disorganization begins with the body/flesh, as sensibility seems to harden while distinctions between organic and inorganic become blurred under the prohibition of aesthetic capacity:

from here, what and how, I’ve been wasted, / these metal glyphs, falling and then
 // as if I’m gone, fingernails / peeled back in salt, / what it is, to lie down in water
 each night // to feel the mouth full like drowning, / the lungs like pinned
 butterflies, / and then as if the heart was eaten out, cored //

(...)

¹⁵³ “were this a painting, it would combust canvases,” (Brand 2010, 124).

arteries of stone, / capillaries of desolate cement, / and no kisses // rather I should
 say nothing, leave you to it, / make your own vain flights, / see how it goes, I
 can't tell time anyway¹⁵⁴

In their “Geology of Morals” Deleuze and Guattari elaborate what they call “stratification.”¹⁵⁵ In their account, three strata—the geological, the organic, and the alloplastic—articulate the organization of the earth through the “double pincer” or “double articulation” of content and expression. Stratification thus describes the earthly organization effected through spatialization (actualization), and distinguishes between the distinct natures of spatializations within each of the three strata. Deleuze and Guattari insist that the quality of the distinction between content and expression is the essential variable between the three strata, determining the latter as distinct from and in relation to each other. The distinction between content and expression manifests as a *formal* distinction in the geological stratum (between molecular elemental masses and molar statistical aggregates), as a *real* distinction in the organic stratum (between proteins and nucleic acids), and as an *essential* distinction in the alloplastic stratum (between the technological and the semiotic or symbolic). Stratification thus relies upon a series of real distinctions—relations—between content and expression, and then between strata themselves, characterizing this most basic and immanent form of spatialization.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Brand 2010, 103-105.

¹⁵⁵ Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 39-74.

¹⁵⁶ In fact, Deleuze and Guattari’s account is considerably more complex, involving many more distinctions. The exposition here is simplified and summarizes the essential points.

In the passage from *Ossuaries* excerpted above, these distinctions begin to erode: “these metal glyphs, falling and then...fingernails...the lungs like pinned butterflies...nothing happened much that was not the same...capillaries of desolate cement...I should say nothing...” The inorganic, organic, and alloplastic become monstrously conjoined, not through—as orthodox Deleuzian-Guattarians might have it—the forming of machinic assemblages, but through the incohering force of an antaesthetic disorganization. The passage continues, increasing its disorganizing intensity:

ripped the guts right out of me, go, / go, my toes are eaten away by frost and
 rubber, / some chemical has boiled my eyes / the rest of me’s been stolen, / I
 should say wrecked, well let’s say, / I never knew it, like wire // full of jealousies,
 red coils, / like swallowing powder above everything, / the throat of broken glass
 and thorny sprigs // the falling slabs of skies in each deluged year, /
 (...)

the starving boats and lithic frigates, / stingless bees, the canvas shirts, / the bright
 darkness, the clotted riverbeds / the flaking skins, the second thoughts, / the
 afterthoughts, dry timbre of air pockets, / the inabilities to live, the inabilities to
 live... ankles, fenced mouths, / mechanic vulva, plastic toenails, / pincerred knee,
 nib of palms, wire / lifelines, elongated radius, cellular / distintegration, *dedos*
destruidos / swollen tongues, *espalda goteando*, snowy pubis, stone aorta¹⁵⁷

As the passage becomes more list-like, relations between terms are undetermined, assemblages dismantled, and distinctions between content and expression rendered incoherent: “the flaking

¹⁵⁷ Brand 2010, 106, 111.

skins, the second thoughts... mechanic vulva... wire/ lifelines..." The crystalline (geological), organic, and alloplastic do not undergo a fusion here—as if in some totalizing megachronotope—but rather become incoherent terms, loose their status as distinguishable strata. Neither should this liquefaction be understood as equivalent to what Deleuze and Guattari call an absolute deterritorialization—a destratification that strips away the codes and organizations through which form, content and expression manifest, leaving a primordial “unformed matter.”¹⁵⁸ Deleuze and Guattari insist that despite its absolute deterritorialization, this “plane of consistency” “is in no way an undifferentiated aggregate” or “a chaos of formed matters of every kind,” but rather a continuum of intensities and flows. “There is no hint in this of a chaotic white night or an undifferentiated black night. There are rules, rules of ‘plan(n)ing’, of diagramming,”¹⁵⁹ comprising the “[combined] resources of real distinction, reciprocal presupposition, and general relativism.”¹⁶⁰ The antaesthetic disorder gestured to in *Ossuaries*, however, would liquefact these combined resources, their constituting distinctions and resultant organizations, gesturing towards a “convergent mimesis” in which “here we morph as twig and ice and bark/ and butterfly”¹⁶¹ without distinction, without difference. Black antaesthetics would even render incoherent the distinction between the “chaotic white night” and the “undifferentiated black night:”

¹⁵⁸ Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 56.

¹⁵⁹ Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 70.

¹⁶⁰ Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 45.

¹⁶¹ Brand 2010, 89.

to undo, to undo and undo and undo this infinitive
of arrears, their fissile mornings,
their fragile, fragile symmetries of gain and loss¹⁶²

For Deleuze and Guattari, the double articulation of content and expression constitutes an *abstract machine*, or an “immanent mode of self-organization.”¹⁶³ As I have argued above, this abstract machine—the blueprint and force of spatialization—is at the same time an immanent mode of the antiblack prohibition of spatialization, of actualization, of assemblage, of the flesh, and of stratification. However, as Brand demonstrates, black antaesthetics moves through this prohibition and incoherence; as an *antimmanent* mode, black antaesthetics moves “without a map, to travel without a way,”¹⁶⁴ animating self-combusting paintings and texts to dissolve content and expression, figuring black spaces to suspend stratification and distinction. If this constitutes an apophatic aesthetic (and an apophatic geography), its apophasis is material; Brand’s black antaesthetics negatively doubles back on the *open* space of antiblack world-captivity: “Counting on her own theory, the theory of *nothing*, she had opened up the world.”¹⁶⁵

¹⁶² Brand 2010, 21.

¹⁶³ Holland 2013, 22.

¹⁶⁴ Brand 2001, 224.

¹⁶⁵ Brand 2001, 207-208; emphasis added.

Four

Black motion: the suspension of physical and political movement

The 2020 George Floyd uprisings, which included worldwide protests and violent uprisings against state institutions of antiblack violence unprecedented in recent history, have been commonly understood as demonstrations against police brutality and racism. The murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police, however, along with innumerable similar examples of antiblack police violence, indicates a more ontologically basic aspect: the immanent dynamics of movement, its violence and its prohibition. Suspected by police of paying his bill at a store with counterfeit currency and thereby putting illegitimate commodities into circulation (economic movement), Floyd was forcibly removed from the automobile he was seated in (local motion) before police prevented the circulation of oxygen throughout his body via asphyxiation (vital or operative movement). While movement or motion is central to life itself, to the life of political-libidinal economies, and to processes of both exploitation and resistance, antiblack violence—from its most generic or structural guise to specific practices and instances of police murder and terror—manifests as a withholding of the capacity for movement.

This perspective derives credibility from studies of antiblack violence that, increasingly over the past two decades, have analyzed its institutional character (and less frequently but even more powerfully, have analyzed the essential aspect of antiblack *society*) as black captivity. Historically, from capture on the African continent to Middle Passage to the plantation, and from the plantation to Jim Crow to late-capitalist urban ghettos; or from continental capture to colonial

forced labor to the post-colonial *damnés* and destitute; antiblack institutions of the world form a “carceral continuum”¹ within which black movement is restricted, impeded, or mandated, variously and at the whim of the master or her deputy. In this context, the slave patrol/ police serve to ensure that the border between carceral and “free” spaces is, for the black, perpetually distended, enforcing the material reality that “the world is a ghetto,”² that within every possible corner blackness is imprisoned or confined. This carceral condition comprises the radical restriction of movement, the restriction of circulation, motion, operation; more precisely, antiblack violence is the enforcement of the immanent prohibition of movement to blackness. At its most radical and essential, the 2020 uprisings took aim not only against this ongoing antiblack prohibition, but also against the withheld itself.

There is an ongoing debate, stretching from the pre-Socratic philosophers to contemporary physics and social theory, regarding the relation or relative priority of matter and motion. While few would now side with Parmenides or Zeno in positing movement as mere illusion within an essentially static universe, contemporary theorists of both political economy and the physical sciences tend to agree with the ancient Greek atomists that movement is an essential and omnipresent characteristic, while some go so far as to posit, with the Latin thinker Lucretius, the ontological primacy of movement over matter.³ Whether time and space—as the dynamis or matrix out of/ within which objects or bodies insist, subsist, and exist—precede or follow movement ontologically, the latter retains a clear connection with the process of becoming, the event (and the *event* is a privileged term in both contemporary physics and

¹ Wacquant 2002, 52.

² See War’s song “The world is a ghetto” on the album of the same name, released in 1972.

³ See Nail 2019 and 2020; Rovelli 2017 (quoted in Nail 2019 and 2020).

contemporary European political philosophy).⁴ With respect to this contemporary focus on movement or motion, this chapter analyzes movement in terms of two of its constituent binary oppositions: self-motion vs. other-motion, and discrete vs. continuous motion. This, in order to show how what I term *black motion*, as pictured in recent video and film productions that each link to instances of antiblack police violence and resulting massive uprisings, works to suspend these antinomies of movement, and thereby movement itself. The connection drawn here between “physical” movement and “political” movement is not metaphorical, but rather, material; the historical uprising in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, whose scenes are captured by the source footage in the video *On the black leadership and other white myths* (2020), and the earlier Los Angeles uprisings (1968 and 1992) referenced and gestured towards in the short film *Until the quiet comes* (2013), should be understood essentially by their antagonism towards the becoming of the world as movement and its antiblack prohibition. Accordingly, the images these films compose present black motion as a movement against movement.

The video work *On the black leadership and other white myths* was produced and circulated by the We Still Outside Collective on you tube in June 2020,⁵ during the George Floyd uprisings that shook cities throughout North America and around the world. The video consists of a series of processed, manipulated, and sequenced images, moving across footage of

⁴ Most famously in Deleuze and Badiou, but also in Agamben (“the event of language”), Catherine Malabou (“the event of literature”), Derrida (“Signature, Event Context”). See also Rovelli 2017.

⁵ We Still Outside Collective 2020. A text-only transcription of the video’s narration appeared on the website of *Ill Will*, an online publisher of radical political writings, with a link to the video on youtube. *Ill Will*’s publication of the work was linked on numerous other sites concerned with contemporary radical political movements and organizations. No information about the We Still Outside Collective, or its members, is available.

mainstream black political activists and politicians, Black Lives Matter protests, young black rioters, and images of imprisoned and exiled black revolutionaries (Mumia Abu Jamal, Assata Shakur). Narration, with subtitles, clarifies the nature of this juxtaposition of images, opening with the declaration that “What they call the black leadership does not exist,” while a nearly static profile of Al Sharpton, microphone in hand while a white woman faces the camera to his right, nodding her enthusiasm unnaturally slowly. Sharpton’s pupils seem to scan his audience in slow-motion, before the video cuts to close-up portraits of an aged Jesse Jackson, Kamala Harris, and then shots of Chuck Schumer and other white house and senate Democrats with their heads bowed ceremoniously and necks adorned with kente cloth scarves.⁶ The slowly moving lips and bodies of these white figures, framed in similarly slowed-down zoom-ins that disclose the normally imperceptible instability of “still” shots, appear as out-of-joint with the serial progression of the images. The movement of stillness shown within these images presents motion as immanent, ongoing, inescapable, and at the same time in excess of teleological or progressive narration’s ordering impulses, working against the images’ serial progression. This visual incongruity seems to illustrate the narration’s opening line: the “black leadership,” as a force of ordered and ordering progression rather than a mere epiphenomenon or prop of white political maneuvering, “does not exist... what they are talking about is nothing more than a fragment of the white liberal imagination.”

That is, if these so-called black leaders even exist at all, then they can only be found shucking and jiving in a “woke” white person’s head. Isn’t it interesting,

⁶ It is relevant to note that the *kente cloth* scarves, which Democratic leaders wore at the presentation of their police reform bill in the wake of the George Floyd uprisings, were issued by members of the Congressional Black Caucus, hilariously, if cynically, playing out the initial narrative point of the We Still Outside Collective’s video.

how progressive whites seem to have a direct line of communication with black leaders while everyone else in the street fails to suffer from the same delusional schizophrenia?⁷

The video cuts to footage of a young black BLM protestor, accessorized with a backpack, black beret, purple bandana tied around his bicep, shaking hands and exchanging meaningful glances with a middle aged uniformed white police officer; and then footage of two white cops engaged in “community policing” a protest, one imposing his physical embrace as he hugs a young black man before the image cuts to “rewound” sequences of a riot police crossing a street and firing pepper spray into a crowd off screen; arial shot of a flash-bang briefly rewind and played forward; smoke and flame billowing in retrograde, back into police SUVs; and black rioters breaking out a police car’s rear window. Over this sequence, the video’s narrator continues:

What’s all the more odd is that the voices that they hear from the magical negroes always manage to say the same things: “Everyone should peacefully protest on the sidewalk because unmediated black rage makes others uncomfortable. Don’t strike back at the cop even if he wants to kill you and everyone you love. I know the manager follows black kids from aisle to aisle, but still, his store shouldn’t be looted.” In other words, the message relayed from the sounds on repeat in a white liberal’s head is to end the black revolt and conduct civil disobedience in a manner that is appropriate for Karen and Ethan, not Jamal and Keisha.⁸

Not quite half-way through this 3:48 long work, the video has made clear its initial claim—that the mainstream so-called “black leadership,” trotted out by the white liberal political-media

⁷ We Still Outside Collective 2020, 0:00-0:47.

⁸ We Still Outside 2020, 0:48.

establishment in times of crisis, exists solely as an instrument for the maintenance of that power structure, functioning to reproduce progressivist “non-violent” reform by clothing the denunciation and repression of open revolt and rebellion with black faces and figures.

The black leadership and other white myths is signed and was first circulated on 4 June 2020, a date which reinforces the urgency of this position vis-à-vis contemporaneous events following the murder of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis on 25 May, when intense insurrection broke out there and in other cities throughout the country. Despite police repression, protestors blocked highways, burned vehicles and buildings, and looted and destroyed stores, even famously setting a Minneapolis police station ablaze. On 28 May the National Guard was mobilized to repress the insurrection in Minnesota, while on 29 May President Trump issued an infamous ultimatum to protestors, calling them “thugs” and threatening “when the looting starts, the shooting starts.”⁹ Over the days that followed, intense fighting between protestors and police accompanied continued destruction of property, especially in cities such as New York, Atlanta, and Minneapolis. The mainstream media’s coverage of the first week of insurrectionary events enforced a familiar narrative that is summarized by Minneapolis Mayor Frey’s tweet, “What started as largely peaceful protests for George Floyd have turned to outright looting and domestic terrorism in our region.” Working to reinforce the liberal dichotomy between protestors good/“peaceful” and bad/ “violent,” it also made wild claims of “white supremacists, members of organized crime, out-of-state instigators, and possibly even foreign actors” conspiring in unknown arrangements “to destroy and destabilize our city and our region,”¹⁰ thereby obscuring the politically radical nature and meaning of the insurrectionary events themselves, and the

⁹ NYT 2023.

¹⁰ Quoted in NYT 2023.

inherent connections between property, law, the police, and antiblack violence. But as Idris Robinson claimed in a talk and online publication less than a month later,

We all saw it. We all saw what happened after the murder of George Floyd. What occurred was an extremely violent and destructive rebellion... Despite all of this, the reformers have had the audacity to claim that all this never actually happened. They are trying to make the burning cop cars disappear, to extinguish from memory the police stations on fire, as if it didn't happen... a political activist gives a talk, and we hear them say something like, "the protests were peaceful and non-violent, they stayed within the bounds of law and order." No: cops being shot at in St. Louis [by black protestors] is not within the bounds of law and order. They're doing their best to make the event disappear.¹¹

Robinson's insistence is instructive: "A militant nationwide uprising did in fact occur. The progressive wing of the counter-insurgency seeks the denial and disarticulation of this event." The initial work done by the video *On the black leadership and other white myths*, then, is to illustrate this point in real time, at the exact moment when counter-insurgent forces in politics and media were already working for the "denial and disarticulation" of the insurrection, just over a week into its development.¹²

As the video proceeds, the narration points out that "black people ourselves never refer to any mythical black leadership," since black people carry the knowledge of the state-sponsored

¹¹ Robinson 2020.

¹² Of course, the narrative of peaceful protest being contaminated by "bad actors" (whether white, black, "anarchist," white supremacist, criminal, etc.) manifests almost immediately if not preemptively, around any and all large-scale protests. Mainstream media understands its job at such moments well, as do the consciences of liberals and progressives.

assassination of past leaders, “since Martin and Malcolm,” the murder of potential leaders “like Trayvon and Tamir” “before they can share with us their vision,” and, short of murder, the political life-imprisonment of revolutionary black leaders such as Sundiata Acoli, Mutulu Shakur, and Mumia Abu Jamal.¹³ “...we know that if you speak with truth and move against oppression, than the only way to avoid the pig’s bullet or penitentiary, the modern-day cracker’s whip or plantation, is to go on the run like Assata Shakur. In fact, any black person that says otherwise should be exposed for what he or she is: a poverty pimp.”¹⁴ This narration accompanies continuing footage of mostly black youth in the street overturning and kicking in the windshields of police vehicles, scenes spookily unfolding in reverse, with intercut images of Malcolm X and the BPP and BLA fighters mentioned by name. This visual articulation of young black rioters with historical figures of the struggle for black liberation foreshadows the second point the video makes. As the narration puts it,

After half a century without a figurehead in the front, the black youth has shown the whole country that they are more than capable of setting their own path and directing their own initiatives. They have demonstrated to us a dynamism that can never be reduced to a homogenous mass following any one authoritative voice.¹⁵

The rioting youth pictured in *On the black leadership and other white myths*, contrary to those black “leaders” that play a role in mainstream politics, provide a vision of black liberation that is obstinate towards and unassimilable by liberal narratives of inclusion—or even of freedom—that

¹³ Sundiata Acoli, Mutulu Shakur, and Mumia Abu-Jamal were all captured and incarcerated (without legal recognition as political prisoners) for their participation in the Black Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 70s. Acoli and Shakur were both released on parole in 2022; Abu-Jamal remains incarcerated.

¹⁴ We Still Outside 2020, 1:28.

¹⁵ We Still Outside 2020, 2:16.

evinced deep seated if cynical groundings in progressive historical self-narrativization. The video's narrative continues, "Paradoxically," then, "it is the entire spectrum of the black revolt in the streets that can be identified as leaderless 'leaders,' since they have shown everyone else what it means to free yourself."¹⁶ The statement immediately precedes the only image in the video that is not slowed down or rewound to emanate an uncanny vibe: as the narration paraphrases James Baldwin on black people's superior awareness "of the inner workings of our pale-face antagonists," a hand held camera shot captures black youth dancing atop a captured police car, celebrating "getting free" amongst the strobing flash of the car's still-running siren lights. This moment in the video recalls the penultimate scene in Maldoror's *Sambizanga*, in which comrades simultaneously mourn the death of their comrade and celebrate their ongoing struggle. It thus stands out as an image that is fully both antagonistic and celebratory; black persistence as a joyously destructive leaderless motion (in *Sambizanga*, while the organized resistance certainly relied on leaders, the party and dancing that the penultimate scene captures certainly persists without them). In contrast, the "Carl Winslow, or Rafiki from the Lion King"-voiced insistence on "non-violence" and reform of the state and system built on black terror is, according to the video's narration, "a defense mechanism against [the liberal progressive's] inability to completely repress their own white superiority complex."¹⁷ The Al Sharptons, et al., narratively represented at the beginning of the video, function as a validation and justification mechanism for (non-black *and* black) progressives whose libidinal investment in the state and

¹⁶ This statement echoes Neal Shirley and Saralee Stafford's historical argument that even before King's relative warming to more radical strategies and tactics than his previous dedication to strict non-violence, it was the radically heterogenous mix of mass-marches, non-violent direct actions, and collective violent uprisings, in both the north and the south, that combined to win the gains now celebrated as the fruit of the civil rights movement. Shirley and Stafford 2015.

¹⁷ We Still Outside 2020, 3:00.

the antiblack world more generally cannot tolerate “unmediated” black rage, cannot afford challenging the material immanence of white supremacy and antiblackness. Alongside slowly-moving images of burning police cars, the narration offers one path towards a radical exit from this antiblack world: “the only way to fully work through this hangup is to gain even a small percent of the courage of a black adolescent and overcome their white guilt with a fist, a stone, and a Molotov cocktail.”

The political *message* of *On the black leadership and other white myths* is clear and powerful, the hyperbolic effect of some of its claims notwithstanding. But its insistent political messaging is not, in itself, what is most crucial for the present analysis. Rather, it is this video’s images themselves, and those of a very different recent black film—images of *black motion*, or of black persistence in *movement*, under and against the antiblack prohibition of capacity—that this chapter foregrounds. What is the relation of these images themselves to the political narration and overall character of *On the black leadership and other white myths*? (Surely, it is not merely coincidental.) What is the relation of the *movement* shown by the images to the *movement* of black revolt and insurrection that we call the movement for/of black liberation? How are these two *movements* connected?

There is a distinction in both English and French between derivatives of the Latin *movere* (“to move”), its stem *mot-*, and ultimately the proto-Indo-European root *meue* (“to push away”).¹⁸ On one hand, mobility—the “capacity for motion, ability to move or be moved, property of being easily moveable” (early 15th cent.), from the Old French *mobilité* (“changeableness,

¹⁸ Online Etymology Dictionary, <https://www.etymonline.com/>; entries for “mobility” and “motility.”

inconsistency, fickleness”), directly from the Latin *mobilitem* (“activity, speed;” figuratively, “changeableness, fickleness, inconstancy”) and *mobilis* (“moveable, easy to move”)—seems to signify the quality of fungibility, as attributed to an object or thing. On the other hand, *motility*—the “capacity of automatic or spontaneous movement” (1827), from the French *motilité*—expresses an agency of movement, the capacity for its initiation or execution. This linguistic difference reflects a way of thinking movement through the binary of what was called, from the ancient Greeks through Medieval scholasticism, self-motion and other-motion. This philosophical distinction surfaces in Plato’s theorization of the soul as “that which is moved by itself,” and therefore the source of the perceived motion of bodies.¹⁹ Aristotle takes up the distinction, but argues that the self-motion recognized as animal (human) motion is in fact derived from two components: one moved and one unmoved.²⁰ Again, it is the soul that is the unmoved element; the soul is “moved” only in the exceptional sense that its sense faculty or faculty of desire is “moved” by perceptible qualities (or the object of desire) “from a heightened state of potentiality to full actuality.”²¹ Thomas Aquinas appropriates the distinction in turn from Aristotle, solidifying the capacity for self-movement as a means for distinguishing between *living* beings and *non-living* objects: “We say then that an animal begins to live when it begins to move of itself... Accordingly all things are said to be alive that determine themselves to movement or operation of any kind: whereas those things that cannot by their nature do so, cannot be called living, unless by a similitude.”²²

¹⁹ Plato, “Phaedrus;” 1989.

²⁰ Sorabji 1988, 223; Aristotle, *Physics* 8.5, 257a25-31.

²¹ Sorabji 1988, 225; Aristotle, *de Anima* 2.5, 417a31-b16; 418a1-3.

²² Aquinas 1946, 99.

Aquinas here not only retains the Greek distinction between self-moved and other-moved, but also appropriates and generalizes Aristotle's understanding of the basis of movement in the transition from potentiality to actuality; movement "properly so called," is "the act... of a thing in potentiality." Or, as he writes in another context, "...nothing can be in motion except it is in potentiality to that power which it is in motion; whereas a thing moves inasmuch as it is in act. *For motion is nothing else than the reduction of something from potentiality to actuality.*"²³ The world, then, is populated by bodies of (at least) two kinds: those that possess the capacity for self-movement as the self-actualization of potential states, and those who are moved, that is, actualized, by others: the living and the dead (or non-living).

The binary of self- and other-motion, in its Platonic, Aristotelian, and Thomist formulations (amongst others), has contributed to and persisted within Western philosophy, science, and common sense, through the twentieth century. While Newton himself attributed an innate force, a *via insita*, to all matter,²⁴ the idea of motility as the capacity *to move*, rather than *to be moved*, seems close to many essential modern social-political ideals including consent, sovereignty, autonomy, resistance, and even ethics at large. Indeed, the conversion of Plato's *soul* into the modern *free will*, via Aristotle and then the scholastics (Aquinas, Duns Scotus, William of Ockham), is the story of the development of the common sense division "between a completely determined nature and a realm of free spirits," in which "the will" is recognized "as a self-moving power," a distinct faculty.²⁵ Thus self-movement, a concept integral to that of

²³ Aquinas, *First Way*. This quote is taken from an argument *against* self-motion in animals, which belongs to a different Thomist context (the preservation of God as the lone self-mover). Nonetheless, in it Aquinas makes clear the intimate connection between movement and the actualization of potentiality.

²⁴ McGuire 1994. See also the other chapters on self-motion in Gill and Lenox 1994.

²⁵ Gill and Lenox 1994, 291. See this chapter on "Ockham, Self-Motion, and the Will," which begins with an illuminating contextualization: "Medieval discussion of the problem of self-

movement itself, is also basic to conceptions of free will and agency that condition our understandings of social and political life.

One might assume, then, that an image of black resistance and contestation of antiblack state violence, a black movement-image, would show black self-motion, would comprise images of black reclamation and use of the capacity for self-movement. However, the images of *On the black leadership and other white myths* present something else. Rather than aesthetically insisting on or explicating black self-motion, the two primary technical effects utilized in the composition of the video—reverse motion and slow motion—work to denaturalize our assumption of agency, or even causality, as inherent to the movement of the human forms on screen.²⁶ Both the white police, and the black insurrectionary youth move at an unnaturally slow speed, without apparent acceleration or deceleration, forwards and/or backwards, as if neither pulled, pushed, self-willed, nor spontaneously actualized; a motion neither autonomous nor heteronomous.

In his discussion of the *action-image*, a variety of movement-image that has, arguably, come to characterize global cinema under the domination of Hollywood and its realist protocols,²⁷ Deleuze formulates two basic forms: the “large form” that proceeds from a situation, to an action, to a new situation (S-A-S’); and the “small form” that, beginning with an action,

motion has two starting-points. One is a problem in physics, the problem of how to reconcile Aristotle’s account of *natural* things in book II of his *Physics* with his apparent endorsement in book VII of the principle that ‘all that is moved is moved by another.’ The other starting-point is in the theory of the soul, and particularly in the theory of the will that, whether present in Augustine or not, was read into his work by later authors and developed during the twelfth century into an account of the will as a distinct part (or faculty) of the soul” (291).

²⁶ In Greek and scholastic discussions around self-motion, causality is always also at stake and often is an explicit part of the argument.

²⁷ “What constitutes realism is simply this: milieux and modes of behaviour, milieux which actualize and modes of behaviour which embody.” Deleuze 1986, 141.

gradually discloses a situation in which a subsequent action intervenes (A-S-A').²⁸ The action-image is a kind of culmination of the movement-image, not merely because of the commercial success of so-called action films ("A film is never made up of a single kind of image: thus we call the combination of the three varieties [perception-image, affect-image, action-image], montage."),²⁹ but because it develops the "sensory-motor link" basic to the image of movement and necessary for the connection of perception and movement, situation and action, into a "cinema of behavior," embodying movement as a "formula of realist violence."³⁰ Within this image, time is presented merely as the measure of movement—just as in Aristotle—while movement itself, as the relay between situation and action, constitutes an actual event. The action-image thus resonates with the Aristotelian-Thomist account of movement, in which movement constitutes a reduction from potentiality to actualization, and comprises both self-motion and other-motion. In the *situation* of the movement-image, "[e]verything is individuated: the milieu as a particular space-time, the situation as determining and determinate, the collective as well as the individual character." Movement, as the differentiation and relay between situation and action, determines milieux, determines characters and their actions, determines "qualities" and "powers. "Already, in the milieu, we distinguish the power-qualities and the state of things which actualises them."³¹ Presenting the necessary link between action and situation, the action-image thus links the inner movement of the character or individual with movement of the outer world, dramatizing movement as individualized action in a situation, as the behavior of a self,

²⁸ Deleuze's formulation echoes Marx's expression of capitalist exchange as M-C-M'. "In *The Time-Image*, Deleuze aligns classical montage and its image-circuit (SAS') with Marx's formulation for the exchange of capital (M-C-M')..." (Flaxman 2000, 55; n. 173). See Deleuze 1989, 78.

²⁹ Deleuze 1986, 70.

³⁰ Deleuze 1986, 155.

³¹ Deleuze 1986, 142.

actualizing the potentialities within a given situation. But it equally dramatizes the situation itself as necessary condition for action, and so for movement; the situation, where “[q]ualities and powers... no longer inhabit originary worlds, but are actualized directly in determinate, geographical, historical and social space-times actualized directly in determinate, geographical, historical and social space-times.”³² The action-image, therefore, presents a dialectic of self-movement and other-movement, the struggle of self-determination against world-determination. It is an ultimately violent picture of actualization via the “will,” within and against, and productive of, the determining and determined situation— “The situation, and the character or action, are like two terms which are simultaneously correlative and antagonistic.”³³

Despite the fact that *On the black leadership and other white myths* begins with images of politicking, protesting, and policing in the wake of the murder of George Floyd that “situate” the uprisings of 2020, and then proceeds to show the “direct action” of black youth rioting in the streets, these images constitute neither an S-A-S’ nor an A-S-A’; the video presents neither situation nor action. While, according to Deleuze, the utilization of various types of montage are “sufficient to organize empirically the mutual link between the vectors” of situation and action within the action-image, the conjunction of “shots” in *On the black leadership... works via none of the procedures Deleuze outlines: parallel and/or alternate montage, “the duel,” or “the big gap.”*³⁴ Rather, the video actively detaches situation from action, as its reverse-slo-mo treatment dissolves the sensory-motor link necessary for the milieu’s self-other dialectic. But this dissolution does not lead to a direct image of time (as in Deleuze’s reading of modernist cinema);

³² Deleuze 1986, 141.

³³ Deleuze 1986, 142.

³⁴ Deleuze 1986, 151-155.

the virtual is not hereby privileged over the actual.³⁵ Rather, the video gestures towards a movement without action and against situation.

Neither do the images of *On the black leadership and other white myths* constitute other types of movement-images delineated by Deleuze alongside the action-image. The (would-be) “affection images” of the faces of Al Sharpton, Kamala Harris, Jesse Jackson, and white Democrats, in their super slo-mo stuttering, have been deprived of any “powers” or “qualities,” they neither “reflect” nor “express.” Contrary to the poles of the close-up that Deleuze describes as “immobile receptive plate” or “micro-movements of expression,”³⁶ these faces undulate with a negative immanence that rejects “singularity” without “constitut[ing] a complex entity.”³⁷ Likewise, *On the black leadership and other white myths* demonstrates nothing like an autonomous “camera consciousness” in which to reflect its content. This is the characterization Deleuze gives of the “perception-image,” which thereby “derives its status, as free indirect subjective.”³⁸ But there is a marked illegibility of intentionality of the “original” video footage used to make the work, and the “post-production” procedures utilized in the video’s composition impart no additional indications of “consciousness.” Moreover, the screwed-down, retrograde motion of these images materializes a de-naturalized perception absent both the subjective and objective, without overcoming them or preceding them. If perception is “the image reflected by a

³⁵ As noted above in Chapter 2, in the *time-image*, Deleuze sees the unhinging of time from movement, the decoupling of pure time from chronology, as pure time in the form of the virtual is presented by post-war modernist cinema. With movement and narrative trivialized, “pure visual and sound images” characterize the time-image, which is an image of virtualization. See Deleuze 1989.

³⁶ Deleuze 1986, 90.

³⁷ Deleuze 1986, 103. Neither do the brief images of Mutulu Shakur, Sundiata Accoli, and Assata Shakur function reflectively or expressively, as “affection-signs,” but rather as *absence-signs* presenting and manifested through the political institutions of antiblackness.

³⁸ Deleuze 1986, 74.

living image” (Bergson’s novel immanentization of the world along lines of light, “capable of corresponding with the new symbols of science,”³⁹ which Deleuze appropriates), which may appear either subjective or objective and is transformed by the cinema’s “independent aesthetic consciousness,”⁴⁰ this video presents a kind of non-living image, an image reflective of and moving against the antiblack violence of living light.

On the black leadership and other white myths, then, is a movement-image that, by rejecting the cinematic protocols used to present worldly movement, demands a new, or another kind of movement. Dissolving the link between situation and action, while comprising images of radical “action,” the video’s *movement against movement* neither actualizes nor virtualizes, but works to suspend this dialectic as well. This dissolution of situation marks a stark departure from twentieth century political thought’s most explicit engagement is the concept of *situation*. Taking the term itself to name their approach to “revolutionary action”⁴¹ the Situationists theorized and experimented with the “construction of situations” as a strategy to spur leftist political action. For the Situationists, a constructed situation, “[a] moment of life concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organization of a uniting ambience and a game of events,” thus aims at the reclamation of a world that has been culturally and politically attenuated through commodity capitalism. The Situationist strategy aims for the restoration of the possibility for revolutionary political action via the creation of the new: “We have to define new desires in relation to present possibilities. In the thick of battle between the present society and the forces that are going to destroy it, we have to find the first elements of a more advanced construction of the environment and new conditions of behavior—both as experiences in themselves and as

³⁹ Deleuze 1986, 60.

⁴⁰ Deleuze 1986, 74.

⁴¹ Knabb 2006, 36.

material for propaganda.”⁴² In a development of Marx’s eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, the Situationists articulate this creative task as a break with the tradition of Western philosophy and criticism’s mere “recognition,” “expression,” and “explanation” of situations.⁴³ In place of the “existential passivity” that characterizes bourgeois culture and its critics—with which indication we might today include the purveyor of academic critique as well as the cynically capitalizing public activist—the Situationists propose “the construction of moments of life,” the replacement of “doubt with playful affirmation.”⁴⁴ Constructed situations, in their reanimation and reclamation of real quadrants of social space-time via aesthetic *détournement* of “preexisting aesthetic elements,”⁴⁵ constitute real interventions into libidinal economy as a strategy for “illuminat[ing] and coordinat[ing]” revolutionary signs and desires as revolutionary action.⁴⁶

Central to the situationist practice of *constructing situations* is the method of *détournement*, a procedure which, taking a preexisting artistic or cultural work as its material (“The literary and artistic heritage of humanity should be used for partisan propaganda purposes.”⁴⁷), turns on a process of “devaluation” in which “all the elements of the cultural past

⁴² Knabb 2006, 36.

⁴³ Knabb 2006; 178, 36.

⁴⁴ Knabb 2006, 178.

⁴⁵ In a 1958 Situationist text, *détournement* receives a definition: “Short for ‘détournement of preexisting aesthetic elements.’ The integration of present or past artistic productions into a superior construction of a milieu. In this sense there can be no situationist painting or music, but only a situationist use of those means. In a more elementary sense, *détournement* within the old cultural spheres is a method of propaganda, a method which reveals the wearing out and loss of importance of those spheres.” “Definitions,” in Knabb 2006, 51-52.

⁴⁶ “The SI aims to represent the highest degree of international revolutionary consciousness. This is why it strives to illuminate and coordinate the gestures of refusal and the signs of creativity that are defining the new contours of the proletariat, the irreducible desire for freedom. Centered on the spontaneity of the masses, such activity is undeniably ‘political’ in the sense that those rebellious masses are themselves political... But in contrast to all the ‘transitional programs’ of specialized politics, the SI insists on a permanent revolution of everyday life.” Knabb 2006, 178-79.

⁴⁷ Knabb 2006, 15.

[in an extant work] must be ‘reinvested’ or disappear. Détournement is thus first of all a negation of the value of the previous organization of expression.”⁴⁸ The quintessential example of détournement is, of course, Guy Debord’s 1974 film *La Société du Spectacle*, in which feature and industrial film footage, television advertisements, still photography, and news footage are détourned alongside music by the eighteenth century French composer Michel Corrette.⁴⁹ Working on the aesthetic elements of industrial capitalism’s organization of desire, including the commodification of human bodies (especially women’s bodies), *La Société du Spectacle* exemplifies the Situationist’s earlier description of an upcoming “parodic-serious stage [of the practice of détournement] where the accumulation of detoured elements, far from aiming to arouse indignation or laughter by alluding to some original work, will express our indifference toward a meaningless and forgotten original, and concern itself with rendering a certain sublimity.”⁵⁰ The parodic-sublime character of a work of détournement like *Société du Spectacle* reflects the late capitalist contradiction of “the urgent necessity and the near impossibility of initiating and carrying out a totally innovative collective action,”⁵¹ at the same time that, constructing a situation for the negation of capitalist values, it coordinates the emergence of revolutionary ones: “Détournement as Negation and Prelude.”⁵²

In contrast to the Situationist approach, the images of *On the black leadership and other white myths* imply a strategy that is more radical in the break it makes with past traditions of proletarian politics and intellectual critique; here situations are not reclaimed but liquidated altogether, along with their corresponding and responsive term, “action.” Moreover, the artistic-

⁴⁸ Knabb 2006, 67.

⁴⁹ Debord 2005.

⁵⁰ Knabb 2006, 15-16.

⁵¹ Knabb 2006, 68.

⁵² Knabb 2006, 67.

technical procedures used to realize this suspension differ fundamentally from détournement. It is not the “cultural elements” of a literary, artistic, or cultural past (or present) that is appropriated and devalued in the video. Rather, the character of the *moving-image* itself, insofar as it presents movement via temporal and spatial processes, is itself taken as material for “partisan propaganda purposes.” Here too, however, a paradigmatic difference is in play, as the motion of the moving picture is neither negated nor reinvested—through subversion, rerouting, “hijacking,” or other tactics. Where the technique of détournement relies on the legibility of the original function or “route” of the object that is détourned or “rerouted,” the images here are split open, letting their (temporal-spatial-kinetic) contents run out. Put differently, rather than rerouting the capitalist organization of expression, *On the black leadership and other white myths* moves against the aesthetic ground that immanently conditions and enables that expression—an image of/as movement of/as antagonistic suspension. The video thus works against the constructing of situations, and for their dissolution.

Its comparison with a work of détournement like *Société du Spectacle* already suggests how the aesthetic intervention made with the images of *On the black leadership and other white myths* depends on more than the simple technical procedures of slowing down and reversing recorded moving images. Like *Société du Spectacle*, as well as the classical-era films Deleuze engages in his formulation of the movement-image, the video’s aesthetic-political intervention comprises a complex assemblage of technical, contextual, and affective aspects—a composition of “signaletic material”⁵³ whose effect transcends the application of a technique. We can thus contrast the video’s use of reverse-action with the superficially similar deployment of the

⁵³ Deleuze 1989, 29.

technique in the 2020 action film *Tenet*, directed by Christopher Nolan.⁵⁴ *Tenet*, which is above all an *action* film, stages a superfluous plot with unintelligible explanations of the scientific-military procedure of “time inversion,” as an excuse to show intricately produced action sequences in which, for instance, a temporally “inverted” character fights “backwards” against a non-inverted adversary. Narratively, the film’s protagonist, a CIA operative (John David Washington), learns to manipulate the “flow of time” while working with a secret transnational organization (“Tenet”) to prevent an attack issued from the future, thereby saving humanity.

Ironically, as the film attempts to push the envelope on the cinematic *representation* of time (Nolan purportedly spent ten years deliberating the details of the concept and then another five years writing the screenplay, then worked months with actors, stunt teams, and cinematographers to execute the film’s strange “inverted” actions),⁵⁵ it sacrifices any attempt to show time itself or to think temporal intervention outside of state power. This is in keeping with Deleuze’s diagnosis that “[w]hen the violence is no longer that of the image and its vibrations but that of the represented, we move into a blood-red arbitrariness.”⁵⁶ *Tenet*’s engagement with time is never at the level of the image itself, but always mediated through action (action-images). This is, after all, the only way to think the “reversal” of time—when time is conceived as the chronological progression of movement through space. Thus, it “is a movie about momentum,” “about objects moving opposite ways in time in the same space,”⁵⁷ whose “irony is that [it]

⁵⁴ Nolan 2020.

⁵⁵ “... we had to do everything four ways, essentially. And so the actors are learning how to throw a punch backwards. They’re also trying to work with the stunt team to determine what an inverted punch against somebody who’s not inverted, what effect that has, because it’s not just a straight backwards punch. And so you’ve got all these different levels of complexity. And that took months to develop. And then the actors coming in had to learn how to walk backwards, talk backwards...” Shapiro and Tanis 2020.

⁵⁶ Deleuze 1989, 164.

⁵⁷ Tallerico 2020.

doesn't want you to be able to rewind it." *Tennet* (along with perhaps all of Nolan's films) thus facilitates the recuperation of time through the action-image. As it represents time and its manipulation as a weapon to be marshalled by state-military power in the latter's protection and safe-guarding of the present from the dangers of the future, the film cynically provides a reminder that "the movement-image was from the beginning linked to the organization of war, state propaganda, ordinary fascism, historically and essentially."⁵⁸ But in *On the black leadership and other white myths*, movement is constituted by neither an other-motion nor a self-motion, neither an action-image nor any other type of movement image catalogued by Deleuze or produced within the protocols of Hollywood (or Indie) cinema. Rather, it suspends the distinction between self- and other-movement that is basic to movement and thus to the cinema's movement-images, along with the poles of potentiality and actualization. As a result, this image presents the suspension, ultimately, of the distinction between living and non-living, living and dead.

If antiblackness can be understood as the prohibition of the faculty for self-motion, for *motility* (as opposed to *mobility*), such a dispensation is not a demotion of the black to animality—since animals actualize their potentiality for local motion and operation—but a specific allocation of *nothing*, below and outside actual and potential, living and dead, a *no-motion*. This is the motile register of fundamental accumulation. *On the black leadership and other white myths* shows this prohibitive nothing as it inheres in the bodies of political-libidinal economy, the dramas of the world, as the figures captured by the video pulsate and flicker with their strange non-movement. In this, the video presents the immanence of antiblack prohibition.

⁵⁸ Deleuze 1989, 165. Deleuze is drawing on Paul Virilio's study *War and cinema: the logistics of perception* (Verso 2009).

But it also shows the antagonistic side of no-motion: as black teenagers dance on the roof of a burning police car, or uncannily levitate up to its roof and windshield, the latter which seems to already have been kicked in as we see feet kicking in—they *are* moving, moving without actualizing, moving against situation and against action; black motion *against*, the movement of generic antagonism.

The images in *On the black leadership and other white myths* therefore exceed the political radicality of the narrative manifesto component of the video. The latter, in claiming that “the entire spectrum of black revolt in the streets,” from youth smashing windows to clergy marching in respectable protest, constitute “leaderless leaders,” does not ultimately escape the limits of a politics of self-management; ‘leaders without the led’ is a formulation that cannot be distinguished from ‘managers without the managed’, especially in the context of contemporary biopolitical governance as described by Harney and Moten as the process of “prospecting for labor.”⁵⁹ Moreover, the narration’s claim that black youth have “shown the whole country that they are more than capable of setting their own path and directing their own initiatives,” constitutes a clear vision of the reclamation of self-motion. On this view, it is the means of struggle that need to be radicalized—generalized autonomous uprising replacing or supplementing mass-organized nonviolent protest—in order to achieve autonomy of motion as an unquestioned and politically conservative end. These formulations—“the spectrum of black revolt” as “leaderless leaders,” and “black youth[‘s] capability for path-setting and direction—cannot escape the democratization of management, of sovereignty, of exploitation, since they constitute a demand for these very processes. Nor can they escape the ongoing democratization of the prohibition of black (self-)movement, since antiblack prohibition is immanent to the very

⁵⁹ Harney and Moten 2013, 53-55.

constitution of motion via “self-“ and “other-.” A fruitful reading of *On the black leadership and other white myths* must, therefore, ultimately give precedence to the movement of the video’s images, over its narrative-discursive aspect. Persisting in “refusing what has been refused,”⁶⁰ the video’s image of black motion works not just to break the antiblack prohibition of self-motion but to dissolve the distinction between self- and other-motion, thereby suspending the im/possibility of black leadership, management, governance, and autonomy.

Another distinction upon which movement/motion relies for its coherence is that between the continuous and the discrete, between immanent flow and waves on the one hand, and spatial-temporal jumps of atomic units or individual bodies, on the other.⁶¹ Is movement most fundamentally the continuous intrinsic motion of all matter, or the change in position of a discrete unit with respect to space and time? This distinction is found in philosophical discussions at least as early as the Greek Atomists, such as Leucippus, Democritus, and Epicurus, who confirmed the omnipresence of continuous motion, while Zeno prioritized the discrete unit, using the logical possibility of the division of space or time into units to argue for an immobile and fundamentally static world.⁶²

In the twentieth century this distinction most famously played out in the interpretation of quantum mechanics and its infamous wave-particle duality, or complementarity. Plank’s 1900 discovery of quantized amounts of energy in an electric field, and Einstein’s confirmation of the

⁶⁰ See discussion of this formulation of Moten’s in Chapter 1 above.

⁶¹ Nail 2019, 56-57. In this study, titled *Being and Motion*, Thomas Nail delineates this distinction between continuous and discrete motion in order to argue for the fundamental ontological priority of motion over stasis (even over matter), reconceiving stasis and discreteness as merely different *appearances* of flow.

⁶² Nail 2019, 56.

atomist conception of matter as inherently discrete, led to experimental physicists's observation of the change of position of atomic particles at discrete points under an electron microscope.⁶³ The subsequent work of Bohr and Heisenberg indicated the "quantum leap" electrons make between inner and outer orbits around a nucleus, and many contemporary theorists now agree that at the quantum level, matter *consists* of such discrete movement: "Electrons don't always exist. They exist when they interact. They materialize *in a place* when they collide with something else. The 'quantum leaps' from one orbit to another constitute their way of being real: an electron is a combination of leaps from one interaction to another."⁶⁴

On the other hand, as Heisenberg theorized with his famous *uncertainty principle*, at the quantum level there is an inverse relation between our ability to measure a particle's precise position and its momentum; "The more precise the precision of a quantum field, the more it looks like a stable particle, and the less we know about its momentum. The less precise the position of a field, the more it looks like a wave, and the more we know about its momentum through its diffraction pattern or waveform."⁶⁵ At the moment of its collision with another atomic object, the quantum particle appears, making itself available as a finite individual whose position is measurable in space-time. Outside of such occasions, the quantum "object" is a continuous wave—an "infinite" vibration that is, as such, also a multiplicity.⁶⁶ The discrete quantum particle moves between two points, then disappears; the multiplicitous quantum wave is in continuous motion, undefinable with respect to a position in space-time. Heir to twentieth

⁶³ Rovelli 2017.

⁶⁴ Rovelli 2017, 119-120; emphasis added.

⁶⁵ Nail 2019, 59-60. Despite what many popular accounts of quantum physics from the twentieth century have claimed, this fundamental "uncertainty" is *not* merely an epistemological effect. See Nail 2019, 460 (note 19); Barad 2007, 301.

⁶⁶ Nail 2019, 61-64.

century physics' principle of complementarity, contemporary quantum field theory posits that at the smallest possible physical scale,⁶⁷ quanta of gravity produce spacetime itself through their interactions with each other. "...space is a fluctuating swarm of quanta of gravity that act upon one another, and together act upon things, manifesting themselves in these interactions as spin networks: grains interrelated with one another. Physical space is the fabric resulting from the ceaseless swarming of this web of relations."⁶⁸ Quantum field theory thus develops the dialectical relation between discrete and continuous movement (and discrete and continuous objects)—the collision of quantum-gravitational grains and the fluid motion of the resulting fields of space-time—that was posited earlier with the principle of wave-particle complementarity, and can be traced back to the Greek atomists' inaugural ontologies of discrete units *and* constant motion. The antinomy of the discrete and the continuous thus appears as basic to the coherence of movement or motion, in scientific thought and existence.

The distinction between continuous and discrete movement surfaces in Deleuze's discussion of the movement image of classical cinema, where he theorizes what he calls the *liquid image of perception* in films of the pre-war French school. In films such as Jean Mitry's *Pacific 231* and *Images pour Debussy*, Grémillon's early documentaries and his dramatic works such as *Maldone* and *Gardiens de la phare*, and Vigo's *L'Atalante*, Deleuze sees the presentation of an opposition between terrestrial and liquid movements—images of motion on land and at

⁶⁷ Contemporary quantum theory confirms again—after Einstein—the atomist hypothesis of the fundamental granularity of matter: "The calculating of the quantum spectra of geometric quantities indicates that the answer [to Zeno's question of whether 'there are intervals between Achilles and the tortoise that can be arbitrarily short'] is negative: arbitrarily small chunks of space do not exist" (Rovelli 2017, 169).

⁶⁸ Rovelli 2017, 174.

sea.⁶⁹ As *L'Atalante* shows, “on land there is not the same régime of movement, not the same ‘grace’ as on the sea,” the former exhibiting a “perpetual disequilibrium” due to the exteriority of the motive force vis-à-vis the center of gravity, “while aquatic movement is like the displacement of the center of gravity, according to a simple objective law, straight or elliptical.”⁷⁰ Deleuze’s terrestrial and liquid movement thus correspond directly to the distinction between discrete and continuous movement, as problematized by the ancient atomists and twentieth-century quantum theory. Discrete or terrestrial movement “always takes place from one point to another, always between two points, while on water the point is always between two movements;” bodies who precede their motion between two points in space-time, versus continuous flow which produces, through its generative relationality, space-time itself. Deleuze suggests that the fluid movement presented in *L'Atalante* “marks the conversion or inversion of movement, as in the hydraulic relationship of a dive and counter-dive, which is found in the movement of the camera itself (the final fall of the entwined bodies of the two lovers has no end, but is converted into an ascending movement.”⁷¹ Thus, the technical, the thematic, and the visual are intertwined in an assemblage that directly presents the conversion of the discrete into continuous flow, a transformation that also inverts top and bottom, ascension and descent.

This fundamental transformation in motion, for Deleuze, is reflected in the “two opposed systems” of “perceptions, affections, and actions of men...,”⁷² where terrestrial and liquid indicate opposing subjective and objective tendencies, respectfully. Describing Grémillon’s *Stormy Waters*, Deleuze observes how on land, subjects are “drawn back to fixed centers, images

⁶⁹ Deleuze 1986, 76. In his discussion, Deleuze engages, to varying degrees, films by Dupont, Epstein, Renoir, L’Herbier, Grémillon, Gance, Mitry, and Vigo.

⁷⁰ Deleuze 1986, 79.

⁷¹ Deleuze 1986, 79.

⁷² Deleuze 1986, 79.

of the wife or lover, image of the villa facing the sea, which are all so many points of egotistical subjectivation. The sea, on the other hand, furnishes “an objectivity as universal variation, solidarity of all the parts, justice beyond men, where the fixed point of the tow-ropes, always called into question, no longer has validity except between two movements.”⁷³ Within those opposed regimes, the terrestrial corresponds to passions and affections structured around commodities and the fetish, “the article of clothing, the partial object and the memory-object...” In the liquid, on the other hand, bodies obtain cruel objectivity, “reveal[ing] hideousness under clothing, but also grace under a course appearance.”⁷⁴ Lastly, these films present the “clairvoyant function” developed in the liquid-image, “in opposition to earthly vision.” In *L’Atalante*, Jean’s disappeared lover is revealed in the water, “as if perception enjoyed a scope and interaction, a truth which it did not have on land.” Likewise, the bourgeoisie itself is disclosed, via the presence of water, “as a monstrous organic body...” The water reveals “the hideousness of bourgeois bodies beneath their clothes, ...a fetish-body, a scrap-body, to which childhood, love, navigation oppose their integral bodies.”⁷⁵ Within the liquid reckoning, “[o]bjectivity’, equilibrium, justice are not of the earth: they are the preserve of water.”⁷⁶

If the opposition between discrete and continuous motion is another distinction (alongside the distinction between self- and other-motion) that is inherent to movement—in the thought of movement (the Atomists), in the movement of matter (quantum field theory), and in the image of movement (the liquid and solid poles of the perception-image of movement)—

⁷³ Deleuze 1986, 79.

⁷⁴ Deleuze 1986, 79.

⁷⁵ Deleuze 1986, 80.

⁷⁶ Deleuze 1986, 80.

Kahlil Joseph's short film *Until the Quiet Comes*, which features the performance of dancer Storyboard P, works to dissolve this basic distinction.⁷⁷ Like the films of classic-era French directors with which Deleuze thinks fluid movement and liquid perception, *Until the Quiet Comes* assembles technical, narrative, and visual aspects to compose an image of movement. But Joseph's movement-image neither jumps nor flows.

Accompanied by a musical work adapted from the album of the same name by Flying Lotus,⁷⁸ *Until the Quiet Comes* begins with a submerged image of blue, bubbling water. The red jacket, white shirt, and leather belt of a figure floating underwater is briefly shown, head and limbs out of field, before the title credits appear and the liquid shot fades and cuts to a different scene. The camera moves forward, across a sun-bleached concrete patio, palm trees and power lines on the horizon, towards an empty swimming pool on the floor of which we see a young black boy standing. The image cuts to an upward-facing portrait shot of the boy, messy hair in braids wearing a white t-shirt, looking past the camera which moves upwards to approach his line of sight, and then jumps to a view from directly behind him. We see him raise his right arm to point out from his body, elbow slightly bent and fingers and thumb formed as if he held a handgun, ready to fire, while the camera jumps back to face him, moving slowly upwards, and then jumps out to frame the boy within the empty pool. Immediately a shot is heard, and in four quick jump cuts we see the concrete and dust disturbed at different points on the surface of the pool by

⁷⁷ Joseph 2013.

⁷⁸ Since the film *Until the Quiet Comes* is in fact a music video, one might reverse the relation here, and insist that the film accompanies the music. Such a reversal would be in keeping with Steven Shaviro's (2016) theorization of the character of post-cinematic images in which the spatial is prior—this itself a reversal of the relation between space and time in modernist cinema as read by Deleuze—and only subsequently *temporalized*, often via sound, as in the music video generally. *Until the Quiet Comes*, however, does not conform easily to this model. In contrast to *On the black leadership and other white myths*, it is shot on 35 millimeter film using only traditional cinematographic and editing techniques, in a highly *cinematic* aesthetic.

a ghost bullet. The boy falls to the floor in slow-motion, and the image cuts to another scene—a grass yard where another black figure lies on the concrete while a small crowd looks on. While the scene of the boy in the empty pool was bright daylight, this scene is staged at night, lit by the imposing brightness of streetlights. The camera approaches the figure on the sidewalk and cuts back to the boy, a wide, deep-red stream running from his motionless body down the slight slope of the pool floor, as the camera zooms out and up, then follows the flow of the blood—uncannily swift and overflowing, forming a broad abstract curve, conjuring an ink smudge or abstract painting, that flows into a pool across the concrete. Over this first minute the video’s sound is light—pieces of static organ reminiscent of Japanese Gakagu, environmental sounds of bubbling water, air, birds, and a woman’s voice singing in ascending and descending syllables of dreaming, light, love, the heart. An introductory beat—almost a shuffle—enters imperceptibly following the shot, and then crescendos through the brief proceeding shots, cut off with the image’s jump to the following sequence.

A helicopter flies across a grey sky; we hear the chopping of the blades against the background noises in the street below, in which the camera and microphone are positioned, which is identified by an intertext as “Nickerson Gardens, Los Angeles.” As contemplative guitar sounds enter, two boys wrestle playfully in a grassy field, framed against a horizon of wire fencing and project housing. A close up of the boys—now standing and facing each other, one bows and then raises and lowers his head and hand in a familiar gesture of comraderie and challenge, effusing an exploratory intimacy—cuts to a shot of a black man waxing his car in the sun-filled parking lot of the housing project, then the boy from the opening sequence sitting beside another man—gold chain and “J Dilla saved my life” in white on his black t-shirt, this is Storyboard P’s character, who features in the subsequent sequence—sharing Cheetos, joined by a

woman and other children. The kids run down the alley in smiles, in the same setting in which a moment ago a man was shown laying motionless on the sidewalk. The sequence now shifts to nighttime, the same group of playing children climbing the chain link fence, running across the grass field illuminated by towering lights, projects and then a rose sunset in the background. As the arpeggiated guitar and long sung vowels crescendo the boy walks along the fence, then the image cuts to another body, laying, piled over in the grass next to a house, the guitar and voices fade to the flickering of the streetlights off screen.

This moment marks a transition or division within the film, as the image up to this point provides a context for the movement that follows. This context comprises the interleaving of black death—the human body floating underwater, the boy in the empty pool struck by a bullet we see him fire himself, and the two bodies laying outdoors on the ground of the Nickerson Gardens housing projects—and black life—the gestures and expressions of children, casual care and relationship between adults and children, the man’s loving maintenance of his car (a fetish containing within itself a bundle of social relations), and the children’s joyful play: everyday social practices of conservation and community. Presented directly, almost matter-of-factly, and animated with deep colors, vivid light and darkness, and digetic sounds, this image intermixes black death and black life, presenting their mutual presupposition as “the social life of social death”⁷⁹ understood precisely as a matter of *fact*, as the situation out of which, ostensibly, any act or movement might occur (as Deleuze would say, the situation whose set of virtual potentialities will yield a subsequent actualization). But by suspending the distinction between the continuous

⁷⁹ See Sexton 2011.

and discrete, the motion that is presented subsequent to this scene at the same time challenges the image of movement.

As the body lays clumped on the grass in the flickering light, in the background a figure in a red hoodie hustles backwards across the scene, slumped over in reverse near-lunge steps, a first hint of the movement to come. The film cuts back to the original image of the figure floating underwater, one arm rising slowly upwards like the bubbles we see leaving the body, being carried by a force other than self-motion. Cut back to the figure shown earlier laying on the sidewalk: this closer shot reveals it as the man who was pictured sharing a snack with the boy, the white letters on the chest of his black shirt now smudged with blood; a brief image of bubbles flowing upwards in water, a man sitting in the car, looking out the open window towards the body on the sidewalk. As ambient long tones transition into a full beat for the first time, the man laying on the sidewalk moves, making a small jolt upwards, his left shoulder and leg rising from side sprawl on the concrete. Subtly supporting himself with one hand, feet moving as if already walking, the man pulses upright as if pulled by invisible strings, torso bent to one side and arms shooting up and out at forty-five degrees from his head. In a series of twelve camera shots, he moves down the sidewalk, past a line of young men and a mother holding her child (the boy pictured in the opening sequences), all leaning against the side of a building, and then proceeds through the open window of the car, whose right rear has lowered in connection with his own motion. The car drives off, rear corner scraping the concrete street, and the image cuts to the floating body, this time pictured from below, light shining downward into the water from just where the figure's head would otherwise be seen. Cut back to the street, where the lights of two ambulances flash, then the bubbling water again, and the camera descends, light blue of the liquid turning darkness as the bubbles disappear.

Through this sequence we see dancer Storyboard P’s body moving in continual refusal of the binary between flow and break. Drastically extending and mixing techniques from various “street” and formal dance styles—including break, vogue, ballet, krump, etc.⁸⁰—the body’s various components—limbs, halves, organs, extremities—seem to move in autonomous trajectories, starting and stopping independently of any unified local motion while nonetheless persisting forwards. At the same time that his body materializes this intensive disjunctive autonomy, however, Storyboard P’s movement is intensively fluid, flowing past and around bystanders (who appear oblivious to his presence, neither physically interacting with him nor even following his motions with their eyes) as if suspended in a medium unknown to bodies, whether human or subatomic.⁸¹

For Lauren M Cramer, Joseph’s film diagrams the suspension of blackness between formal eroticization and functional dehumanization. This suspension of blackness, in Cramer’s architectural-informed reading, enables the conception of “other architectural configurations... specifically, a world where black bodies are not inextricably linked to the structural function of being whiteness’s oppositional ground.”⁸² By presenting what Cramer understands as the removal of blackness from the architecture of antiblackness, *Until the Quiet Comes* visualizes a catastrophe for the antiblack world. Moreover, for Cramer, when Storyboard P performs his deathly, or after-lively dance, his character performs a “dramatic visualization of the new black architecture formed in the wake of catastrophe and its formal potentialities.”⁸³ While there is much to learn from and agree with in Cramer’s reading of *Until the Quiet Comes*, my reading of

⁸⁰ Weiner 2013, Hoby 2014; both cited in Cramer 2017.

⁸¹ “[Storyboard P] is a star of flex, a form of street dance characterized by jarring feats of contortion, pantomime, and footwork that simulates levitation” (Weiner 2013).

⁸² Cramer 2017, 159.

⁸³ Cramer 2017, 160.

Joseph's film locates its architectural-theoretical affordances as tangential or secondary; architectural diagramming does not seem a natural or maximally generative lens through which to engage Storyboard P's performance in the film (or elsewhere).

Until the Quiet Comes has also been treated by Tina M. Campt, alongside other films by Joseph and related work by a constellation of contemporary black artists.⁸⁴ In her analysis, Campt foregrounds the role of continuity and flow in Storyboard P's performance, writing that "[h]e moves neither vertically, nor horizontally; his body bounces repeatedly, then begins to flow like a fluid material that refuses to congeal fully into solid or liquid."⁸⁵ Echoing Liquid Blackness Collective's (of which Cramer, above, is a founding member) valorization of liquidity and flow as a privileged form for blackness in both political-ontological and aesthetic contexts,⁸⁶ Campt reads the movement of Storyboard P's character as transcendent and messianic, if not downright Christ-like, triumphantly exceeding the earthly constraints of temporality and the discrete. Before "pour[ing] himself into the vehicle, oozing backward into and through a side window,"⁸⁷ "[h]is reanimated corpse flows past their stilled-in-time bodies, intently making its way toward the promise of a new celestial plane." As a narration of "impossible" transcendence, Campt's fabulation of "Black resurrection and rebirth,"⁸⁸ cannot help but fetishize a particular form (in this case continuity and flow) that transcends all others—thus is the strategy of transcendence. But once we understand the force of antiblackness and its process (fundamental accumulation) as immanent, all transcendent strategies (both analytical and political) for

⁸⁴ See Chapter 2 above.

⁸⁵ Campt 2021, 59.

⁸⁶ See Chapter 2 above.

⁸⁷ "Rather than entering, he pours himself into the vehicle..." (Campt 2021, 60).

⁸⁸ Campt 2021, 61. Also, "What if [Flying Lotus and Joseph's] retelling—a dreamlike retelling of *resurrection* in the face of violent negation—were in fact the rule rather than the exception?" (Campt 2021, 62; emphasis added).

struggling against antiblackness are quickly seen to be inherently insufficient. In the simplest terms, as Warren (2019) observes, form itself effectuates antiblack violence,⁸⁹ always relying upon a differentiation in the service of fundamental accumulation. To unplug this impasse, it is necessary to diagnose the immanent antiblackness of aesthetic capacity itself—as this dissertation works to do, and to move against that immanence—which, I am arguing, is precisely what Storyboard P’s movement and Joseph’s film work to do.

The dancer’s movement, and Joseph’s film, materialize a direct presentation of the suspension, not of blackness between structural modes (Cramer), or of (only) the disjunction and “detachment” of antiblack solidity and “premature death”⁹⁰ (Campt), but of the essential antinomy of movement itself (*both* continuity and the discrete, and the antinomy of movement that comprises them, are *refused*—as what has been refused). Liquidity and fluidity are shown thematically at the beginning and end of the film not as a salutary alternative to terrestrial movement and its assumed whiteness (and antiblackness), but as the inherent counterpart of discrete movement, together which enable the movement that helps define whiteness and/in its prohibition to black being. The images of the figure suspended under water function as negatives of the general liquid-movement image; they show the black death immanent to liquidity and its motion. The operative visual reference is to enslaved Africans “escaped” or thrown off slave ships during Middle Passage, to drown in the continuous motion connecting the “old world” with the “new.” The three other deaths shown in the film, on the other hand, picture black death as the effect of discrete movement. First, the death of the boy occurs in an emptied concrete pool—a

⁸⁹ See discussion of Warren (2019) in Introduction above.

⁹⁰ “Detachment or shock; opaque or impermeable; suppressed rage or disbelief—what range of emotions is commensurate to witnessing persistent encounters with premature death?” (Campt 2021, 63).

concrete visual sign of this death's terrestrial scene, having been drained of all liquid. The bodies of the two dead men shown subsequently both lay on the ground, on grass and cement, end points marking the discrete termination of antiblack motion on land. These shots show the stillness of black bodies, produced through movement; the cause of death indicated (explicitly in the case of the boy) as gunshot. This is a quintessential example of discrete motion—if it supplements terrestrial movement with arial movement—as the bullet is located at point (a) (chamber of the gun), moves as if instantaneously through the air (ricocheting to and from various intermediate points in the image of the boy's shooting), and comes to rest at its termination point (b), killing the body which it has thereby penetrated; black death pictured graphically in motion as the change-of-position of a bullet. In the film, a series of presentations of liquid and terrestrial motion—continuous and discrete, A-S-A' and S-A-S', respectively—constitute an image of the movement of black death that is interspersed with images of black life; the film unfolds (as) this material immanence.

The movement of Storyboard P's character, which the second portion of the film revolves around, proceeds to suspend this antinomy of discrete and continuous, by moving “impossibly” terrestrially-fluid, continuously un/broken. Or rather, in moving with a quality that undoes this binary, his movement undoes both the antinomy and its two terms, as the film gestures towards an unknown motion that is ultimately antagonistic to prior forms of movement. This black motion does not amount to a superposition of continuity and the discrete (wave and particle), nor an *overcoming* of the contradiction between the two. To appreciate the antagonism immanent to this movement we should reflect on the historical relevance of its setting.

Cramer notes the historical resonance of the location of Nickerson Gardens, Watts: its proximity to the location of the 1965 Watts riots and of the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Additionally,

the images in the film of the car—being maintained and driven by a black man—seem to reinforce Cramer’s historical connection, as both uprisings began with the occasion of “routine” traffic stops of black male motorists by the police. With respect to this historical connection, Cramer links catastrophe theory as applied to the sociology of social movements and social conflict to the film’s ostensible disarticulation of blackness with antiblack architectural structures, working with the Situationist International text “The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy” to extend Guy Debord’s argument that the Watts riots were an example of people “destroy[ing] commodities [to] show their human superiority over commodities.”⁹¹ The riots thus disarticulated “the joints that previously connected the black community through violence and systematic discrimination,” opening up the possibility for “expressions of the creativity of black power,”⁹² a retroactive symbolization of which Cramer reads in Simon Rodia’s *Watts Towers*, an architectural assemblage that “effectively diagrams the racial resonance and internal spatial relations of a community likened to junk...”⁹³ But what of the riots themselves, the *movement* they comprised; what of the movement itself as performed by Storyboard P, before and besides whatever architectural-diagrammatic potential it may imply; and what of the relation between these two *movements*? I posit a more central link between the motion performed in Storyboard P’s character and the quality of both uprisings *as movement*.

Unflinchingly destructive, unconcerned with demand or legibility, the 1965 and 1992 uprisings were movements *against* the (white) world that materially equates a “routine” traffic stop with the violence of antiblack terror. The police never stop—their continual patrolling constitutes the continuous force of movement out of which singular points of antiblack brutality

⁹¹ Quoted in Cramer 2017, 163.

⁹² Cramer 2017, 163.

⁹³ Cramer 2017, 164. See also, Harris 2005.

emerge as discrete *situations*: situations of antiblack violence bookended by continuous antiblack movement (antiblack A-S-A´). On the other hand, the traffic stop is a literal termination of movement, an instance of the prohibition of black movement which rose to the level of cliché alongside the rise of the automobile over the course of the twentieth century and into the present—the risks of “driving while black:” movement interrupted by an antiblack situation that reproduces the movement of antiblackness (antiblack A-S-A´). Considered from yet another perspective, the schema that antiblack administration strives to install (or reproduce) is a police state in which every movement has been reduced to a change of position between points that is rigorously calculated and predicted like the quantum probabilities of an observed state (antiblack S-A-S´), a schema of discrete movement which in turn reproduces and fortifies continuous antiblack movement by the police. The 1965 and 1992 riots may therefore be understood most fundamentally as movement against this dialectic between the continuous and the discrete—two faces of movement that interleaf as the dynamis for the antiblack world’s unfolding as actualization (via action) of the virtual or potential (within the situation), which always presupposes and materializes the prohibition of black movement. The setting of *Until the Quiet Comes* in Watts, along with its visual references to black motoring, links the (ant)aesthetically novel movement it foregrounds to the movement of both Watts rebellions. In visually undoing the antinomy of black life and black death illustrated in the film’s first half, the movement of Storyboard P’s character moves against them both; neither continuous nor discrete; the dance is black motion against that movement of the world.

It is worth noting something else about the schema formulated above. The situation, the terrestrial, the discrete and particulate, all exhibit and characterize a structure, and thus link to

signification, or what Deleuze and Guattari call signifying semiotics,⁹⁴ wherein meanings are derived via a general equivalency of networked, mutually presuppositional terms (the structure of language). This is the realm of *social subjection*, in which individuation, identity, and representation are all ascendant⁹⁵—recall that in *Stormy Waters* the presence of identity and the fetish occurs *on land*. Conversely, the liquid, action, continuous flow and waves are all *asignifying*, manifesting as assemblages within regimes of what Deleuze and Guattari call *machinic enslavement*.⁹⁶ The latter, forming inclusive disjunctions between its components without recourse to linguistic meaning, but through material, machinic relations, are typified—over different “historical” perspectives—by the machines of industrial capital, the relation of insect and orchid, or the capture of post-consumer *dividuals* via the networks of digital financialization and web 3.0.⁹⁷ As Deleuze demonstrates with his studies of situation and action, and liquid and terrestrial perception, these two regimes of capture never function in isolation, but always mutually presuppose each other; the action occurring in response to a specific situation leads to a subsequent situation, and so on; the point in water is surrounded on all sides by continuous movement, but on land movement is an event framed by points; In its suspension of the (dialectic of) liquid and discrete, situation and action, Joseph’s film approaches a cinematic materiality that evades this antinomy between subjection and the machinic. *On the black*

⁹⁴ See for example the fifth chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus*, “587 B.c.-A.D. 70: On several Regimes of Signs” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

⁹⁵ See Lazzarato 2014.

⁹⁶ “...all we know are assemblages. And the only assemblages are machinic assemblages of desire and collective assemblages of enunciation. No significance, no subjectification: writing to the „th power (all individuated enunciation remains trapped within the dominant significations, all signifying desire is associated with dominated subjects). An assemblage, in its multiplicity, necessarily acts on semiotic flows, material flows, and social flows simultaneously...” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 22-23).

⁹⁷ Lazzarato 2014.

leadership and other white myths, on its surface, presents a dichotomy of signifying subjection (the political narrative spoken and given in subtitles) and asignifying movement (the images the video comprises). But similarly to *Until the quiet comes*, the video's suspension of the binary between self- and other-movement spills over to this initial formal preparation. Ultimately, its explicit political subjectivation notwithstanding, *On the black leadership and other white myths* suggests a movement that suspends the binary of political subjectivation and machinic enslavement—the assembly of “free wills,” versus the inclusive disjunction of component nodes or individuals, in which only the palliative measure of the ethical remains in the place of politics.⁹⁸ In both these works, the respective suspension gestures towards a new materiality (or, most immediately, a new “signaletic material”⁹⁹), and an accompanying (anti-political, anti-ethical) force of antagonism.

To return to an understanding of movement based in the contemporary interpretation of quantum mechanics, space and time are manifested via the “interaction” between quanta of gravity. The collision of quanta create space, while time amounts to the “change” this emergent spatial-relationality enacts, or the mere “counting” of these interactions. As one quantum physicist puts it, “[t]ime, in a sense, ceases to exist.”¹⁰⁰ But in another sense, the quantum field theory conception of time is very close to Deleuze's own conception of non-chronological time as the virtual field of pure potentiality and its constant augmentation of dimensions via actualization.¹⁰¹ Like actualizations of the field of the virtual, the indeterminate-probabilistic collisions of quanta—that is to say, their antinomial discrete-continuous movement—constitutes

⁹⁸ See the discussion of politics and ethics in relation to humanism and binarism, or the One and *the rule of two*, in the Introduction above.

⁹⁹ See discussion of Deleuze's understanding of cinema in Chapter 2 above.

¹⁰⁰ Rovelli 2017, 178.

¹⁰¹ Deleuze 1994, 81.

the emergence of “[t]ime..., like space, from the quantum gravitational field.”¹⁰² The movement of Storyboard P’s character in *Until the quiet comes* can be understood as working *against* this creation of spacetime. As he moves through the alley towards the street and the car in which he makes his exit, visually suspending the discrete and continuous via his im/possible motion, narratively suspending the discrete states of life and death with an after-death/after-life motion, all diegetically without colliding or engaging the gaze of other bodies—bodies/particles/waves that *don’t* collide—the image undoes the movement that produces space and time, life and relationality itself.

The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben is one of few contemporary thinkers to critically engage movement in its social or political sense (i.e. *social movements*, *political movements*) outside of sociological methodologies, and to link physical and political movement materially, without recourse to metaphor.¹⁰³ Agamben addresses the meaning of “movement” insofar as the term has been central to radical politics (both leftist and on the right) over the twentieth century while remaining, largely, aporetically undefined within political thought. According to Agamben, the term first surfaced around the July Revolution of 1830 France, where the *partie du mouvement* was positioned against the *partie du l’ordre*, indicating a dialectical opposition formulated twenty years later by the German Lorenz Von Stein. Stein, in his *The History of Social Movement in France* (1850), characterizes movement as “the expression of the dynamic forces of society” against “the static and legal element” of the state.

¹⁰² Rovelli 2017, 176.

¹⁰³ Agamben, 2005.

Next in Agamben's history of the term, Hannah Arendt makes a similar observation a century later, analyzing how both the right and left develop movements at an accelerated rate immediately before and after the first World War, in opposition to established parties on both sides that are undergoing pronounced crisis; "Fascism and Nazism [and Communism] always define themselves as movements first and only secondly as parties" (Agamben). Further, the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt theorizes that within his conception of the tripartite articulation of state, movement, and people, "the movement becomes the decisive political concept when the democratic concept of the people, as a political body, is in demise" (Agamben). Agamben rightly concludes that this description obtains for historical leftist politics as well as for the history of twentieth-century fascism (and it is not difficult to see its applicability to contemporary neoliberal *biopolitical* contexts).

Here, Agamben articulates his own uneasiness in working with the thought of a twentieth century jurist whose "identification with racism" and "co-responsibility with Nazism" is well known. For in Schmitt's account, the movement can itself become political, and thereby take up its role vis-à-vis the un-political or de-politicized body of the people, via the assignation of an "internal caesura" to that body: the *internal enemy* of racism. Agamben takes the structure of this fascist movement as the blueprint for contemporary political contexts that, from his perspective, have evolved to lack the explicit racist character of the Nazis: "The movement decides on the unpolitical. It can be racial, but today it can also often be a function of the management or government of the unpolitical element which is the population, the biological body of humankind and peoples that need governing."¹⁰⁴ Here, Agamben characteristically ignores the essential racial and racist characteristic of modern (antiblack) biopolitics, equating and limiting racism to

¹⁰⁴ Agamben 2005.

Nazism and maintaining a willful ignorance towards the monumental history and relevance of antiblack violence to the formation and development of biopolitical regimes and apparatuses.¹⁰⁵

Notwithstanding this foundational lapse in thought, Agamben's attempt is to trace movement's genealogy from the period of modern politics and classical fascism to the contemporary conjuncture, and thus to attempt a kind of rehabilitation that would render the concept appropriate and usable for contemporary leftist politics—ostensibly, post-Autonomist Italian leftism in its most recognized guises of anti-globalization and the associated *movement of movements*.¹⁰⁶ In order to “rethink the concept of movement in relation to [contemporary] biopolitics,” and specifically in relation to *the multitude*—the central concept of post-autonomist Italian political philosophy¹⁰⁷—Agamben has recourse to Aristotle's theorization of movement as *kinesis*. In Aristotle's conception, movement functions in the context of the dynamic between *power* and *act*, or potentiality and actualization. But rather than the passage from the former to the latter, rather than the transformation of potentiality into *an* actual, Aristotle understands movement here as an *actual potentiality*, “the actuality of that which exists potentially,”¹⁰⁸ or as Agamben has it, “the act of a power as power.”

It is worth noting that earlier in his *Physics*, Aristotle defines *kinesis* as the persistence of a subject through change of position with respect to two *termini*.¹⁰⁹ This conception of *discrete*

¹⁰⁵ See Sexton and Copeland 2003, and Weheliye 2014.

¹⁰⁶ In the transcribed talk I have been citing and quoting from, Agamben is explicitly addressing interlocutors “who are here today (Toni Negri, Luca Casarini ...).” Toni Negri's role within the movements mentioned above is central to the latter's European perspective. Luca Cassarini is an Italian activist and author who was involved in the *Tute Bianche* movement. For an introductory perspective on anti-globalization and the “movement of movements,” see Mertes 2004.

¹⁰⁷ See Negri 2000, Hardt and Negri 2000 and 2004, Virno 2003, Agamben 2015.

¹⁰⁸ Waterfield 1999, 57 (*Physics III*, A: 201a10-11).

¹⁰⁹ *Physics* 1.7.

movement unsatisfactorily neglects any thought of movement or change itself, thereby making necessary this theorization of continuous movement/change.¹¹⁰ The antimony of discrete and continuous movement is thus contained within Aristotle's *Physics*. Likewise, over various texts, Aristotle appropriates Plato's idea of the self-mover into an antinomy of self- and other-movement contained in the conjunction of different (self- and other-moving) parts as the moving subject (animal and human). In both these cases, Aristotle characteristically attempts a reconciliation or resolution of binary oppositions, ultimately assimilating them into what is intended to be a universal system. Agamben, in his radicalization of this Aristotelian procedure, enthusiastically inherits the same binary oppositions. But instead of devising reconciliations, he unfolds these oppositions into paradoxes, caesurae that ground life and politics in an anomalous, yet immanent, openness (the political as constituted via the absence of direction and *érgon*).

Agamben recalls Aristotle's *kinesis*—an actual potentiality as such, incomplete and without *telos* (contra Aquinas's adjustment of the concept of motion as a *reduction* from potentiality to actuality)—and reframes it from a static concept into something ontologically productive: “movement is the *constitution* of a power as power” (emphasis added). The difference here is subtle: from Aristotle's *movement as actual potentiality*, Agamben's *movement as actualization of potentiality itself* (not to be confused with actualization of a mere potential). This shift from *actual* to *actualizing* suits Agamben's project, furnishing a metaphysical-material basis for the multitude's self-arrogation or auto-genesis of potentiality to itself (and there is nothing incompatible between the two definitions—there is no logical deterrent to *adding* Agamben's version to Aristotle's: as an *actualizing* potentiality, movement always [also] constitutes itself as an *actual* potentiality, and vice versa). In other words, in modifying

¹¹⁰ Aristotle, of course, strives to prioritize continuity.

Aristotle's concept of *kinesis* in this short text, Agamben introduces an idea that exceeds the common sense understanding of *movement* as physical displacement; by unravelling the meaning of the Greek term *kinesis*, which is translated as both *movement* and *change*, Agamben suggests a definition of (physical) movement as the self-constitution of the capacity for change. This resonates strikingly with contemporary quantum-theoretical accounts of motion as outlined above. And although his intention is to think *movement* in a properly political sense, the application of this formulation to physical movement implies the opening up of political possibilities at the most basic levels of material life.¹¹¹

With respect to the real role of political movements, Agamben's refinement renders movement—in opposition to order—as immanent, contra both Schmitt's description of a mechanism to catalyze the otherwise non-political people and the sociological description of an outward manifestation of the people's interiority. “[W]e cannot think of movement as external or autonomous in relation to the multitude or the people. It can never be the subject of a decision, organization, direction of the people, or the element of politicization of the multitude or the people.” The caesura that is immanent to (the) movement requires no internal enemy; rather, (the) movement itself constitutes the caesura, and is immanent to the becoming of the multitude; (the) movement is the actualization of “means without ends,”¹¹² it is the self-constitution of pure

¹¹¹ I owe this formulation to Phillip Thurtle, who has impressed upon me the need to think movement outside of displacement, or rather to think beyond movement (as displacement) to *change* or *transformation* as the ground of life. I am not at all sure that he will find the present reading of Agamben convincing, given that it implies an exceptional break with Agamben's more influential work on *bios* and *zoe*—a break that the philosopher himself does not posit or suggest in the text—that explicitly denies the presence of the political within the biological. No doubt, I am here reading a marginal text against the grain.

¹¹² This is the title of a collection of Agamben's essays that contains an elaboration of his thinking on politics' immanent openness, and its closure or limit, its being assigned a *telos*, *érgon*, etc., as characteristically fascist and/or capitalist.

capacity—pure insofar as it lacks *telos* (end) and *érgon* (task, result, work). Movement is therefore “the impossibility, indefiniteness and imperfection of every politics.” Agamben’s theorization of movement thus lends another dimension to our analysis of the antiblack prohibition of movement.

When this constitution of potentiality plays at the level of real politics, as the ongoing opening of the political, then its antiblack prohibition is structured as the withholding of politics *tout court*, directly; it is through the prohibition of movement to blackness that the “unfinished, unaccomplished act” of politics as potentiality itself is deprived its (black) actuality. *On the black leadership and other white myths* and *Until the quiet comes*, in their suspension and dissolution—rather than reconciliation *or* ungrounding—of the constituent antinomies of movement, illustrate the limit of Agamben’s radicalization of politics. As elaborated above, these works present the immanent antiblackness of precisely the ongoing, open movement that Agamben approaches and refounds via his caesurization of Aristotelian binaries; the *opening* of politics always also marks the closing off of politics to blackness, the domination of blackness through prohibition as fundamental accumulation. As movement’s unthought, this insight remains beyond the limit of Agamben’s ‘limit concepts’. Moreover, as they gesture towards a *different* movement, of immanent antagonism towards the movement(s) that constitute bodies and world, these works present a (political) movement immanently against “every politics,” against every (political) opening and closing.

If politics is grounded in the opening of power’s self-constitution, the auto-actualization of capacity as such, then it too will be suspended—that is, destroyed—by the movement of black motion, black movement, in its refusal of the movement, politics, and life that has been refused in antiblack prohibition. Against movement, against the *movement of movements* and all

movements to come, black motion moves us past all this fundamental accumulation and its complications—the faculties, the self, the species, the political and the ethical. Black motion moves us past this all.

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