



The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism

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Such gatherings are always haunted by a sense that violence and captivity are the grammar and ghosts of our every gesture.

This is where performance meets ontology.

Frank B. Wilderson, III, "Grammar and Ghosts"

What's at stake is fugitive movement in and out of the frame, bar, or whatever externally imposed social logic—a movement of escape, the stealth of the stolen that can be said...to break every enclosure. This fugitive movement is stolen life, and its relation to law is reducible neither to simple interdiction nor bare transgression.

Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness"

I.

In what is his finest role, but also his most distressing, the legendary Sidney Poitier plays one Virgil Tibbs, a Philadelphia police detective in transit from an out-of-state visit to his mother's residence, in Norman Jewison's Academy Award-winning 1967 film, *In the Heat of the Night*. The indomitable Mr. Tibbs has been commandeered by the police chief of Sparta, Mississippi, to solve the murder of Philip Colbert, a Chicago industrialist whose business plan for the development of the local economy has now been jeopardized by his untimely death. Chief Gillespie has justice on his mind, to be sure, but also the rate of unemployment of his rural working-class white constituency. Closing the case to the satisfaction of the industrialist's widow ensures the job creation essential to the maintenance of law and order on *this* side of the tracks. Identifying a black perpetrator (I was about to write "suspect" but use of that term would require a presumption of innocence not afforded here) ensures that individualized disorder stays on *that* side of the tracks. It's a two-for-one deal that keeps everything on track and, more importantly, keeps in place the tracks themselves: the built environment of segregation and the mythos of Jim Crow.

[2] The distribution of goods in this universe dovetails with the distribution of guilt, and both proceed along a gradient called race. A rich white man

whose Yankee enterprise was meant to mitigate the frustration and dishonor of free white Southern labor on the centenary of Radical Reconstruction is killed, his wallet lifted. Penny wise and pound foolish, whoever made off with the petty cash is chasing away the capital of foreign direct investment. Exploitation is better than obsolescence here, at the beginning of the end of the short American Century. The culprit, it seems, knows nothing of delayed gratification or collective benefit and so, it stands to reason, it must be a Negro that done it. And since "ours" are more or less accounted for, as it were, the stranger passing through in the heat of the night must be our "man." The logic, being airtight, lands our protagonist behind bars.

[3] Tibbs is released from the jail cell he finds himself in, again, only when his white male "employer" up North tells his white male captor down South that he is, in fact, "working for Mr. Charlie." The transfer of custody is complete only when Leslie Colbert insists in the name of the *real* white patriarch, recently departed, that "the Negro officer" be assigned to the investigation. As it turns out, the captain of industry was knocked upside his head by a counter clerk from a nearby diner in need of fee money for his girlfriend's backroom abortion. So, if white criminality first appears in blackface—suit and tie, advanced training, gun and badge, *all* be damned to hell—that white crime stretching desperately across the great class divide tells yet another (aspect of the) cover story for entirely related affairs: the

privatization of medicine, the regulation of female sexuality, the punishment of non-marital reproduction—the whole setup of a pay-as-you-go society beset by a narrowly moralistic reading of the Christian legacy. Taken together, this chain of events, in which shit falls down with the force of gravity, might otherwise be known as a favorable business climate—meaning that maybe our assailant hit the right target after all. What is most relevant to our present engagement, however, is the pivotal scene in which Tibbs uncovers the final clue: “A man’s name.” Tibbs is interrogating Mama Caleba (played by the great Beah Richards), the black woman whose informal and affective labor stands in place of a public health care system as LBJ’s fated War on Poverty false starts a full generation after FDR’s New Deal. Snubbed at every turn, harassed, threatened, demeaned and assaulted by every single white person considered to be a lead in the case, Tibbs now leans in close and says to his elder female counterpart:

Tibbs: Now listen. Hear me good, Mama, please. Don’t make me have to send *you* to jail.

Mama Caleba: A lot you care!

Tibbs: There’s white time in jail, and colored time. The worst kind you can do is colored time.

And so “colored time” enters this drama, “this maniacal tale emerging at the century’s apex of black radicalism” (Sexton 2009: 44), with the force of dread: interminable, perhaps even incalculable, stalled time. And it enters

the drama as a seemingly intramural affair, across the conflicted relational aspirations of male and female gender, as a form of strife and striving at cross-purposes internal to the black (radical) tradition.¹ This projected image of black masculinity inscribed, impossibly, in the function of the police power is maneuvering within the claustrophobic space between the law and its extra-legal supplement and leveraging against a black female and feminist sexual politics a threat of incarceration which it is neither authorized to enlist nor armed to enforce. Nonetheless, in desperation, this captive of an everyday, social incarceration reaches for a pivot point: the prison within the prison, a *solitary* confinement. This is the slow time of captivity, the dilated time of the event horizon, the eternal time of the unconscious, the temporality of atomization.

[4] If there is a leitmotif to George C. Wolfe's 1985 masterpiece, *The Colored Museum*, then this just might be it. Normal Jean tells us, for instance, in a late scene entitled, "Permutations," that "nuthin' really ever ends" and certainly not the past, not *this* past. Indeed, we learn in advance of the script proper, right there in the stage direction, that this education in black life that everyone must learn is an experience for which "there is no intermission." Benjamin's famous "time of the now" signifies peculiarly in this memorial venue. In place of the interval, or the break, or the mark of punctuation, there is a tenacious continuity, a historical continuum, across

eleven moving exhibits, a dirty dozen; not cessation or interruption of historical flow but persistence of historical force, persistence *in* and *as* permutation. But how, then, does one mark time and think historicity, how does one engage the iterability of the performative, if nothing ends? How to orient or make sense of lived experience, the lived experience of the black no less, without break or interval or punctuation in the fact of (anti)blackness? Dance to “the music of the madness,” declares Topsy in the final number, for there is freedom and freedom is there, a mad freedom there where there is none, in our unending, uninterrupted captivity in the colored museum, in the baggage we *do* claim, in the pain we can’t live inside of *and* can’t live without. The ultimate refrain, then: “THERE’S MADNESS IN ME AND THAT MADNESS SETS ME FREE.” Altogether, the ensemble repeats and recites and recounts. But what is this madness within, and from whence, and what is the “me” it sets free? It is undoubtedly true that the worst kind of time in jail you can do is colored time. But perhaps, as Topsy et al. testify, “freedom is in unfreedom as the trace of the resistance that constitutes constraint” (Moten 2007: 318). Perhaps Mr. Tibbs is only half right.

[5] To that end, a few opening questions: What is the nature of a form of being that presents a problem for the thought of being itself? More precisely, what is the nature of a human being whose human being is put into question radically and by definition, a human being whose being human raises the

question of being human at all? Or, rather, whose being is the generative force, historic occasion, and essential byproduct of the question of human being in general? How might it be thought that there exists a being about which the question of its particular being is the condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility for any thought about being whatsoever? What can be said about such a being, and how, if at stake in the question is the very possibility of human being and perhaps even possibility as such? What is the being of a problem?

[6] The formulation of a sustained response to such an inquiry is the province of the field of investigation called black studies, or African American studies, or, more recently, African diaspora studies. And this is the case whether practitioners are working in or across disciplinary formations called literature, history, sociology, or politics. One of the towering figures of that field, W. E. B. Du Bois, moved among those genres of writing across several eras without failing to remark and revise the path he traversed in each case. His legacy, widely cited and yet still dimly understood, includes too many achievements to summarize, but offers at least this crucial insight: that one is not only able to learn about the world while learning intensively about one's local and immediate conditions, but that one cannot learn about the world otherwise. It is, in other words, the exploration of ground, and the discovery of an "originary displacement," that enables the chance for a

genuine encounter with the world in its difference and in its differing (Chandler 2000).

[7] There is among friends and foes alike what seems to be a global imperative to relate to the African American and to African American Studies as well with a permanently didactic tone. The African American, here in the United States, is encouraged to achieve self-transcendence, a graduation from the sense of self that being African American engenders. I say encouraged but we cannot help but hear the euphemism. The assumption at work is that there is nothing to learn here, with the Negro in the colored museum, except that which must be engineered to become truly worldly and cosmopolitan. To read Du Bois, especially after the ongoing theoretical annotations of Nahum Chandler (1996, 2000, 2008), is to understand why there's no place like home.

[8] We might call this outlook or approach—in distinction from and relation to both black studies and African diaspora studies—*global* African American studies. This is an endeavor, or projection, that teaches us all how we might better inhabit multiplicity under general conditions at the global scale for which such inhabitation has become (and perhaps always has been or must be) a necessary virtue. And it does so less through pedagogical instruction than through an exemplary transmission: emulation of a process of learning

through the posing of a question, rather than imitation of a form of being; which is also to say a procedure for reading, for study, for *black* study or, in the spirit of the multiple, for black *studies* ... wherever they may lead. And, contrary to the popular misconception, they do lead *everywhere*. And they do *lead* everywhere, even and especially in their dehiscence.

II.

To speak, as Moten does, of “simple interdiction” and “bare transgression” is interesting phrasing, implying what today must be considered a naïve understanding of law that requires an untenably strict delimitation of inside and out. Yet the idea in the preceding sentence of the second epigraph of law as “frame, bar, or whatever externally imposed social logic” or as even “enclosure” can be read as an involvement with just such an understanding. In a way it cannot be otherwise, since the language of this difference between inside and out—and what will turn out to be a series of differences including life and death, pessimism and optimism, subject and object, object and thing, thing and case, blacks and blackness, beings and being, and so on—must be used to demonstrate why this language of difference is not what it seems or claims to be. If we could sum it up in advance (which, of course, we cannot really do), we might say that captivity is always an unsettled condition, open to an outside about which it will not know anything and about which it cannot stop thinking, a nervous

system always in pursuit of the fugitive movement it cannot afford to lose and cannot live without, if it is to go on existing in and as a mode of capturing.

[10] In "The Case of Blackness," Moten is concerned with a strife internal to the field formation of black studies, internal, moreover, to the black (radical) tradition that black studies is or seeks out as institutional inscription, a "strife between normativity and the deconstruction of norms" that he argues, persuasively, "is essential not only to contemporary black academic discourse but also to the discourses of the barbershop, the beauty shop, and the bookstore" (Moten 2008: 178). Put slightly differently, there is a strife within the black (radical) tradition between "radicalism (here understood as the performance of a general critique of the proper)" and a "normative striving against the grain of the very radicalism from which the desire for norms is derived" (Moten 2008: 177).ⁱⁱ If radicalism gives rise to the desire for norms, like a river from source water or a tree from roots, and if the general critique of the proper gives rise to the desire for propriety (in the fullest sense of the term) and not vice versa, then our prevailing notion of critique—and the forms and sources of our critical activity—is put profoundly into question, and, I think, rightly so. It would mean, at the very least, that we could not, as Nahum Chandler ably demonstrates, analytically presuppose "the system in which the subordination takes place," in this case

the system of racial slavery, and then insert the subjects or objects of that system “into this pre-established matrix to engage in their functional articulation of the permutations prescribed therein” (Chandler 2000: 261). Instead, we would have to account for “the *constitution* of the general system or structure” and not just its *operational* dynamics (ibid, emphasis added).ⁱⁱⁱ Moten finds examples of this prevailing notion of critique in a certain moment of Fanon and, consequently, in a citation and elaboration or resonance of Fanon in a 2003 article, “Raw Life,” that I co-authored with Huey Copeland for the journal *Qui Parle* (Sexton & Copeland 2003). There are other references in Moten’s piece, less perceptible, to an interview with Saidiya Hartman conducted by Frank B. Wilderson, III for the same issue under the title, “The Position of the Unthought” (Hartman 2003). There are references, by extension, to Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection* (1997) and *Lose Your Mother* (2007) and to Wilderson’s *Red, White and Black* (2008), as well as to some of the sources that the latter draws upon in his own formulation: Kara Keeling’s *The Witch’s Flight* (2007), David Marriott’s *On Black Men* (2000), Achille Mbembe’s *On the Postcolony* (2001). All of these works are addressed to the extent that they are said to share “an epistemological consensus broad enough to include Fanon, on the one hand, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, on the other—encompassing formulations that might be said not only to characterize but also to initiate and continually re-

initialize the philosophy of the human sciences” (Moten 2008: 188).^{iv} That’s curious company, of course, but that’s precisely the point.

[11] In the same vein, and based on a reading of “raw life” as a synonym rather than an opening toward another frame of reference, Moten rails against what he sees in “a certain American reception of Agamben” as a “critical obsession with bare life” that “fetishizes the bareness of it all” (Moten 2008: 216 fn. 6).^v What is unattended or forgotten in this “constant repetition of bare life,” which is how Moten reads this troubled and troubling reading of Fanon *avec* Agamben, is an engagement with Agamben’s (affirmative) notion of “form of life.” And here one is unfaithful to the best of Agamben if one’s theorization “separates life from the form of life,” just as one is unfaithful to the best of Foucault if one overlooks his “constant and unconcealed assumptions of life’s fugitivity” in support of a mistaken conviction that misattributes to the great French historian and political philosopher a thesis about the absoluteness of power (ibid). What links these two observations—a strife internal to black studies and a failure in the understanding of power—is a relation of mutual implication. A central point of “The Case of Blackness” obtains in a caution against and a correction of the tendency to depart from the faulty premise of black pathology and thereby carry along the discourse being criticized within the assumptions of the critique. If one misunderstands the nature of power in this way, then

one will more than likely assume or, at least, agree to the pathology of blackness and vice versa. Chandler might identify this entanglement less with a problem of attitude and more with an error of judgment. Wilderson's concurrence with the spirit of this gambit would, in turn, warn against the tendency to "fortify and extend the interlocutory life of widely accepted political common sense" and its theoretical underpinnings (Wilderson 2008: 36). However, before we adjudicate whether the authors of "Raw Life" or the dossier of articles that it introduces or, for that matter, Fanon himself truly suffer from "an explicatory velocity that threatens to abolish the distance between—which is also to say the nearness of" a whole range of conceptual pairs requiring a finer attunement to "their difference and its modalities" (Moten 2008: 182)—I think it paramount to adjudicate whether the fact that "blackness has been associated with a certain sense of decay" is, in the first instance, something that we ought to strain against as it strains against us. And even if, in the last instance, we decide to stay the course, need we mobilize a philosophy of life in order to do so?

[12] Being and causality are the watchwords of developments still very much underway in the precincts of contemporary critical theory, and Donna Jones makes a powerful contribution and a key intervention to that end in her recent text, *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy* (2010). In the now perennial skirmishes between the conceptual touchstones of lack and

surplus, negation and affirmation, transcendence and immanence—all of which are at hand and at stake *within* black studies in this and other idioms—she cuts a theoretical bias that moves at times obliquely, at times directly, zooming in to the finest of detail and pulling back to survey the full sweeping vista. What she finds in her careful and daring exploration of the emergence of life philosophy in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe—and its appropriation by leading lights of the contemporaneous but nonsynchronous *Négritude* movement—is not a coherent intellectual history, or even a dialectal movement or a simple contest of meaning, but a profound convolution of thought, a convolution that the current discussion inhabits no less. A convolution arising in the wake of Marx and of Darwin about the nature of nature, about the essence of life and the living insofar as such questions were raised, excitedly or ominously, by the industrialization and urbanization—and the institutional projections of modern science—attendant to a globalizing capitalist world-system in crisis; attendant as well to the twilight of Europe’s global colonial enterprise, in the intermezzo between the international abolitionist movement and what we’ve come to know as the movements for civil rights and decolonization that move in and across the black (radical) tradition.

[13] Looking back with a scrutinizing eye toward Bergson’s 1907 *Creative Evolution* and the milieu of philosophical debate against which it inveighed,

we see with Jones how the sustained effort that garnered the 1927 Nobel Prize in Literature added to this convolution of thought a certain confabulation about life, a life force set against the machine, the mechanical and the mechanistic. What is, in part, so valuable about Jones' research is that it allows us to track the subtle and often muddled distinctions at work on this score in Darwin and his critics and defenders, in Marx and his interlocutors, in Nietzsche, in Bergson—in the whole field of inquiry established by vitalism and its lasting impact on contemporary thought. And shot through this theoretical tangle is the vexed and vexing question: *What is freedom?* This is more than a notion, of course, depending on your vantage. "My mouth shall be the mouth of those calamities that have no mouth," Aimé Césaire writes famously; "my voice the freedom of those who break down in the solitary confinement of despair."

[14] To interrogate "the *racial* discourses of life philosophy" is to demonstrate that the question of life cannot be pried apart from that thorniest of problems: "the problem of the Negro as a problem for thought," that dubious and doubtless "fact of blackness," or what I will call, in yet another register, the social life of social death.^{vi} This is as much an inquiry about the nature of nature as it is about the politics of nature and the nature of politics; in other words, it is metapolitical no less than it is metaphysical. In charting the intellectual prehistory of the theorization of biopolitics, Jones

also forecasts—and reframes—the biotechnological anxiety or euphoria provoked by the prospect of engineered life in our own time *and* the way that prospect is powerfully associated with notions of social, economic, and political possibility. Reading Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault or Agamben cannot remain the same, nor should it, to the degree that we have engaged the tragic-comic complexities of existence in black. Moten might follow, at another pace, the long qualification of vitalism that Jones accomplishes in her text, just as he might read skeptically the implications of an affirmative biopolitics. The question that remains, beyond the immediate negotiation even as it continues to loop back to it, is whether a politics, which is also to say an aesthetics, that affirms (social) life can avoid the thanatological dead end if it does not will its own (social) death. Marriott might call this, with Fanon, “the need to affirm affirmation through negation...not as a moral imperative...but as a psychopolitical necessity” (Marriott 2007: 273 fn. 9).^{vii}

[15] In this article, I am only attempting to preface the exploration of a tension emergent in the field of black studies, not unrelated to the strife that occupies Moten’s own writing, regarding the theoretical status of the concept of social death. It goes without saying that this sort of prefatory note implicates how we might formulate notions of social life as well and, in a fundamental way, the tension regards the emphasis on or orientation toward life or death, or the thought of the *relation* between the two, as it plays out

within a global history of slavery and freedom. In fact, social death might be thought of as another name for slavery and an attempt to think about what it comprises, and social life, then, another name for freedom and an attempt to think about what it entails. Though slavery is an ancient institution with provenance in nearly every major form of human society, we are concerned here with the more specific emergence of freedom—as economic value, political category, legal right, cultural practice, lived experience—from the *modern* transformation of slavery into what Robin Blackburn terms the “Great Captivity” of the New World: the convergence of the private property regime and the invention of racial blackness (which is to say the invention of antiblackness in the invention of whiteness, which cannot but become immediately a more generalized nonblackness).^{viii} The meditation is at once structural and historical and seeks to displace a binary understanding of structure and history in any case, asking what the most robust understanding of slavery might consist in and, on that basis, how the practice of writing history and of inhabiting or being inhabited by that writing might proceed. We want to think about what makes New World slavery what it is in order to pursue that future anteriority which, being both within it and irreducible to it, will have unmade it, and that anterior futurity which always already unmakes it.

[16] Orlando Patterson first developed the concept in question for an academic audience in his encyclopedic 1982 survey, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, and surprisingly little elaboration followed in the wake of his intellectual contribution and the minor controversy it spurred. That debate, played out in the pages of book reviews and, sometime thereafter, in passing references to the earlier work in scholarly articles and books, generally invoked a caricature of the concept as already debunked. Not that there isn't much in Patterson to worry about, especially if one were interested to examine how aspects of the neoliberalism he would eventually come to embrace are embedded in prototypical form in his *magnum opus* and in earlier writings from *before* the commencement of the Reagan/Bush era proper. Consider, on this score, comments by V.P. Franklin (at this writing President's Chair and Distinguished Professor of History and Education at the University of California, Riverside) in his review for the *Journal of Negro History*:

The large gap in our knowledge of global slavery "from the perspective of the dominated" still needs to be filled. Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death* provides us with a great deal of information on the legal status of slaves and freedpeople from ancient times to the present, but his lack of knowledge of ancient and modern languages and his dependence upon secondary sources limits the value of the work for researchers

who have moved beyond “the World the Slaveholders Made” to an analysis of what it was like “To Be A Slave.” And his inadequate and outdated discussion of slave life and culture in this country makes the work of questionable value to historians and social scientists interested in the Afro-American experience in the United States. (Franklin 1983: 215-6)

[17] The negative estimation is two-fold: on the one hand, Patterson is unable and uninterested in writing history from the perspective of the dominated (which is a way of saying that he is unable and uninterested in writing history *for* the dominated); on the other, Patterson nonetheless takes the liberty of speaking about the dominated, and the result is travesty. Franklin draws up a review article Patterson penned for the pages of *The New Republic*, while at work on the study that would become *Slavery and Social Death*, in order to establish in Patterson an acute condescension toward the career of the African American in the United States that may suggest something about the conceptual framework more generally. In registering profound disagreement with one of the principal arguments of Eugene Genovese’s Bancroft Award-winning 1974 study, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, Patterson denounces the “Afro-American cultural system” as a “limited creed—indulgently pedestrian and immediate in its concerns, lacking in prophetic idealism, a total betrayal of the profound eschatology and heroic

ideals of their African ancestors” (quoted in *ibid*: 215). Patterson goes on: “It was not a heritage to be passed on. Like their moral compromises, this was a social adaptation with no potential for change, a total adjustment to the demands of plantation life and the authoritarian dictates of the masters” (*ibid*). And the fatal blow: “A people, to deserve the respect of their descendents, must do more than merely survive spiritually and physically. There is no intrinsic value in survival, no virtue in the reflexes of the cornered rat” (*ibid*). Though I’ve been called worse, one can understand with little effort why an eminent scholar writing in the *Journal of Negro History* (Franklin incidentally is now editor of the renamed *Journal of African American History*) might chafe against the suggestion that the masthead of said academic venue contained an oxymoron. We will call Patterson’s verdict here an instance of the universal tendency to debasement in the sphere of analysis, insofar as that analysis posits the presupposition of its object. One might think, with Franklin, that a shift in perspective from slaveholder to slave slips the knot of the hermeneutic circle. But the question of the constitution of the system (or whole), Chandler reminds us above, is also the question of the constitution of those subjects or objects (or parts) whose functional distribution plots the operations of the system.

[18] Whereas Patterson’s detractors take to task his historical sociology for its inability and unwillingness to fully countenance the agency of the

perspective and self-predicating activity of the slave, his supporters (or those engaging his work through generous critique) do not fail to remark, even if they rarely highlight, that what is most stunning is the fact that the concept of social death cannot be generalized. It is indexed to slavery and it does not travel. That is, there are problems in the formulation of the relation of power from which slavery arises and there are problems in the formulation of the relation of this relation of power to other relations of power. This split reading was evident immediately, as indicated in a contemporaneous review by Ross K. Baker (professor of political science at Rutgers University and editor of a 1970 collected volume, *The Afro American*). Baker observes, against the neoconservative backlash politics of “angry white males” and the ascendance of another racialized immigration discourse alternating, *post-civil* rights, between model minority and barbarians at the gate: “The mere fact of slavery makes black Americans different. No amount of tortured logic could permit the analogy to be drawn between a former slave population and an immigrant population, no matter how low-flung the latter group. Indeed, had the Great Society programs persisted at their highest levels until today, it is doubtful that the mass of American blacks would be measurably better off than they are now” (Baker 1983: 21). Baker’s refusal of analogy in the wake of his reading of Patterson is pegged to a certain realization “brought home,” as he puts it, “by the daunting force of Patterson’s description of the bleak totality of the slave

experience" (ibid). I want to hold onto this perhaps unwitting distinction that Baker draws between the mere *fact* of slavery, on the one hand, and the daunting force of description of the slave *experience*, on the other. In this distinction, Baker echoes both the problem identified by Moten in his reading of my co-authored piece as a certain conflation of the fact of blackness with the lived experience of the black (Moten 2008: 179) and the problem identified by Hartman as a certain conflation of witness and spectator before the scenes of subjection at the heart of slavery (Hartman 1997: 4). I concede that Moten's delineation is precise (though its pertinence is in doubt) and that it encourages a more sophisticated theoretical practice, but Hartman's conclusion, it seems to me, is also accurate in a sort of noncontradictory coincidence or overlap with Moten that situates black studies in a relation field that is still generally undertheorized. Rather than approaching (the theorization of) social death and (the theorization of) social life as an "either/or" proposition, then, why not attempt to think them as a matter of "both/and"? Why not articulate them through the supplementary logic of the copula? In fact, there might be a more radical rethinking available yet.

[19] In recent years, social death has emerged from a period of latency as a notion useful for the critical theory of racial slavery as a matrix of social, political, and economic relations surviving the era of abolition in the

nineteenth century, “a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago” (Hartman 2007: 6). This “afterlife of slavery,” as Saidiya Hartman terms it, challenges practitioners in the field to question the prevailing understanding of a post-emancipation society and to revisit the most basic questions about the structural conditions of antiblackness in the modern world. To ask, in other words, what it means to speak of “the tragic continuity between slavery and freedom” or “the incomplete nature of emancipation”, indeed to speak of about a type of living on that survives after a type of death. For Wilderson, the principal implication of slavery’s afterlife is to warrant an intellectual disposition of “afro-pessimism,” a qualification and a complication of the assumptive logic of black cultural studies in general and black performance studies in particular, a disposition that posits a political ontology dividing the Slave from the world of the Human in a constitutive way. This critical move has been misconstrued as a negation of the agency of black performance, or even a denial of black social life, and a number of scholars have reasserted the earlier assumptive logic in a gesture that hypostatizes afro-pessimism to that end.^{ix}

[20] What I find most intriguing about the timbre of the argument of “The Case of Blackness,” and the black optimism it articulates against a certain construal of afro-pessimism, is the way that it works away from a discourse of black pathology only to swerve right back into it as an ascription to those

found to be taking up and holding themselves in “the stance of the pathologist” in relation to black folks.^x I say this not only because there is, in this version of events, a recourse to psychoanalytic terminology (“fetishization,” “obsession,” “repetition,”), but also because there is at the heart of the matter a rhetorical question that establishes both the bad advice of a wild analysis and a tacit diagnosis affording a certain speaker’s benefit: “So why is it repressed?” The “it” that has been afflicted by the psychopathology of obsessional neurosis is the understanding, which is also to say the celebration, of the ontological priority or previousness of blackness relative to the antiblackness that establishes itself against it, a priority or previousness that is also termed “knowledge of freedom” or, *pace* Chandler, comprehension of “the constitutive force of the African American subject(s)” (Chandler 2000: 261).

[21] What does not occur here is a consideration of the possibility that something might be unfolding in the project or projections of afro-pessimism “knowing full well the danger of a kind of negative reification” associated with its analytical claims to the paradigmatic (Moten 2004: 279). That is to say, it might just be the case that an object lesson in the phenomenology of the thing is a gratuity that folds a new encounter into older habits of thought through a reinscription of (black) pathology that reassigns its cause and relocates its source without ever really getting inside it.^{xi} In a way, what

we're talking about relates not to a disagreement about "unthought positions" (and their de-formation) but to a disagreement, or discrepancy, about "unthought dispositions" (and their in-formation). I would maintain this insofar as the misrecognition at work in the reading of that motley crew listed in the ninth footnote regards, perhaps ironically, the performative dimension or signifying aspect of a "generalized impropriety" so improper as to appear as the same old propriety returning through the back door.^{xii} Without sufficient consideration of the gap between statement and enunciation here, to say nothing of quaint notions like context or audience or historical conjuncture, the discourse of afro-pessimism, even as it approaches otherwise important questions, can only seem like a "tragically neurotic" instance of "certain discourse on the relation between blackness and death" (Moten 2007: 9).^{xiii}

[22] Fanon and his interlocutors, or what appear rather as his fateful adherents, would seem to have a problem embracing black social life because they never really come to believe in it, because they cannot acknowledge the social life from which they speak and of which they speak—as negation and impossibility—as their own (Moten 2008: 192). Another way of putting this might be to say that they are caught in a performative contradiction enabled by disavowal. I wonder, however, whether things are even this clear in Fanon and the readings his writing might facilitate. Lewis

Gordon's sustained engagement finds Fanon situated in an ethical stance grounded in the affirmation of blackness in the historic antiblack world. In a response to the discourse of multiracialism emergent in the late twentieth-century United States, for instance, Gordon writes, following Fanon, that "there is no way to reject the thesis that there is something wrong with being black beyond the willingness to 'be' black – in terms of convenient fads of playing blackness, but in paying the costs of antiblackness on a global scale. Against the raceless credo, then, racism cannot be rejected without a dialectic in which humanity experiences a blackened world" (Gordon 1997: 67). What is this willingness to 'be' black, of choosing to be black affirmatively rather than reluctantly, that Gordon finds as the key ethical moment in Fanon?

[23] Elsewhere, in a discussion of Du Bois on the study of black folk, Gordon restates an existential phenomenological conception of the antiblack world developed across his first several books: "Blacks here suffer the phobogenic reality posed by the spirit of racial seriousness. In effect, they more than symbolize or signify various social pathologies—they become them. In our antiblack world, blacks *are* pathology" (Gordon 2000: 87). This conception would seem to support Moten's contention that even much radical black studies scholarship sustains the association of blackness with a certain sense of decay and thereby fortifies and extends the interlocutory life

of widely accepted political common sense. In fact, it would seem that Gordon deepens the already problematic association to the level of identity. And yet, this is precisely what Gordon argues is the value and insight of Fanon: he fully accepts the definition of himself as pathological as it is imposed by a world that knows *itself* through that imposition, rather than remaining in a reactive stance that insists on the (temporal, moral, etc.) heterogeneity between a self and an imago originating in culture. Though it may appear counterintuitive, or rather because it is counterintuitive, this acceptance or affirmation is active; it is a willing or willingness, in other words, to pay whatever social costs accrue to being black, to inhabiting blackness, to living a black social life under the shadow of social death. This is not an accommodation to the dictates of the antiblack world. The affirmation of blackness, which is to say an affirmation of pathological being, is a refusal to distance oneself from blackness in a valorization of minor differences that bring one closer to health, to life, or to sociality. Fanon writes in the first chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*, "The Black Man and Language": "A Senegalese who learns Creole to pass for Antillean is a case of alienation. The Antilleans who make a mockery out of him are lacking in judgment" (Fanon 2008: 21). In a world structured by the twin axioms of white superiority and black inferiority, of white existence and black nonexistence, a world structured by a negative categorical imperative—"above all, don't be black" (Gordon 1997: 63)—in this world, the zero degree

of transformation is the turn toward blackness, a turn toward the shame, as it were, that “resides in the idea that ‘I am thought of as less than human’” (Nyong’o 2002: 389).^{xiv} In this we might create a transvaluation of pathology itself, something like an embrace of pathology without pathos.

[24] 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 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 inhabiting it and 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.

III.

Those of us writing in a critical vein in the human sciences often use the phrase "relations of power" and yet we just as often gloss over the complexity of the idea of relation itself, and especially so regarding the relation that relation has with power, or, rather, regarding the way in which power obtains *in* and *as* relation. We are not afraid to say, for instance, that relations of power are complex, but we have less to offer when faced with the stubborn fact that relation itself is complex, that is, does not simply suggest a linkage or interaction between one thing and another, between subjects, say, or between objects, or between subjects and objects, or persons and things. The attention to relation that Christina Sharpe (2010), for instance, sustains across her intellectual enterprise puts pressure on any static notion of each term. This is an interrogation of power in its most intimate dimension. We learn not just that power operates intimately (which it does) or that intimacy is inextricable from the question of power (which it is), but that the relation between the two—when it is brought into view, within earshot, when it enters language—deranges what we mean, or what

we thought we understood, by the former *and* the latter. What is power? What is intimacy? How do we know this at all? How to communicate it? And where or when are these questions, and their relation, posed with greater *force*—political force, psychic force, historical force—than within the precincts of the New World slave estate, and within the time of New World slavery? We still must ask at this late stage, “What is slavery?” The answer, or the address, to this battery of questions, involves a strange and maddening itinerary that would circumnavigate the entire coastline or maritime borders of the Atlantic world, enabling the fabrication and conquest of every interior—bodily, territorial, and conceptual. To address all of this is to speak the name of race *in the first place*, to speak its first word. What is slavery? And what does it mean to us, and for us? What does slavery mean for the very conception of the objective pronoun “us”?

[26] If the intimacy of power suggests the sheer difficulty of difference, the trouble endemic to determining where the white imagination ends and the black imagination begins, then the power of intimacy suggests, with no less tenacity and no less significance, that our grand involvement across the color line is structured like the figure of an envelope, folds folded within folds: a black letter law whose message is obscured, enveloped, turned about, reversed. Here a structure of violence is inscribed problematically in narrative, an inscription that can only struggle and fail to be something

other than a writing-off, or a writing-over. The massive violence that founds and opens a structure of vulnerability, a world-making enjoyment of that violence of enjoyment disappears into the *telos* of resolution, the closure of family romance, the drive for kinship, where insistence replaces imposition. Black rage converts magically to black therapeutics, a white mythology that disavows its points of origin in the theft that creates the crime and its alibi at once. This illegible word, where affect drops away only to remain, is what Sharpe terms "*monstrous intimacy*," "a memory for *forgetting*."^{xv} And what would we do without it? Indeed, what might we do?

[27] What kind of politics might be possible across this gap, as wide as a river, as thin as a veil? It is a powerful misrecognition that enables an understanding of afro-pessimism as moving against black life, in other words, of pathologizing blackness. Blackness is not the pathogen in the afro-pessimist imagination and it is a wonder how one could read it so even as it is no wonder at all. No, blackness is not the pathogen in afro-pessimism, the world is. Not the earth, but the world, and maybe even the whole possibility of and desire for a world. This is not to say that blackness is the cure, either. It is and it isn't. If, as Moten suggests, radicalism is the general critique of the proper and blackness is radicalism in the split difference between experience and fact; then afro-pessimism, in its general critique of the myriad recuperations of the proper at the singular expense of blackness

(blackness in some ways as that expense of the proper) is, in fact, the celebration (of the experience) of blackness as (the) performance (of) study.

[28] This article is an attempt to think through an ambivalence that invests the differentiated field of black studies. Maybe we share it and maybe we don't, or maybe we don't know it, or don't show it. And maybe we can't. But this isn't just a personal story, in any case. It is a meditation on the conditions of an intellectual practice among those that pose the greatest problem for intellectual practice. I have only been able to outline two associated points: 1) the paradigmatic analysis of afro-pessimism and the black optimism of performance studies relate through a set-theoretic difference rather than dialectical opposition or deconstruction; 2) afro-pessimism remains illegible—and unduly susceptible to dismissal—without attending to the economy of enunciation that sustains it and to the discursive-material formation in which it intervenes. That discursive-material formation is global in scale, approximating the terms of “the antiblack world” (Gordon 2000), and that economy of enunciation resists the attenuation of black freedom struggle against the convergence of colorblindness, multiracialism, and what I introduced in a recent article as “people-of-color-blindness” (Sexton 2010a). There is something like a rule of inverse proportion at work here: how radical a reconstruction you seek relates to how fully you regard the absoluteness of power, whether you conceive of the

constituted power of the slave estate as prior or understand it as a reactive apparatus of capture. In short, slavery must be theorized maximally if its abolition is to reach the proper level. The singularity of slavery is the prerequisite of its universality. Otherwise, we succumb to the forces of mitigation that would transform the world through a coalition of a thousand tiny causes.

[29] As a way of stepping into it, again, and of concluding with anticipation, I'll ask directly: Are the epigraphs in contradiction? Do we have here two incommensurable approaches to black studies, or perhaps some other relation? Let us assume, with Wilderson, it is the case that *every* gesture, *every* performance of blackness, *every* act or action, critical or creative, rhetorical or aesthetic, is haunted by this sense of grammar and ghosts, of a structure and a memory of its (still) coming into being through and as violence. Does this haunting imply, much less ensure, that there is not and can be no fugitive movement of escape, as Moten has it? Does afro-pessimism fail to hear the resonance of black optimism? Or might something else be at work. Of course, when Wilderson writes that "performance meets ontology," he is saying quite a bit more than that. Though he is attempting to think the two registers together—the performative and the ontological—he is indicating not so much that ontology is not performative, but rather more so that performativity does not, in fact, have disruptive power at the level or

in the way that it has been theorized to date. More radically still, he is suggesting that this theorization remains insufficiently elaborated. That, at least, is how I read the animating gesture of the intervention and interlocution.

[30] Adjudicating the question may require that this sense of permanent violence, if not the violence itself, become intelligible. But can it be rendered available to thought or even become knowledge? This is Wilderson's intervention: to illuminate the ways in which we do not, cannot, or will not know anything about this violence, the ways in which our analyses miss the paradigm for the instance, the example, the incident, the anecdote. Is this knowledge, or sense, something that operates at the point where thought breaks down, at its limit? Some may chafe at the notion of permanence here, because it seems not to admit of historicity or, more radically, of a certain impossibility of permanence. But we are talking about permanence in the pedestrian sense that something "lasts or remains without *essential* change." It is the logic of change as permutation. The contention arises, then, over what it means to inhabit this permanence and, in related fashion, how it is to be inhabited. Can there be knowledge of a grammar (of suffering), of a structure (of vulnerability)? If so, is it available to articulation, can it be said, or is it an unbearable, unspeakable knowledge? Can it even be experienced as such, expressed, accounted for practically or

theoretically? Or is there only “knowledge of the *experience* of freedom [from grammar, structure, or ghosts], even when that knowledge precedes experience” (Moten 2004: 303)?^{xvi}

[31] This is another way of asking and bringing into the open a question that might otherwise be choked out by a whispering campaign or low-intensity conflict or depoliticizing collegiality: Does (the theorization of) social death negate (the theorization of) social life, and is social life the negation (in theory) of that negation (in theory)? Put differently, does the persistence of a prior—but originally displaced and heterogeneous—(black) social life against the (antiblack) social death that establishes itself against it demand more than the fullness of an account? I’m asking a question of procedure here, of course, but also one of politics. Must one always think blackness to think antiblackness, as it were, a blackness that is against and before antiblackness, an anti-antiblackness that is also an ante-antiblackness? Can one gain adequate understanding of antiblackness—its history and politics, its mythos, its psychodynamics—if one does not appreciate how blackness, so to speak, calls it into being? Can one mount a critique of antiblackness without also celebrating blackness? Can one pursue the object of black studies without also affirming its aim? Moreover, can one pursue the former without doing so in the name of and as the latter?

[32] What I take to be a certain aggression, or perhaps anxiety, in the deconstruction of the structure of vulnerability and the grammar of suffering that undergird afro-pessimism is not a sign of pathology in the moral register, but rather a matter of the apprehension of psychic—and political—reality in the properly psychoanalytic sense: an effect of misrecognition, a problem of register and symbolization, an optical illusion or echo that dissimulates the source and force of the propagation. It is a confusion of one for two and two for one, the projection of an internal differentiation onto an external surface, the conversion of impossibility into prohibition. Wilderson's is an analysis of the law in its operation as "police power and racial prerogative both under and after slavery" (Wagner 2009: 243). So too is Moten's analysis, at least that just-less-than-half of the intellectual labor committed to the object of black studies as critique of (the antiblackness of) Western civilization. But Moten is just that much more interested in how black social life steals away or escapes from the law, how it frustrates the police power and, in so doing, calls that very policing into being *in the first place*. The policing of black freedom, then, is aimed less at its dreaded prospect, apocalyptic rhetoric notwithstanding, than at its irreducible precedence. The logical and ontological priority of the unorthodox self-predicating activity of blackness, the "improvisatory exteriority" or "improvisational immanence" that blackness is, renders the law dependent upon what it polices. This is not the noble agency of resistance. It is a

reticence or reluctance that we might not know if it were not pushing back, so long as we know that this pushing back is really a pushing forward. So you see, in this perverse sense, black social death is black social life. The object of black studies is the aim of black studies. The most radical negation of the antiblack world is the most radical affirmation of a blackened world. Afro-pessimism is “not but nothing other than” black optimism.^{xvii}

ⁱ This notion is an amalgamation of Cedric Robinson’s well-known theorization of “the black radical tradition” in his classic text, *Black Marxism*, and the concept of “the black tradition” theorized in Bryan Wagner’s recent text (indebted to Robinson), *Disturbing the Peace*. Wagner’s definition of blackness and his delineation of the distinction and connection between blackness and blacks are instructive for our understanding of the complexity of the appearance of Poitier/Tibbs as “the predicament of the ex-slave” above and the discussion of “existence without standing in the world system” below, so I quote it here at great length: “Perhaps the most important thing we have to remember about the black tradition is that Africa and its diaspora are much older than blackness. Blackness does not come from Africa. Rather, Africa and its diaspora become black at a particular stage in their history. It sounds a little strange to put it this way, but the truth of this description is widely acknowledged. *Blackness is an adjunct to racial slavery*. No doubt, we will continue to discuss and disagree about the factors that made blackness imaginable as well as the pacing of their influence. That process is quite complex, mixing legal doctrine from ancient slave systems with customs from the history of enslavement between Christians and Muslims to produce *a new amalgam that would become foundational to the modern world*. Blackness is a modern condition that cannot be conceptualized apart from the epochal changes in travel, trade, communication, consumption, industry, technology, taxation, labor, warfare, finance, insurance, government, bureaucracy, science, religion, and philosophy that were together made possible by the European systems of colonial slavery. Due to this complexity, we will likely never be able to say with certainty whether blackness starts before or during the sugar revolution, or consequently whether slavery follows from racism or racism follows from slavery. We can say, however, what blackness indicates: *existence without standing in the modern world system*. To be black is to exist in exchange without being a party to exchange. Being black means belonging to a state that is organized in part by its ignorance of your perspective—a state that does not, that cannot, know your mind. Adapting a formula from the eve of decolonization, we might say that *blackness indicates a situation where you are anonymous to yourself*. Reduced to what would seem its essential trait, blackness is a kind of invisibility.

Taken seriously, these facts about blackness are enough to make problems for anyone who wants to talk about blackness as founding a tradition. Conceptualized not as a shared culture but as *the condition of statelessness*, blackness would seem to deny the perspective that is necessary to communicate a tradition. To speak as black, to assert blackness as a perspective in the world, or to argue the existence of the black world is to deny the one feature by which blackness is known. *Because blackness is supernumerary, it*

is impossible to speak as black without putting yourself into an unavoidable tension with the condition you would claim. Speaking as black can mitigate your condition, or make you into an exception or credit to your condition, but *it cannot allow you to represent your condition*, as speaking is enough to make you unrepresentative. You can be clean, articulate, and also black, but to be all these things at once is to admit to a life scored by its division (or its doubleness). From [*Somerset v. Stewart* (1772)], there comes a line of thought that denies these facts on the grounds that individuals are audible to one another in nature before there is a law to intercede between them. The politics in this line is often communicated as a chiasmus about persons made into slaves and slaves made into persons, a trope whose limitation lies in the fact that it takes for granted a term ("person") that is unevenly intelligible in the natural rights lineage that determines what blackness means. By returning to that lineage, and in particular to the symbolic scene where the enemy combatant is made into the slave, *I believe that it is possible to think harder and better about the predicament of the ex-slave, without recourse to the consolation of transcendence*" (Wagner 2009: 1-2, emphases added).

ⁱⁱ This theme is explored throughout Moten's work, from his proleptic commentary in "Music Against the Law of Reading the Future and *Rodney King*" (1994) to his more direct address in "Black Op" (2008b). In the former, he writes: "This entails a radically different conception and enactment of organization—the spatio-temporal generativity in and through which we think those issues fundamental to the possibility of a sense, and alteration, of the world. The music continues to light and sound the form of precisely that organization which we must improvise. That form is improvisation itself, the political direction through the binary and its internal oscillation in the name of a totality which is, itself, the improvisation through the opposition of description and prescription, interpretation and change (61)." Or again: "If the emergence of the discourse of the other is to be fully manifest as truth rather than as an artifact of an all too facile assimilation or an equally simple rejection and submergence, it has to break the law, to break the law of the law, and it has to think in the most rigorous way the question of the future, to move into the future of the tradition's thinking of the future—breaking the laws of narrative and testimony, breaking through the prescriptive force of the hegemony of description, improvising the aporia of idiomaticity, and interrupting the power of disciplinarity. That clues for the movement toward these projects are embedded in texts which are largely neglected outside of the interdiscipline of Afro-American Studies and in cultural practices which remain unthought beyond the boundaries of that interdiscipline, means that for the future ... Afro-American studies remains, today, a necessity" (63 fn. 2). In the latter, he thus marks, in a sort of Freudian tone, a critical distinction, that is not (only) a binary, between the object and the aim of black studies, component parts of what Moten refers to at various points in *In the Break* (2003) as "a freedom drive" (7, 26, 27). Following the lead of Cedric Robinson, Moten describes the object of black studies as Western civilization itself, which is to say that the occupation of black studies is the critique of (the anti-blackness of) Western civilization. Regarding the aim of black studies, Moten writes: "Robinson is equally adamant black studies' critical modalities are driven toward and directed by an aim – the ontological totality and its preservation – that, in all its secret openness, is called blackness" (Moten 2008b: 1744). The preservation of the ontological totality called blackness is not a conservative preservation of an unreconstructed essence, however, but rather an active affirmation, a celebration that continually transforms that which it celebrates, repeating with and as difference. "Such articulation," for Moten, "implies and enacts an *unorthodox essentialism* wherein essence and performance are not mutually exclusive" (Moten 2003: 255, emphasis added). The wager and risk of black studies lies in striking the right balance. "Black studies' aim has always been bound up with and endangered by its object. When the prosecutorial gaze that is trained on that object (Western civilization) passes over that aim (blackness, which is not but nothing other than Western civilization), the danger is brutally, ironically

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redoubled" (Moten 2008b: 1744). Because blackness is "not but nothing other than Western civilization," it is always vulnerable to oversight, in the double sense of being overlooked by black studies and of falling within the jurisprudence of black studies. Indeed, in his presentation, "On (Non)Violence" (2010), for a recent symposium on "Law, Violence and the State" at the University of Southern California, Moten remarked to the effect that he always wants his writing to be comprised of "49.99% critique and 50.01% celebration." The aim of black studies should, in other words, cast the shortest shadow upon its object. It is not unimportant that we are dealing here with the value of a minor difference as the desired preponderance is indicated to be minimal, infinitesimal, quantum. Notably, Moten admitted on that occasion that he has yet been able to manage this tipping of the scale.

ⁱⁱⁱ Chandler continues: "The matrix sketched out by the conjoined resourcefulness and limitations of this conceptualization, the aporias that are incessantly produced within it, effectively constitutes what we may call the problematic, the order of questions, that must concern us when we ask about the African American subject" (Chandler 2000: 262). Crucially, Chandler finds that this analytical presupposition characterizes not only those discourses aimed at describing the world of constituted power, but also those pursued "under the guise of recognizing the agency of African Americans in the making of some social text" (ibid: 261). So, for instance, the noted (formerly) Marxist historian, Eugene Genovese, did not escape this problem when his analytic focus shifted from a study of "the world the slaveholders made" (Genovese 1969) to a study of "the world the slaves made" (Genovese 1974). In other words, the topical foci or emphases on the agency of constituted power or the agency of resistance against constituted power are, as it were, two sides of the same analytical coin. On this score, the question before us is, then, to what extent do the analyses under scrutiny actually reproduce this aporia? Might they not be involved in a different order of questions altogether, or perhaps a different inflection of the problematic?

^{iv} Elsewhere, Moten will nominate this consensus "the natural scientific attitude" (Moten 2008: 179) and associate it with "a certain being positive, if not positivism," "the straight-ahead discourse of the clear-eyed," of "that generation of American academic overseers – the non-seers who can't see, because they see so clearly – who constitute the prison guards of a certain understanding of the carceral" (Moten 2008: 216 fn. 6).

^v When Mbembe (2001) describes raw life as "a place and time of half-death – or, if one prefers, half life...a place where life and death are so entangled that it is no longer possible to distinguish them, or to say what is on the side of the shadow or its obverse," he is signaling a critique and a departure from Agamben's bare life which concept requires a counterpart in the form of life in order to account for something like power and resistance (Mbembe 2001: 197). Mbembe indexes a move away from the theory and thematic of hegemony by way of his notion of "conviviality," "the dynamics of domesticity and familiarity, inscribing the dominant and the dominated within the same *episteme*" (ibid: 110) and he will develop this critique and departure in his "Necropolitics" (2003). For a reading of necropolitics that situates the formulation of the concept with respect to the ensemble of questions and assumptive logic imprecisely named afro-pessimism, see Sexton (2010).

^{vi} I am borrowing the phrase "the problem of the Negro as a problem for thought" from Chandler (2008). The "fact of blackness" refers, of course, to Charles Markmann's 1967 English translation of Fanon's famous fifth chapter in *Black Skins, White Masks*, "L'expérience vécue du Noir." Lewis Gordon, Ronald Judy, and Ato Sekyi-Otu have each suggested the title be translated instead as "The Lived Experience of the Black" and note that the Markmann rendering loses almost entirely Fanon's engagement with phenomenology and his central focus on lived experience not as "the objectively given or an event [i.e., as fact], but the process in which objects acquire their status as such for-consciousness" (Judy 1996: 53-4). Richard Philcox follows this suggestion in his 2008 translation. Moten, in turn, is working in the space between the two translations.

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^{vii} On the notion of biopolitics, see generally Lemke (2011) and on affirmative biopolitics, see especially Esposito (2008). Cf. Marriott (2007), especially his "Afterword: Ice Cold." There Marriott writes: "death as lawless violence is the predicament and possibility of who we are and might become, here, now, the tenses through which we belong irreducibly to this time" (234). I want to stress that Marriott would not read Fanon against those aspects of vitalism that link Nietzsche and Bergson to Foucault and Deleuze by way of Heidegger and Derrida, for instance. Rather, Marriott demonstrates how deeply Nietzschean Fanon *already* is, how profoundly driven his writings are—from *Black Skin, White Masks* to *Wretched of the Earth*—by the force of the affirmative. This is true already in Marriott's first book, *On Black Men*, but it is readily discernible in his second book, *Haunted Life*. For a recent and fuller account of these themes in Fanon, see Marriott (2011).

^{viii} "That slaves were sold in Africa or bought by merchants was not new. The novelty of New World slavery resided in the scale and intensity of the slave traffic and the plantation trades. Earlier forms of slavery had been geared to household service, or the strengthening of a lineage, or the construction of a military apparatus, or to relatively modest enclaves of estate or mine labor. The New World slave plantations, by contrast, had established a *permanent* and *hereditary* slavery of the most onerous sort, *breaking with any geographical constraint* and displaying an unquenchable thirst for slave labor and slave lives. Traditional defenses of slavery, and established racial notions, were inadequate to the task of explaining this Great Captivity.... New World slavery thus brought about a degradation of the slave condition, and of the ideologies which justified or explained it. The slave status in the Americas was defined by two core features – namely that slaves were private property and that, after a while, only those of African descent were enslaved" (Blackburn 1997: 585-6, emphasis added).

^{ix} The following list of scholars of black performance is only a loosely associated sampling, but each pursues a project with an assumptive logic brought to question by afro-pessimism and vice versa. See, for instance, Brooks (2006), Brown (2008), Johnson (2003), Munoz (1999), and Weheliye (2005).

^x For instance, Moten writes of "that trying, even neurotic, oscillation between the exposure and the replication of a regulatory maneuver whose force is held precisely in the assumption that it comes before what it would contain" (Moten 2008: 178). Or, again, in describing "the constant repetition of bare life" just mentioned, he raises a figure of regression in reference to "the annoying, grating tone that one imagines must have been the most prominent feature of the voice of that kid who said the emperor has no clothes" and then immediately qualifies the point through negation – "It's not that one wants to devalue in any way the efficacy of such truth telling, such revelation..." (ibid: 216 fn. 6). In an earlier version of the article that would become "Black Op," Moten refers to "a certain discourse on the relation between blackness and death," of which afro-pessimism is the example *par excellence*, as "tragically neurotic" (Moten 2007: 9).

^{xi} It strikes me that the arrangement of afro-pessimism and black optimism in this discourse is a variation on a theme of Moten's discussion of Hartman in the opening pages of his *In the Break* (2003). For an admittedly inchoate critique of that discussion, see Sexton (2010b). I would note here as well that the present exploration recalls and refashions the extremely complicated discourse between and among Lacan and Derrida, especially over the inheritance of the Freudian discovery. On that score, see generally Muller & Richardson (1988) and Forrester (1991), but also the three-way debate involving Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek in their *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (2000). Much of the confusion and clarification about structural analysis in the wake of post-structuralism is highlighted by Žižek's contributions, especially "Holding the Place." For more recent studies that effectively displace the supposed antagonism between Lacan and Derrida, see Egginton (2007), Hurst (2008), Lewis (2008), Sheperdson (2008). On the inhabitation of "pathology without pathos," see the discussion of Nyong'o (2002) below.

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^{xii} In emphasizing just how motley is this crew, it should be said that afro-pessimism (I use the lower-case deliberately) is not, as Wilderson himself notes, “anything as ostentatious as a school of thought” and the moniker “neither infringes on their individual differences nor exaggerates their fidelity to a shared set of assumptions” (Wilderson 2008: 58). Wilderson lists a dozen or so among the “who’s who” of afro-pessimists in his text, but there is no one on that list, including this author, that identifies themselves or their work by that term. That does not mean I think the heading is simply an imposition. The term emerges as an effect of a reading, a reading that is compelling in many ways, even as I find the term enabling and disabling precisely to the extent that it remains open to a supposed contradistinction to black optimism. The term, and its counterpart, is also open to confusion with respect to another iteration in the field of African Studies in the 1980s and 90s regarding “the perception [among Western creditor countries] of sub-Saharan Africa as a region too riddled with problems for good governance and economic development” (Onwudiwe 2005). My fear is that the interlocation between afro-pessimism and black optimism today resonates too strongly with the limitations of that earlier debate between afro-pessimism and afro-optimism before the backdrop of structural adjustment. See Hartman & Wilderson (2003) for an account of Wilderson’s adaptation of this term. “Generalized impropriety” is from Marriott (2011). At another level, one would need to approach the encounter of afro-pessimism and black optimism by distinguishing between pessimism and optimism as philosophical positions rather than psychological conditions, a distinction that requires revisiting tensions among Leibniz, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, to name only a few of the most critical sources (Dienstag 2006). This much would likely recast Gramsci’s famous aphorism: “pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will” (which Gramsci actually attributed to the French novelist Romain Rolland). Not the least of the points raised therein would have to do with frictions between anarchist and Marxist formulations (Manders 2006: xlix-l).

^{xiii} This is to say that Wilderson’s afro-pessimism insists less on the proper way to think about the relation between blackness and blacks and more on the proper way to think about the relation between blackness and blacks, on the one hand, and non-blackness and non-blacks, on the other. So, it is less interested in pursuing the intramural conversation within its precincts than it is in revisiting the conditions of possibility for that conversation in the contemporary moment. Wilderson writes: “No other place-names depend upon such violence. No other nouns owe their integrity to this semiotics of death. Meditations on African performances and subjectivity are always already spoken by this grammar and haunted by these ghosts. For whatever ‘African’ means when spoken by Africans, whatever it means in the moment of performance, that cannot change Africa’s paradigmatic relation to other place-names and the people of those places. Performance cannot reconcile this gap between the place of slaves and the places of all others” (Wilderson 2010: 120).

^{xiv} Nyong’o (2002) continues: “At bottom, the shame of racist [discourse] resides in the idea that ‘I am thought of as less than human’. And yet, the very shame that floods through at that thought, a shame that, were we not human, we would have no capacity to feel, is our best internal evidence that the thought is wrong and vulgar: I feel (shame), therefore I am (human). Acknowledging the permanence of our shame, and its usefulness, may mark the beginning...[of a response to the call] to “begin enjoying the humor” again. The point may not be to become individual and modern, to ever achieve a kind of prophylactic invulnerability to the [discourse] that says ‘Shame on you! Shame on you for being black!’ We do not, at this late date, need yet newer formulations of pride to negate this shame. The point may be to locate, within the transformations of our shame, a way out of scapegoating, and thus, out of the bloodletting that accompanies with such monotonous reliability our attempts to regain our innocence” (389).

^{xv} “Memory for forgetting” is the tentative title of Sharpe’s forthcoming second book, a phrase likely drawn from Robert Louis Stevenson’s well-known 1886 novel, *Kidnapped*.

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When the young protagonist David Balfour questions his newfound companion Alan Breck Stewart about whether he can swear that he does not know the man suspected of murdering the English loyalist Colin Roy Campbell (a fictional treatment of the infamous "Appin Murder" that occurred in the aftermath of the 1745 Jacobite Rising), Stewart replies: "Not yet...but I've a grand memory for forgetting, David."

^{xvi} "If it is, something other than a phenomenology is required in order to know it, something other than a science of immediate experience, since this knowledge is highly mediated by deprivation and by mediation itself, and by a vast range of other actions directed toward the eradication of deprivation. Perhaps that knowledge is embedded in action toward that which is at once (and never fully) withdrawn and experienced. What this knowledge of freedom requires is an improvisation through the sensible and the intelligible, a working through the idiomatic differences between the modes of analysis which would valorize either over the other" (Moten 2004: 303).

^{xvii} It may be that here I am simply returning Moten's message in inverted form: "How can we fathom a social life that tends toward death, that enacts a kind of being-toward-death, and which, because of such tendency and enactment, maintains a terribly beautiful vitality? Deeper still, what are we to make of the fact of a sociality that emerges when lived experience is distinguished from fact, in the fact of life that is implied in the very phenomenological gesture/analysis within which Fanon asserts black social life as, in all but the most minor ways, impossible? How is it that the off harmony of life, sociality, and blackness is the condition of possibility of the claim that there is no black social life? Does black life, in its irreducible and impossible sociality and precisely in what might be understood as its refusal of the status of social life that is refused it, constitute a fundamental danger—an excluded but immanent disruption—to social life? What will it have meant to embrace this matrix of im/possibility, to have spoken of and out of this suspension? What would it mean to dwell on or in minor social life? This set of questions is imposed upon us by Fanon. At the same time, and in a way that is articulated most clearly and famously by W. E. B. Du Bois, this set of questions is the position, which is also to say the problem, of blackness" (Moten 2008a: 188). Moten is gesturing here to the work of Chandler on Du Bois cited above, but see also Marriott (2007, 2011) regarding a reading of Fanon very different from Moten's.

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