



## **The Vengeance of Vertigo: Aphasia and Abjection in the Political Trials of Black Insurgents**

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And who can affirm that vertigo does not haunt the whole of existence?

Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*<sup>i</sup>

### **I. Where Vertigos Meet**

The guerilla war that the Black Liberation Army waged against the United States in the late 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s was part of a multifaceted struggle to redress Black dispossession which has been waged since the first Africans landed in the “New” World.<sup>ii</sup> But the political trials of BLA soldiers marked an unprecedented moment in the history of that struggle; a moment when it became *de rigueur* for revolutionaries to refuse the role of defendant and assume (while still in custody and often handcuffed) the role of prosecutor and judge—with the public gallery as jury.

This shift comprised an unparalleled inversion of jurisprudential casting in which the court itself (and by extension the U.S. government) became defendants. Assata Shakur recalls how brothers and sisters came to her trial every day to “watch the circus.” Her narrative paints a vibrant picture of an intra-mural conversation between Black folks from all walks of life, for whom the court and the trials functioned much like backwoods churches did during slavery. A courtroom of people who joined the defendants in their refusal to rise when the judge came in; folks giving each other the Black Power salute in full view of the U.S. Marshals; Black Muslim men and women spreading their prayer rugs in the corridors of the court and praying to Allah; Black parents explaining the underlying racism of the American legal system to their children. As the judge entered the courtroom, one such well-educated child looked up and said, “Mommy, is that the fascist pig?” to the laughter and applause of the gallery (*Assata* 212).

[2] With only small arms and crude explosives at their disposal, with little of nothing in the way of logistical support,<sup>iii</sup> with no liberated zone to claim or reclaim, and with no more than a vague knowledge that there were a few hundred other insurgents scattered throughout the U.S. operating in largely uncoordinated and decentralized units,<sup>iv</sup> the BLA launched 66 operations<sup>v</sup> against the largest police state in the world. Vertigo must have seized them each time they clashed with agents of a nuclear-weapons regime with three

million troops in uniform, a regime that could put 150,000 new police on the streets in any given year, and whose ordinary White citizens frequently deputize themselves in the name of law and order. Subjective vertigo, no doubt: a dizzying sense that one is moving or spinning in an otherwise stationary world, a vertigo brought on by a clash of grossly asymmetrical forces. There are suitable analogies, for this kind of vertigo must have also seized Native Americans who launched the AIM's occupation of Wounded Knee, and FALN insurgents who battled the FBI.

[3] Subjective vertigo is vertigo of the event. But the sensation that one is not simply spinning in an otherwise stable environment, that one's environment is perpetually unhinged stems from a relationship to violence that cannot be analogized. This is called objective vertigo, a life constituted by disorientation rather than a life interrupted by disorientation. This is structural as opposed to performative violence. Black subjectivity is a crossroads where vertigoes meet, the intersection of performative and structural violence.

[4] Elsewhere I have argued that the Black is a sentient being though not a Human being. The Black's and the Human's disparate relationship to violence is at the heart of this failure of incorporation and analogy. The Human suffers contingent violence, violence that kicks in when s/he resists

(or is perceived to resist) the disciplinary discourse of capital and/or Oedipus. But Black peoples' subsumption by violence is a paradigmatic necessity, not just a performative contingency. To be constituted by *and* disciplined by violence, to be gripped simultaneously by subjective and objective vertigo, is indicative of a political ontology which is radically different from the political ontology of a sentient being who is constituted by discourse and disciplined by violence when s/he breaks with the ruling discursive codes.<sup>vi</sup> When we begin to assess revolutionary armed struggle in this comparative context, we find that Human revolutionaries (workers, women, gays and lesbians, post-colonial subjects) suffer subjective vertigo when they meet the state's disciplinary violence with the revolutionary violence of the subaltern; but they are spared objective vertigo. This is because the most disorienting aspects of their lives are induced by the struggles that arise from intra-Human conflicts over competing conceptual frameworks and disputed cognitive maps, such as the American Indian Movement's demand for the return of Turtle Island vs. the U.S.'s desire to maintain territorial integrity, or the Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional's (FALN) demand for Puerto Rican independence vs. the U.S.'s desire to maintain Puerto Rico as a territory. But for the Black, as for the slave, there are no cognitive maps, no conceptual frameworks of suffering and dispossession which are analogic with the myriad maps and frameworks which explain the dispossession of Human subalterns.

[5] The structural, or paradigmatic, violence that subsumes Black insurgents' cognitive maps and conceptual frameworks, subsumes my scholarly efforts as well. As a Black scholar, I am tasked with making sense of this violence without being overwhelmed and disoriented by it. In other words, the writing must somehow be indexical of that which exceeds narration, while being ever mindful of the incomprehension the writing would foster, the failure, that is, of interpretation were the indices to actually escape the narrative. The stakes of this dilemma are almost as high for the Black scholar facing his/her reader as they are for the Black insurgent facing the police and the courts. For the scholarly act of embracing members of the Black Liberation Army as beings worthy of empathic critique is terrifying. One's writing proceeds with fits and starts which have little to do with the problems of building the thesis or finding the methodology to make the case. As I write, I am more aware of the rage and anger of my reader-ideal (an angry mob as readers) than I am of my own interventions and strategies for assembling my argument. Vertigo seizes me with a rash of condemnations that emanate from within me and swirl around me. I am speaking to me but not *through* me, yet there seems to be no other way to speak. I am speaking through the voice and gaze of a mob of, let's just say it, White Americans; and my efforts to marshal a mob of Black people, to conjure the Black Liberation Army smack of compensatory gestures. It is not that the

BLA doesn't come to my aid, that they don't push back, but neither I nor my insurgent allies can make the case that we are worthy of our suffering and justified in our actions and not terrorists and apologists for terror who should be locked away forever. How can we be worthy of our suffering without being worthy of ourselves? I press on, even though the vertigo that seizes me is so overwhelming that its precise nature—subjective, stemming from within me, or objective, catalyzed by my context, the raging throng—cannot be determined. I have no reference points apart from the mob that gives no quarter. If I write "freedom fighter," from within my ear they scream "terrorist"! If I say "prisoner of war," they chant "cop killer"! Their denunciations are sustained only by assertion, but they ring truer than my painstaking exegesis. No firewall protects me from them; no liberated psychic zone offers me sanctuary. I want to stop and turn myself in.

## **II. Static Positivism and the Necessary Thing**

David Gilbert and Judy Clark, two former members of the Weather Underground, stood trial with Kuwasi Balagoon, the only openly bisexual<sup>vii</sup> member of the Black Liberation Army in what is commonly referred to as the Brinks Trial.<sup>viii</sup> They sat out much of the trial, arguing "that to participate would be to recognize the legitimacy of the court to criminalize *political* acts. When they did appear, it was to make statements condemning white supremacy and U.S. imperialism." They argued that "the United States

government lacked the legal basis to try them, both because of the political character of their actions, and because of the government's own illegitimacy" (Berger, *Outlaws of America...* 252-53). They rejected the terms of jurisprudential engagement by refusing the hermeneutics of individual guilt or innocence. They believed the power to pose the question is the greatest power of all. In short, they sought to short circuit the court's disciplinary logic by exploiting their trial, a window of time between arraignment and incarceration, as an opportunity to shift the terms of adjudication from moral questions of guilt and innocence to ethical questions of state power and political legitimacy. If acquittal came with the counter-hegemonic gains of this Gramscian War of Position, so be it; if not, well, those were always the risks. They weren't alone in their analysis. The "Verdict of the International Tribunal on Political Prisoners and Prisoners of War in the United States," *Yale Journal of Law and Liberation* 2 (1991), declared that the U.S. should follow the same international protocol with political prisoners in the U.S. as it does with prisoners on the battlefields abroad. The Tribunal used the Geneva Convention to frame the defendants as "anti-colonial combatants."

[7] There were examples of the effects of pedagogy and praxis less ludic than that of small children who enquired as to which species of pig a federal judge belongs to. The trials occurred within a context wherein there was a

tacit consensus on the Left which espoused non-cooperation with law enforcement officials. David Gilbert explains how his Weather Underground unit's ability to elude a police dragnet in San Francisco, flee to Oregon, and establish new identities was less a result of their clandestine skills than of "the anti-state political consciousness that prevailed in youth culture, which meant that information did not flow to the state but flowed to us."<sup>ix</sup>

[8] The fruits of this counter-hegemonic context, the transformation of Gramscian "common sense" (apprehensive or inscrutable cooperation with the cops) into "good sense" (non-cooperation with the cops), can also be glimpsed by taking stock of the plethora of progressives who, when called before grand juries, began their testimony by announcing that they would not answer any of the questions put to them. By refusing to answer questions of the grand jury, the witness was all but guaranteeing an 18 month prison sentence. But by refusing to answer all questions *prior to their being asked*, the witness performed a rejection of the grand jury's right to convene—an ethical *refusal* of the legal system itself, as opposed to a moral *objection* to legal excesses. Ironically, this ethical refusal shaved years off their prison sentences. If the witness had engaged the court in conversation, that is, listened to the questions and then either answered or rejected them, s/he could have served 18 months for each unanswered question for



contempt of court. By announcing his/her refusal to participate in the process s/he could only be convicted on one count of contempt.

[9] This is not to say, however, the political awareness and politics of refusal that resisted state violence of the late 1960s and 1970s developed along an increasingly enlightened, point for point pilgrim's progress. As we ascend from the commonplace into the rare, that is, from grand jury refusals of everyday progressives who risked receiving 18 months for contempt, to the trials of Black Liberation Army soldiers who refused the decorum and the discourse of the court though they faced life imprisonment for paramilitary activity—in other words, even for the ideologically unified segment of the movement committed to armed struggle—we find that the Black paramilitaries' orientation to the court resists singular and unified interpretation. Some scholars interpret their jurisprudential engagements as the *sine qua non* of a politics of refusal; others see them as being underwritten by rank reformism.

[10] David Ray Papke is among the latter group. He argues that despite the Black Panther Party's commitment to the revolutionary overthrow of the state, a "pronounced sensitivity to legal concerns" was "central to [their] internal education program" (Papke 667). For Papke, the Panthers' interpellation by (rather than refusal of) bourgeois jurisprudence is exemplified in Huey's P. Newton's eagerness to defend himself in court.

Newton's rhetoric of contempt for the American legal system is hard to reconcile with his penchant to revel in debates on legal definitions and his belief that the answers to these debates could be known and finalized.

[T]he greatest problem with the Panther's understanding of constitutional rights involved their static positivism. They seemed to think almost like white conservative right-to-bear arms zealots, that the meaning of constitutional amendments was unambiguously known. Their constitutional jurisprudence was oversimplified and reductively ahistorical. In addition, [they made] a certainty of something as fluid and complex as a constitutional right (Papke 666-67).

[11] In what rings as a repudiation of Papke's interpretation of Black paramilitary courtroom strategies, Evelyn Williams, Assata Shakur's attorney and aunt, writes:

Political prisoners scrutinize each motion their attorney files with an eye not for its legal competence or consequences but for its political ramifications in the overall unceasing need to expose the society in its true light, not to extricate themselves from its grip. And they refuse to be deterred by fear of the system's retaliatory might or by the hope that submission to its rules would benefit them. (Williams 84)

What Papke calls “static positivism” and an “oversimplified and reductively ahistorical” jurisprudence, Williams characterizes as an unflinching paradigmatic analysis. Paradigmatic because not only does it refuse to grant Papke’s call for “constitutional complexity” essential status, *but also* because this refusal is buttressed with an added dimension: the desire to restore relational logic to the idea of the court—that is, the desire to consider the court as a political institution within a constellation of political institutions, as opposed to a sealed, hermitic space. Unflinching, because their refusal was not deterred by state violence. Representing Assata Shakur, Williams continues,

required constant adjustment from my long practiced academic and technical approach. Her assessment of our differences was partially correct. According to her, I would not classify a forest as such until I had counted every tree, while she would recognize the obvious immediately: I was cerebral and legally knowledgeable, but not the political strategist that she was. So we made a pact: I would do my legal thing and she would do her necessary thing (84).

The necessary thing ran the gamut from taking judges and officers of the court hostage, as Jonathan Jackson did in Marin, to refusing to stand when the judge entered the room, to commandeering the court as a liberation school, to refusing to testify or testifying in ways that shunned decorum and

the rules of evidence. An example of the latter is Kuwasi Balagoon's poetic rendering of the statement he read right before he was sentenced to life imprisonment for the deaths of two police officers and a money courier during the Brinks armored car expropriation.

**Your Honor**

your honor

since i've been convicted of murder

and have taken time to digest

just what that means

after noting what it means to my family

and how it affects people who read the newspapers

and all

i see now that i've made a terrible mistake!

and didn't approach this trial

in a respectful, deliberate or thoughtful manner

didn't take advantage of the best legal advice

and based my actions on irrelevant matters

which i can see now in a much more sober mind

had nothing to do with this case

i must have been legally insane thinking about:

the twenty five murders of children in atlanta since

Wayne Williams' capture

the recent murder of a man in boston by the police  
 the recent murders of two in chicago by the police  
 the shooting of a five-year-old little boy in suburban calif[ornia]  
 the lynching in alabama  
 the mob murder of a transit worker in brooklyn  
 the murders of fourteen women in boston  
 feeling that this is evidence of something  
 and that there must  
 be a lesson in all of this—I thought  
 murder was legal (Balagoon 95)

[12] Balagoon's poem is an example of the "necessary thing" that Evelyn Williams noted—the kind of performative gesture the BLA political prisoners were famous for. It demonstrates how the court is systemically implicated in the ongoing Black holocaust. But as a *testimony* it is incomplete—not in terms of quantity, but in terms of quality. Its deepest insight is the conclusion that it reaches that the law is White, coupled with the inference that Balagoon was guilty prior to the Brinks expropriation. His innocence cannot be vouchsafed until all semblance of the law has been eradicated. The poem's closing line, "I thought murder was legal" locates the court at the end of a metonymic chain of hate crimes, and thus, politicizes the presumed impartiality of the pending violence—the life sentence about to be

handed down. Such counter-hegemonic gestures are part of a process that Gramsci describes as the War of Position's isolation and emasculation of ruling class values. But the Gramscian model breaks down because the subjects of the poem (Black people) are not Gramscian subjects. From the poem we get a sense that Black people are being killed because they are Black people. This is different from the Gramscian subject who is killed because s/he goes on strike or lays siege to a factory. Another spanner in the Gramscian works is evident in the way the deaths are narrated. The body count Balagoon offers reads like a report on holocaust atrocities through which we get no sense of the people who existed before the holocaust or the impacts of this holocaust on their polity, their cosmology, their structures of feeling, or the capacity of their offspring to go on living.

[13] Kuwasi Balagoon's testimony is incomplete because taxonomy can itemize atrocities but cannot bear witness to suffering, and a conceptual framework of redress is contingent upon a subject's capacity to bear witness. The structural violence that positions Balagoon paradigmatically<sup>x</sup> makes the degree of psychic integration required in order to bear witness all but impossible, thereby undermining the status of his claims at the level of identity and, by extension, undermining his capacity to offer a testimony on trauma or a narrative of redress, be it juridical or political. I am humbled by the courage and tenacity it must have taken to use the space and time

allotted to them for reading atrocities into the public record often at the expense of adjudicating the charges levied against them. But the reportage of atrocities is just that, reportage: laden with spectacle and light on sustained meditations on trauma. How can a sense of redress—juridical or political—emerge from a context where sustained meditations on trauma have no purchase?

### **III. Jurisprudential Dreamwork**

The synchronic homologies between the status of the slave and the status of Black subjectivity, are manifested diachronically as historical continuity. In other words, there are important continuities between the ethical dilemmas raised when a slave stood before the bar in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and when Black insurgents stood before the bar in the 1970s and early 1980s. The Dred Scott trials of 1847, 1850, 1852, and 1857 (the Supreme Court) are exemplary of this. One could argue that Dred Scott was pushing in the opposite direction than the BLA, that he wanted to *depoliticize* the court so that it would focus on a narrow (and just) interpretation of existing law. But I am not asserting historical continuity of courtroom strategies. The historical continuity of the Dred Scott case and the BLA trials isn't a continuity of performance but a continuity of position.

[15] Chief Justice Taney's 1857 majority decision was an early rejoinder to the Black Liberation Army's demand, 124 years later, that their standing before the court be recognized as political rather than juridical. Taney returned Dred Scott to slavery by arguing in the opposite direction of the BLA, from the juridical to the political. Taney argues that Dred Scott has no standing as a juridical subject because he had no standing as a political subject. Justice Taney implies that there is a structural injunction precluding the court from hearing Scott's case because Blacks come from Africa, a place void of political community, and only members of political community can stand before the bar. "The question is simply this," Taney writes, "Can a negro whose ancestors were imported and sold as slaves, become a member of the political community...?"<sup>xi</sup> Taney is compelled to compare the Black to the Indian as a necessary prerequisite to legitimating the court's decision to re-enslave Dred Scott. In so doing, he triangulates the dyad between the Human and the Black with the Indian.

The situation of [the Black] population was altogether unlike that of the Indian race. The latter, it is true, formed no part of the colonial communities and never amalgamated with them in social connections or in government. But although they were uncivilized, they were yet free and independent people, associated together in nations or tribes, and governed by their own laws. Many of the political communities were situated in



territories to which the white race claimed the ultimate right of dominion. (*The Dred Scott Decision: Opinion of Chief Justice Taney* 4)

[16] From the opening of Taney's tangential pursuit of Native Americans, it would seem that they constitute a defeated and denigrated identity within the Human race, de-valued Humanity as opposed to the embodiment of social death (Blacks). Taney's writing speaks of a being with subjective Presence, and of a community with the capacity for "perspective of consciousness" (Lewis Gordon): "[u]ncivilized ... yet free and independent ... associated together in nations or tribes, and governed by their own laws."<sup>xii</sup> Furthermore, Indians are not natively alienated because their claims to their offspring are recognized by and incorporated into the world. By extension their right to govern is acknowledged beyond their circle, which is to say their claims to temporal presence are recognized. Just as their spatial presence is recognized and incorporated, which is to say their place-names have resistance in the eyes of the Other. "Many of the political communities were situated in territories to which the white race claimed the ultimate right of dominion."

[17] Taney's goes on to impose imaginary and fantastic formulations on what heretofore in the ruling has been sober and realist prose buttressed by relational (albeit racist) logic:

...Indian Governments were regarded and treated as foreign Governments, *as much so as if an ocean had separated the red man from the white*; and their freedom has constantly been acknowledged, from the time of the first emigration to the English colonies to the present day, by the different Governments which succeeded each other. (4)

Through a process of condensation and displacement, or jurisprudential dreamwork, Taney maps the imagery of settlerism onto the body of Indigenism. Like the dreamer who brings his own water to the beach, Justice Taney has to *manufacture* an ocean out of dry land, lest the analogy between Whites and Indians crumbles.

[18] Chief Justice Taney's phantasmagorical and labyrinthine dreamwork labors to substantiate Native American humanity (genocide notwithstanding), in order to reinvigorate Black social isolation (the practice of chattel slavery) and Black ontological isolation (the paradigm of social death), and thereby stave off a crisis of coherence amongst Humans; a crisis of coherence which all three lower court decisions threatened, despite their opposing verdicts. The lower courts (one finding for Dred Scott, two finding

against him) made the same mistake as Roman jurisprudence which declared the essence of slavery to be ownership of one human being by another. This fictive discourse gave Dred Scott the opening he needed to bring his case to court. Taney's ruling, however, was predicated on the understanding that any person can be an object of a property relation (Patterson 22) because all people have proprietary claims and powers sunk into them like talons (whether they be husbands, wives, or, in modern times, professional athletes), but not all people are slaves. To say, "I own my slave but I don't own my wife" is spurious, merely a form of convention. But the subjective meaning of the convention is an essential aspect of the slave's lack of honor. To try Dred Scott's case by addressing the question of whether or not he was owned would be to *recognize and incorporate* him into political ontology and the legal framework of Human beings; and that, in effect, would rob ontology and, by extension, the law itself of meaning and coherence. The declaration that Africa is void of political community, coupled with the fantasy of immigration mobilized to situate, by contrast, the Indian within political community, was a vital intervention which reminded the lower courts that general dishonor and natal alienation are two of the three constitutive elements of slavery, not proprietary claims. Dred Scott has no juridical standing because he is not a member of political community; he is not a member of political community because he is a genealogical isolate; and his status as a genealogical isolate is an effect of structural violence, his

subsumption by objective vertigo, a subsumption unique to his paradigmatic position. To hear his case on the basis of proprietary claims or, more to the point, *to hear it at all*, is to breach the divide between the living and the dead.

[19] In its attempts to make suffering legible, Black politics appends itself to the loss of the subaltern. But Taney's text throws into relief the failure of his appendage, marks it as compensatory labor that seeks to establish the coherence of prior plenitude, critiques the status of oppression in the moment, and offers an imaginary futurity—as when Black Liberation Army soldiers demanded they be recognized as political prisoners and that their trials to be moved to The Hague. But Black people cannot bear witness to the coherence of prior plenitude because their “loss” is overwhelming and irreparable—without a past, with only a body count in the present, and with desire for redress that must be channeled through conceptual frameworks and cognitive maps which crowd them out as subjects.

#### **IV. In Lieu of Mourning**

Scaling downward from the court to the body we will be able to better understand the compulsion to list atrocities and the prohibition against reflecting upon them when the victims are Black. There is a disquieting resonance of form between the way BLA autobiographical narratives labor

and the way transcripts that emerge from police interrogations labor. This resonance of form is found in the way BLA autobiographical narratives and police confessions narrate violent events; and it is most pronounced when Panthers-cum-BLA soldiers (i.e. Safiya Bukhari Assata Shakur, Kuwasi Balagoon, George Jackson, and Eldridge Cleaver) narrate the violence levied against their bodies. It is as though the writer who, until that point in the narrative, has demonstrated political sophistication, complexity, and a unique capacity to muse on the socio-economic woes of Black people writ large, is suddenly struck with aphasia or reduced to the most unadorned and empirical patterns of speech when dramatizing assaults on her/his body; as though they are sure of neither the presence of their bodies nor the presence of an auditor were they to articulate their suffering. My reading in this context does not claim to do the corpus of BLA writings justice in terms of literary analysis proper; on the contrary, I am looking only at a rather select aspect of that literature, namely its penchant for appending itself to rhetorical strategies it cannot "rightfully" claim, and its attempts to restore balance to the inner ear by narrating violence in a manner which is crisp and austere.

[21] As with the transcripts of interrogation confessions, those moments in BLA autobiographical writings that home in on the pained Black body tend to proceed by pruning duration. Duration is pruned by privileging action,

summary and (less commonly) dialogue, the swiftest strategies of narration, over exposition, description, and transition, the slowest strategies of narration. As was the case with Balagoon's courtroom testimony regarding the Black Holocaust, observation and taxonomies of facts and statistics take precedence over introspection, musing, and reflection when BLA paramilitaries reflect upon their own pained and violated bodies. From a Left perspective, the counter-hegemonic strategies operating in the autobiographical work of Black revolutionaries is preferable to the fetish of the individual and the Aristotelian underpinnings of mainstream memoirs. Black paramilitary writings are to be commended for their proclivity to subordinate the egoic individual to the collectivity of Black people on the move. However, I am arguing that these rhetorical strategies are less attributable to conscious selection and combination decisions than they are to the quandary of a Black unconscious trapped by the disorientation of violent events and disorientation constituted by a paradigm of violence which is too comprehensive for words. In Safiya Bukhari's *The War Before: The True Life Story of Becoming a Black Panther, Keeping the Faith in Prison & Fighting for Those Left Behind* we find an example of this.

I entered the store, went past the registers, down an aisle to the meat counter and started checking for all-beef products. I heard the door open, saw two of the brothers coming in, and did not give it a thought. I went back to what I was doing, but out of the

corner of my left eye, I saw the manager's hand with a rifle pointed toward the door. I quickly got into an aisle just as the firing started. Up to this point, no words had been spoken. With the first lull in the shooting Kombozi Amistad (one of my body guards and a member of the Amistad Collective) came down the aisle toward me. He was wearing a full-length army coat. It was completely buttoned. As he approached, he told me he had been shot. I did not believe him at first, because I saw no blood and his weapon was not drawn. He insisted, so I told him to lie down on the floor and I would take care of it.

Masai [Ehehosi] (my co-defendant) apparently had made it out the door when the firing started because he reappeared at the door, trying to draw fire so we could get out. I saw him get shot in the face and stumble backward out the door. I looked for a way out and realized there was none. I elected to play it low key to try to get help for Kombozi as soon as possible. That effort was wasted. The manager of the store and his son, Paul Green Sr. and Jr., stomped Kombozi to death in front of my eyes (Bukhari 7-8).

A formal aspect of the passage that jumps out at the reader is the declarative quality of the sentences. "I entered the store..." "I heard the door open..." "I did not believe him at first..." "I saw him get shot in the face and

stumble backward out the door." "That effort was wasted." The sentences neither command, nor question, nor proclaim. Even when they contain multiple clauses, their structure does not derail the basic purpose: to make a statement and share a fact.

[22] This drives the passage forward at the expense of empathic identification with the subject of speech, Bukhari's persona. The sequencing of the passage proceeds by privileging Roland Barthes' proairetic and symbolic codes. "The proairetic code applies to any action that implies a further narrative action. For example, a gunslinger draws his gun on an adversary and we wonder what the resolution of this action will be. We wait to see if he kills his opponent or is wounded himself. Suspense is thus created by action rather than by a reader's or a viewer's wish to have mysteries explained."<sup>xiii</sup> The symbolic code organizes semantic meanings by way of antitheses or by way of mediations between antithetical terms. In Bukhari's passage, the symbolic code labors through the antitheses of guilt and innocence, thereby fortifying and extending the cultural code of the law, even before the shooting ends. The text's privileging of the proairetic and symbolic codes creates a hydraulics that crowds out codes of thematization that would otherwise work to slow the narrative down and bring the spoken subject into empathic view. This is also how a signed confession works. In other words, the formal aspects of Safiya Bukhari's recollection are allied



with the police in a way that the revolutionary ideology and intent of her politics are not. The stakes of this paradox are thrown into relief by the fact that not only were the White father and son duo *not* tried and convicted for voluntary manslaughter, but when Bukhari attempted to press counter charges of murder against them the Commonwealth prosecutor told her that it was justifiable homicide; the FBI held a press conference at which they characterized Bukhari not as the victim of and witness to vigilante terror, but as someone who was “notorious, dangerous ... and known to law enforcement agencies nationwide”—as though adjectives and hearsay conform to the rules of evidence; and the judge set her bail at five million dollars for each of the five counts against her. After a “trial that lasted one day, [Bukhari] was sentenced to forty years for armed robbery” (8). That night, she was placed in the maximum-security building at the Virginia Correctional Center for Women.

[23] Bukhari’s passage is emblematic of a kind of aphasia Black revolutionary autobiographical narratives are stricken with when they attempt to “draw the reader into an identificatory relationship with their pained speaking bodies” (Broeck 205). Discourse demands readers who will identify with the subjects it projects, but in Bukhari’s passage there are only two subjects worthy of such identification, Paul Green Sr. and his son Paul Green Jr. Bukhari’s narrative must proceed, therefore, by means of

pornotroping Black victims. In other words, the Black subject's suffering is paraded (as opposed to engaged and reflected upon) so as to provide "stimulans and satisfaction for a...readerly voyeuristic gaze" (Ibid).<sup>xiv</sup> In this way, narratives of Black suffering mimic not only the narrative strategies of police confessions, but the editing strategies of Hollywood cinema, as well; editing strategies in which spectators are treated to a scene of Black mutilation and death and, once the body is inert, the film cuts to a scene which suspends reflection on that mutilation and death.<sup>xv</sup> Narrative strategies of pruning duration and editing strategies which fixate on spectacle at the expense of reflection are symptomatic of a bond between the murderous anti-Black projections of civil society and the emancipatory narratives of BLA soldiers, what David Marriott describes as bonding over a phobic response to the Black imago. Furthermore, they highlight the difficulty in determining where White filiation ends and state affiliation begins.

[24] In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon argues that there "is no disproportion between the life of the family and the life of the nation" (*BSWM* 142); and, he adds, the male child attains selfhood by challenging his father in an Oedipal struggle that prepares him for the competitive and aggressive demands of life as an adult. But how is this aggression worked through so as not to implode the nation from within? "Collective catharsis" is

Fanon's explanation: "a channel, an outlet through which the forces accumulated in the form of aggression can be released" (*BSWM* 145). The examples he gives range from children's games to psychodramas in group therapy to popular cinema; cultural objects produced "by white men for little white men" to facilitate rituals of collective release. (*BSWM* 146)

[25] Paul Green Sr.'s and Paul Green Jr.'s murder of a wounded Black body is one such ritual which, like lynching, allows for this collective release and vouchsafes the stability of civil society. Blacks "must die," writes Marriott, "so that the aggressive structure of white repression and sublimation of libidinal drives can remain in place" (Marriott, "Bonding over Phobia," 428). Here, repressed hatred of the White father (both Greens can suffer such repression) is satisfied by the real and symbolic murder of Blacks. "This allowed positive feeling for the father to remain intact, while ambivalent emotional ties to the father were allowed to appear—as a cultural and unconscious fantasy of racial intrusion—through substitute objects" (Ibid). Small wonder the Commonwealth prosecutor responded to Safiya Bukhari's desire to press counter charges as though it was a lethal assault on the family. And the reciprocal thought that Bukhari, Kombozi, and Ehehosi come from and can constitute families is unthinkable for both Bukhari and the state.

[26] This may account for the tyranny of closure which stalks Bukhari's passage; that is, the classical sequencing of narrative which contains few distractions, very little description, and limited transitions, and thus works as an injunction against "an identificatory relationship with their pained bodies" (Broeck 205). This injunction does not simply rear its ugly head at the end of the narrative, but has been operating throughout: Bukhari cannot mourn during the murder itself for fear the Greens might include her in their ritual; and nor could she mourn in the immediate aftermath of it, for she needed all of her energies to press counter charges on behalf of Kombozi and deal with her own trial. But later, in the moment of narration when there is a lull in the assaults, in the time and space of writing—here, injunctions against mourning still stand.

[27] Before continuing, I must tender my confession. My status as a sentient being who is not a Human being, someone who cannot be recognized by and incorporated into the world, someone who exists to facilitate the renewal of others, has *shaped* the rhetorical strategies of my analysis just as it shaped the rhetorical strategies of BLA testimonies. I cropped Safiya Bukhari's passage so as to omit the reasons Bukhari and the Amistad Collective were out that night. They were on their way to the countryside to practice night shooting. On their way to Mississippi they were to have stopped in Georgia where all Safiya tells us is that she was to

rendezvous with persons unnamed. In short, they may have been on a mission. I thought it wise not to lead with this. Just as I omitted all but passing reference to the BLA's spate of paramilitary operations, as when they drove by a crowd of mourners outside a San Francisco church where a police funeral was being held and lobbed a grenade. Nor did I address the question as to whether or not Bukhari was involved in the liberation of Assata Shakur from a maximum security prison and Shakur's subsequent escape to Cuba. I could say that I did not establish their bona fides as an army of liberation for fear that might clutter my exegesis of Bukhari's passage and make of me a shoddy scholar; that I did not reflect on how they laid hold to the violence which exceeds and anticipates them because I had my reader in mind; a reader who looks more like the Greens than anyone else.

## **V. The War Within**

Ritual murders which purge White aggressivity subtend Bukhari's impeded mourning and my dissembling scholarship, despite the fact that the filial cleansing and affilial stability proffered by the Black imago's intrusion as a phobic object does not cut both ways. The Black psyche emerges within a context of force, or structural violence, which is not analogous to the emergence of White or non-Black psyches. The upshot of this emergence is that the Black psyche is in a perpetual war with itself because it is usurped

by a White gaze that hates the Black imago and wants to destroy it. The Black self is a divided self or, better, it is a juxtaposition of hatred projected toward a Black imago and love for a White ideal: hence the state of war (Marriott, "Fanon's War"). This state of being at war forecloses upon the possession of elements constitutive of psychic integration: bearing witness (to suffering), atonement, naming and recognition, representation. As such, one cannot represent oneself, even *to* oneself as a bona fide political subject, as a subject of redress. Black political ontology is foreclosed in the unconscious just as it is foreclosed in the court. "[I]t may not be too fanciful to suggest," Marriott writes, "that the black ego, far from being too immature or weak to integrate, is an absence haunted by its and others' negativity. In this respect the memory of loss is its only possible communication" (425). It is important to note that loss is an effect of temporality; it implies a syntagmatic chain that absence cannot apprehend. Marriott's psychoanalytic inquiries work through the word "loss" in order to demonstrate the paucity of its explanatory power. Again, loss indicates a prior plenitude, absence does not.

[29] Marriott explains how we *all* work together, how we *all* bond over the Black imago as phobic object, that we might form a psychic community even though we cannot form political community. He does so by recalling that

exemplary moment in *Black Skin, White Masks*, when Fanon sees himself through the eyes of a White boy who cries in terror, “Look a Negro!”

Symbolically, Fanon knows that any black man could have triggered the child’s fantasy of being devoured that attaches itself to a fear of blackness, for this fear signifies the “racial epidermal schema” of Western culture—the unconscious fear of being literally consumed by the black other. Neither the boy nor Fanon seems able to avoid this schema, moreover, for culture determines and maintains the imago associated with blackness; cultural fantasy allows Fanon and the boy to form a bond through racial antagonism (“Bonding over Phobia” 420).

[30] This phobia is comprised of affective responses, sensory reactions or presubjective constellations of intensities, as well as representational responses, such as the threatening imago of a fecal body which portends contamination. And this affective/representational performance is underwritten by paradigmatic violence; which is to say the fantasy secures what Marriott calls “its objective value” because it lives within violence too pervasive to describe.<sup>xvi</sup> “The picture of the black psyche that emerges from” this intrusion “is one that is always late, never on time, violently presented and fractured by these moments of specular intrusion” (“Bonding over Phobia” 420). The overwhelming psychic alienation that emerges from the

literal fear and trembling of the White boy when Fanon appears, accompanied by “the foul language that despoils...is traumatic for” the Black psyche. One comes to learn that when one appears, one brings with one the threat of cannibalism. “What a thing,” writes Fanon, “to have eaten one’s father!” (*Black Skin, White Masks*) And the Black psyche retains the memory of that eternal White “fear of being eaten ... [and] turned into shit by an organic communion with the black body ... [This] is one of the most depressing and melancholic fantasies ensuing from the psychodynamics of intrusion” (“Bonding over Phobia” 421).

[31] Again, though this is a bond between Blacks and Whites, it is produced by a violent intrusion that does not cut both ways. Whereas the phobic bond is an injunction against Black psychic integration and Black filial and affilial relations, it is the life blood of White psychic integration and filial (which is to say domestic) and affilial (or institutional) relations.

[32] To add to this horror, when we scale up from the cartography of the mind to the terrain of armed struggle and the political trials, we may be faced with a situation in which the eradication of the generative mechanism of Black suffering is something that is not in *anyone’s* interest. Eradication of the generative mechanisms of Black suffering explored in this article, is not in the interest of the court, as Justice Taney demonstrates as his ruling



mobilizes the fantasy of immigration to situate the Native American within political community and to insure the African's standing as a genealogical isolate. Taney's majority decision suggests that juridical and political standing, like subjectivity itself, are not constituted by positive attributes but by their capacity to sidestep niggerization. Nor is the eradication of the generative mechanisms of Black suffering in the interests of the White political prisoners such as David Gilbert and Judith Clark, Kuwasi Balagoon's codefendants—their ideological opposition to the court, capitalism, and imperialism notwithstanding, because such ideological oppositions mark conflicts *within* the world rather than an antagonism *to* the world. Eradication of the generative mechanisms of Black suffering would mean the end of the world and they would find themselves peering into an abyss (or incomprehensible transition) between epistemes; between, that is, the body of ideas that determine that knowledge that is intellectually certain at any particular time. In other words, they would find themselves suspended between worlds. This trajectory is too iconoclastic for working class, post-colonial, and/or radical feminist conceptual frameworks. The Human need to be liberated *in* the world is not the same as the Black need to be liberated *from* the world; which is why even their most radical cognitive maps draw borders between the living and the dead. *Finally, if we push Marriott's findings to the wall, it becomes clear that eradication of the generative mechanisms of Black suffering is also not in the interests of Black*

*revolutionaries*. For how can we disimbricate Black juridical and political desire from the Black psyche's desire to destroy the Black imago, a desire which constitutes the psyche? In short, bonding with Whites and non-Blacks over phobic reactions to the Black imago provides the Black psyche with the only semblance of psychic integration it is likely to have: the need to destroy a Black imago *and* love a White ideal. "In these circumstances, having a 'white' unconscious may be the only way to connect with—or even contain—the overwhelming and irreparable sense of loss. The intruding fantasy offers the medium to connect with the lost internal object, the ego, but there is also no 'outside' to this 'real fantasy' and the effects of intrusion are irreparable" ("Bonding over Phobia" 426). This raises the question, who is the speaking subject of Black insurgent testimony? Who bears witness when the Black insurgent takes the stand? Black political horizons are singularly constrained, because the process through which the Black unconscious emerges and through which Black people form psychic community with Humans is the very process which bars Black people from political community.

## **Conclusion**

Many pacifist scholars and activists consider the strategies and tactics of armed revolutionaries in First World countries to be short-sighted bursts of narcissism.<sup>xvii</sup> What pacifist detractors forget, however, is that for

Gramsci, the strategy of a War of Position is one of commandeering civic and political spaces one trench at a time in order to turn those spaces into pedagogic locales for the dispossessed; and this process is one which combines peaceful as well as violent tactics as it moves the struggle closer to an all-out violent assault on the state. The BLA and their White revolutionary co-defendants may have been better Gramscians than those who critique them through the lens of Gramsci. Their tactics (and by tactics I mean armed struggle as well as courtroom performances) were no less effective at winning hearts and minds than candle light vigils and “orderly” protests. If the end-game of Gramscian struggle is the isolation and emasculation of the ruling classes’ ensemble of questions, as a way to alter the structure of feeling of the dispossessed so that the next step, the violent overthrow of the state, doesn’t *feel* like such a monumental undertaking, then I would argue the pedagogic value of retaliating against police by killing one of them each time they kill a Black person, the expropriating of bank funds from armored cars in order to further finance armed struggle as well as community projects such as acupuncture clinics in the Bronx where drug addicts could get clean, and the bombing of major centers of U.S. commerce and governance, followed by trials in which the defendants used the majority of the trial to critique the government rather than plead their case, have as much if not more pedagogic value than peaceful protest. In other words, if not for the “pathological pacifism” (Churchill) which clouds political debate

and scholarly analysis there would be no question that the BLA, having not even read Gramsci,<sup>xviii</sup> were among the best Gramscian theorists the U.S. has ever known. But though the BLA were great Gramscian theorists, they could not become Gramscian subjects. The political character of one's actions is inextricably bound to the political status of one's subjectivity; and while this status goes without saying for Gilbert and Clark, it is always in question for Balagoon and Bukhari.

[34] How does one calibrate the gap between objective vertigo and the need to be productive as a Black revolutionary? What is the political significance of restoring balance to the inner ear? Is tyranny of closure the only outcome of such interventions or could restoration of the Black subject's inner ear, while failing at the level of conceptual framework, provide something necessary, though intangible, at the level of blood and sweat political activism? These unanswered questions haunt this article. Though I have erred in this article on the side of paradigm as opposed to praxis, and cautioned against assuming that we know or can know what the harvest of their sacrifice was, I believe we are better political thinkers—if not actors—as a result of what they did with their bodies, even if we still don't know what to do with ours.

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<sup>i</sup> "Colonial Wars and Mental Disorders," 253.

<sup>ii</sup> Akinyele Umoja, "Repression Breeds Resistance: The Black Liberation Army and the Radical Legacy of the Black Panther Party."

<sup>iii</sup> Especially after 1975, when the Vietnam War ended and the revolutionary White Left, most notably members of the Weather Underground Organization, came out of hiding, surrendered to authorities, took the often meager sentences that courts imposed—often no more than probation—and then returned to a private and quotidian life. See Dan Berger's, *Outlaws in America: The Weather Underground and the Politics of Solidarity*; Jeremy Varon's *Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, The Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies*; Akinyele Umoja's, "Repression Breeds Resistance: The Black Liberation Army and the Radical Legacy of the Black Panther Party;" Muntaqim, Jalil Abdul. "On the Black Liberation Army." *Arm the Spirit*. September 18, 1979; and my *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, 128-129.

<sup>iv</sup> In her autobiography, Assata Shakur emphasizes the decentralized, nonhierarchical structure of the BLA—whether by design or desperation. This was also told to me by Marilyn Buck, one of the few White "task force" members of the Black Liberation Army, on one of my visits to her in Dublin Prison, Dublin, CA.

<sup>v</sup> The number of operations that BLA members acknowledge, presumably because this number is a matter of public record. See Jalil Abdul Muntaqim "On the Black Liberation Army." *Arm the Spirit*. September 18, 1979.

<sup>vi</sup> *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms*, "Biko and the Problematic of Presence," and "Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society."

<sup>vii</sup> I am working on an article which puts Balagoon's sexuality and declared anarchism in dialogue with the heteronormative and Marxist-Leninist frameworks which underwrote most BLA self-imaginings. This is not an effort to cathedralize Balagoon's framework over those of his comrades, but to explore how different Black revolutionary *identities* negotiated their common position while in the throes of armed struggle.

<sup>viii</sup> For the expropriation of funds from an armored car in Nyack, NY and the resultant deaths of police officers.

<sup>ix</sup> Gilbert quoted in Berger, 158.

<sup>x</sup> Orlando Patterson's three constituent elements of slavery: natal alienation, general dishonor, and complete and open vulnerability to gratuitous violence.

<sup>xi</sup> *The Dred Scott Decision: Opinion of Chief Justice Taney*, page 4.

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xiii</sup> Felluga, Dino. "Modules on Barthes: On the Five Codes." *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*. Last Update: Jan. 31, 2011. Purdue U. Accessed on April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

<<http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/narratology/modules/barthescodes.html>>. Also, see Barthes, Silverman, and Wayne.

<sup>xiv</sup> Broeck summarizes a concept, "pornotroping," which Hortense Spillers inaugurated in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe."

<sup>xv</sup> Wilderson, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, especially the chapters on *Monster's Ball*.

<sup>xvi</sup> Marriott, "Lynching and Photography." In *On Black Men*

<sup>xvii</sup> See, for example, Jeremy Varon's "The Excesses and Limits of Revolutionary Violence," in *Bringing the War Home...*; and John Castelucci's *Big Dance: The Untold Story of Weather-Man Kathy Boudin and the Terrorist Family that Committed the Brinks Robbery Murders*. New York: Dodd Mead, 1986.

<sup>xviii</sup> The first 500 pages of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* were not translated into English until the 1970s, when the BLA was underground; but Gramsci strategies and sensibilities are infused in their practices and theorizing.

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