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UNBEARABLE BLACKNESS

Jared Sexton

O, speak obliquely, if at all, of History and its slaves.

—Tisa Bryant, *Unexplained Presence*

You explain that the political movement gathered beneath the “Black Lives Matter”¹ banner has amplified and updated the long-standing demand to end state-sanctioned violence against black people and populations in and beyond the United States. You outline how the eponymous slogan has proliferated over the past year and how it now links, rhetorically if not conceptually, a range of racial justice campaigns across an expansive geography and a complex network of local, state, national, and international organizing efforts. You point to its inscription on posters and placards throughout the visual archive of the demonstrations, ongoing at this writing, following the killing of Michael Brown by Officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri, on August 9, 2014.

“#BlackLivesMatter is both a call to action and a response to the ways in which our lives have been devalued.” For you to utter this deceptively simple declarative statement amid “an infinite array of dangers” is no mean feat (Hartman, 63). Even as you try to come to terms, impossibly, with the absurdity of the world that this claim indexes, you are still unsure of what is signifying in what you’ve just said. Black Lives Matter: how so and to whom, in what ways and by what means, when and under what conditions, precisely? What, moreover, does it mean to matter at all, much less for life or a life to matter, for lives to matter, let alone for *black* lives to matter? Do black lives matter only when taken together, or taken apart, or taken apart together? Black lives are (a) strange matter.

You think also, in this moment, about the unspeakable, perhaps unimaginable ways that black lives have been devalued, and you have trouble determining when to start the story—or history or mythology or fable—or how far afield to draw your sphere of concern. Who, after

all, are your people? And, again, did or do *those* lives have value in the first place? Did or do they not, rather, antagonize value? Can black lives as such be counted and counted on, in or as a form or principle? Are they accountable or are they supernumerary? Add to that the fact that you cannot but wonder about the sort of action that might respond to that devaluing, or originary nonvalue, and to speculate, indeed, about forms of value created or derived otherwise; the value of a color, all color, or the notes of another score. The usual repertoire won't do.

And what of your allies, coalescing around the matter or mattering of black lives lost or taken, today all clamoring that they are so much with you as to be you too? Which side you are on is easier to assert than to ascertain. Your beautiful statement of a universal particular is turned on its head as the agglutination of the world's largest particular universal, voiced in radical newspeak. Get out and testify, you think, make it plain. The police are marching with you now as well, expressing sympathy and solidarity with the people, *your* people, and they are denying their terrible and terrifying social function in the selfsame moment of execution. You are losing track of where policing ends and protesting begins. Get out and clarify, you think, speak on it. Take *action*. You want to imagine a practice in "the default of the political, in the absence of the rights of man or the assurances of the self-possessed individual, and perhaps even without a 'person,' in the usual meaning of the term" (Hartman, 66). You raise the ultrapolitical possibility of a "spooky action at a distance"—think otherworldly, act nonlocally.²

A comrade declares: "Black people in the United States and worldwide are the only people . . . for whom it is not productive to speak in terms of police brutality." Not because police brutality as such is not a pervasive problem and a mortal threat, but rather because the reigning political philosophy has been built on fundamental concepts and categories inadequate for the analysis. "The world," or at least that political world in which legible claims and nameable losses are characteristic, "is not ready to think about policing in the way that it affects black people. We are policed all the time and everywhere" (Wilderson). You wonder what to do in a world like this. How many dimensions does it entail? "What shape does resistance or rebellion acquire when the force of repression is virtually without limit, when terror resides within the limits of the socially tolerable, when the innocuous and the insurgent meet an *equal* force of punishment" (Hartman, 63,

emphasis added)? Innocuous or insurgent, it makes no difference. You are never innocent, so you waste no breath pleading with a “redeeming adjective” (Kelley, 108). It makes you want to throw up both your hands and holler, “Don’t Shoot!” You do not doubt that they will, and you halfway wish they would, again, here and now. “Don’t shoot!” or “Go on and shoot!” What’s the difference?³ You wish them out of existence, their whole world.

You come to this, here’s the marrow of it, not moving, not standing, it’s too much to hold up, what I really want to say is, I don’t want no fucking country, here or there and all the way back, I don’t like it, none of it. (Brand 1997, 48)

But this is not a positive program. This is a politics without claim or name. You won’t even concede that it’s negative dialectics. It is much worse than that, or much better, depending on the vantage, and the wish. You do everything “with the acknowledgment that conditions will most likely remain the same.” No bullshit. The slogans are for the press, and that imaginary audience you say you must address, but in your heart you know they aren’t true, performative contradictions all. You mask that knowledge because you think you need allies to protect against isolation, because you think solidarity is always and only engendered by coalitions, because you think you need friends beyond those whose raised hands like yours make no earthly difference, except to elongate the target, because you think you have some already. You need to be reassured that you have not fallen prey to resignation or fatalism or irresponsibility, that you have not given up on struggle as a way of life, as *living*. No, you cannot but recognize, if no one else will, “the enormity of the breach instituted by slavery” (Hartman, 51).

That breach establishes the fundamentals of a negrophobic society, an antiblack world, and you feel it set violently against you, not as an idea, but in your very body, your “actual being” (Fanon, 142). The breach is an established fact for you, from the cradle to the grave, and you have nowhere from whence to go once more unto it. You are in the breach and of it. We *all* are, you say, but few listen. You are never innocent and you realize the children must know it too. You wonder what is the minimum age for the loss of innocence or its absence. The children know that innocence is not black. They never had it to lose. And they will have occasion to learn as much, over and over again.

You live out a valueless form of life whose value exists as potential in and of another world, a higher-dimensional space. You cannot protect yourself and you will not be saved. You will learn that lesson to the young ones and pass it on to them as a mission or a curse. You cannot protect them with your love or advice and no one has yet devised an art of war sufficient to the task. The hatred of the world is upon you. It is also within you. It is the substance of your waking dreams, “the single most constant fact of [your] existence.”⁴ None of which diminishes your desire to fight. You understand now that black lives matter, not in or to the present order of knowledge that determines human being, but only ever against it, outside the limits of the law. “Black Lives Matter” is a radical will and testament. You sense in this a displacement of the human held up between your eventful protests against a nonhuman status and your everyday celebrations of an inhuman excess otherwise known as *black power*.⁵

“Black Lives Matter” is, from its inception, a feminist and queer proposition. It does not require modification or specification or expansion against a presumptively male and heterosexual victim of anti-black violence. It *is* that modification and specification and expansion, the collective enunciation of black feminist and queer activist intervention and leadership in the international demonstrations following the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin in the summer of 2013. Such leadership—radically democratic in form and content—has only continued and grown since that time (Pierre-Louis). The phrase was coined by Alicia Garza (Executive Director of People Organized to Win Employment Rights), Patrisse Cullors (Founding Executive Director of Dignity and Power Now), and Opal Tometi (Executive Director of Black Alliance for Just Immigration) in order to challenge expressly “the narrative out there about black men being the only ones . . . impacted by state violence” and to assert, likewise, that when “we’re talking about Black Lives Matter, we’re talking about *all black lives*” (Smith, emphasis added): Jordan Davis *and* Renisha McBride *and* Eric Garner *and* Aiyana Stanley-James *and* Sean Bell *and* CeCe McDonald *and* Jonathan Ferrell *and* Rekia Boyd *and* . . . The overriding question is, how do we create a world where black lives matter to everyone? Put differently, how do we imagine the “only thing in the world that’s worth the effort of starting: The end of the world” (Fanon, 76)?

Let us assume that the concept of the human, or a certain dominant conception of the human, stands in the way of any collective and insurgent reevaluation of black life as such. Yet the specter of captivity that haunts black experience is both the condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility for the displacement of the human as such.⁶ To think further about such conditions one could do worse than lend attention to a very rich and provocative “forum on violence” featured in a October 9, 2012, article from *The Feminist Wire* website, cofounded by Tamura Lomax and Hortense Spillers. Omar Ricks, editor of the forum, opens his commentary with the following question: “How can we be ethically opposed to some forms of violence while being in favor of others?”⁷ On the one hand, this is a version of the paramount question *internal* to Left politics, a question about the consistency of radical analysis and practice in face of “cross-cutting issues” (Cohen 1999), or, in another valence, of outright conflicts of interest. In this sense, the question bears directly on the possibility and the potential, the form and the function of coalition. And it bears repeating here that the etymology of the word “coalition” relates to nourishment; to coalesce is to nourish one another, to supply what is necessary for life, together, whatever that may be. This is also a question, with reference to the exemplary work of Wahneema Lubiano (1999), about the ways that the state structures or solicits the desire and identification of its erstwhile radical opponents and enemies such that state violence gains and retains the aura of legitimacy, or at least inevitability, even in the eyes of its victims and at the direct expense of the legitimacy of one’s own constituent insurgency or one’s very sense of self.

On the other hand, the question can be inflected in a distinct but related way, as a matter of how to theorize and to politicize violence in the midst of violence, to indicate the wetness of water while submerged in it, if you will, and to ask affirmatively and even pragmatically rather than critically or poignantly: “How can we be ethically opposed to some forms of violence while being in favor of others?” I am highlighting the multivalent nature of Ricks’s opening question, and pointing up the dialectical relation between the two inflections I’ve offered, with a keen regard for what seems a crucial aspect of *The Feminist Wire*’s stated mission. From the website:

The mission of *The Feminist Wire* is to provide socio-political and cultural critique of feminist, anti-racist and anti-imperialist politics pervasive in

all forms and spaces of private and public lives of individuals globally. Of particular critical interest to us are social and political phenomena that block, negate, or limit the satisfaction of goods or ends that humans, especially the most vulnerable, minimally require for living free of structural violence. *The Feminist Wire* seeks to valorize and sustain pro-feminist representations and create alternative frameworks to build a just and equitable society.

Recalling our guiding question—“How can we be ethically opposed to some forms of violence while being in favor of others?”—does this formal distinction about structure bear on the pursuit of the ethical demand? *Structural* violence: compared to what? Can the structural form of violence be delimited and, if so, how? In other words, can we conceptualize it and, if so, can that conceptualization be perceived, and can that perception be represented? Need it be, in order to do something about it, assuming one is ethically opposed to it? Assuming, too, that this opposition is also an endorsement of “the satisfaction of goods or ends that humans, especially the most vulnerable, minimally require,” whatever and whoever those might be.

Ricks is surely posing an ethical question in his editorial commentary, a question of how we might position ourselves as partisans in the matter of violence, in a forum *on* violence, a place of assembly of the people to discuss the matter of violence in a context characterized *by* violence, a structure, a strange form of relation, a dynamic, perhaps, frozen in space and time. Concerning violence, however, Ricks and the dozen-and-a-half contributors to this forum are also formulating a question about the *nature* of the violence in question. They are asking—in a series about slavery and colonialism, immigration and nativism, gender and sexual violence, that is by turns essay, meditation, *reportage*, fiction, and poetry—*what* are the forms of violence we oppose and favor? To these philosophical queries—one ontological, the other ethical—I would add two more—one epistemological, the other aesthetic: how do we *know* anything at all about the forms of violence we oppose and favor, and how might that knowledge or that violence be *represented*?

In *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Dionne Brand cites philosopher David Turnbull, who writes in his well-known 1989 study of comparative cartography, *Maps Are Territories*, “In order to find our way successfully, it is not enough just to have a map. We need a cognitive schema as well as practical mastery of way-finding.” Brand responds to the point:

This door [of no return] is really the door of dreams. This existence in the Diaspora is like that—dreams from which one never wakes. Then what here can be called cognition let alone a schema? A set of dreams, a strand of stories which never come into being, which never coalesce. One is not in control in dreams; dreams take place, the dreamer is captive, even though it is the dreamer who is dreaming. Captured in one's own body, in one's own thoughts, to be out of possession of one's mind; *our cognitive schema is captivity*. (29, emphasis added)

She continues, as if anticipating charges of pessimism: "But what of all rebellions, emancipations, political struggles for human rights? Aren't these part of the schema, too?" "Yes," she replies. "Except for the perpetual retreats and recoveries. In the Diaspora, as in bad dreams, you are constantly overwhelmed by the persistence of the spectre of captivity" (29). To be overwhelmed in this way suggests a loss of bearings; and to lose one's bearings is to lose the very means by which any loss whatsoever can be registered; it is *to lose the capacity for loss . . .* "even though it is the dreamer who is dreaming." Brand writes of "the sudden awful liability of one's own body" produced, singularly, by the dispossessions of slavery, "the epidemic sickness with life that would become hereditary," and "the antipathy which would shadow all subsequent events" (21). None of which recommends feelings of belonging or sympathy or togetherness. These are dreams and stories that never coalesce.

At the outset of her reflections, Brand relates an anecdote from her childhood in which she asks her grandfather for the name of the people from which her family descended. Her grandfather says that he knows, but if she continues to pester him about it, he won't be able to remember. So she waits, for days and then weeks, months, years. No answer. Eventually, she reports:

The name of the people we came from has ceased to matter. A name would have comforted a thirteen-year-old. The question however was more complicated, more nuanced. That moment between my grandfather and I several decades ago *revealed a tear in the world . . .* the rupture this exchange with my grandfather revealed was greater than the need for familial bonds. It was a rupture in history, a rupture in the quality of being. (4–5, emphasis added)

A rupture in history, in the quality of being, slavery bears on more than the complicated genealogy of African-derived populations in the

Americas—what Brand calls “the end of traceable beginnings” (5)—and so cannot be addressed fully by any historical account or sociological investigation or cultural anthropology, valuable as those might be. It cannot be addressed fully by any aesthetic inquiry, even if such is necessary. And, ultimately, slavery cannot be addressed fully if it is only addressed as a matter of *black* experience, rather than the epochal transformation it inaugurates on a global scale: “a tear in the world” is not something that happens solely to Africans; it is something that happens to *everyone*, and with radically incommensurate effects. Is the language of structural violence, then, adequate “to describe *that* loss of bearings” (21, emphasis added) and the paradoxical orientation, the cognitive schema, it continues to provide for every claim to and for history, being, and world?

This is the question that animates what Michael Hanchard (1999) calls “Afro-Modernity,” an ensemble of expressions and commentaries that are not only “responses to the Middle Passage and racial slavery” but also “[responses] to the age and the technological, normative, and societal *conditions* that made the Middle Passage and racial slavery *possible*” (247, emphasis added). The question of the possibility of racial slavery is, we might say, the question of the possibility of global modernity itself, including the development of historical capitalism and the advent of European imperialism and its colonial devolutions. It bears repeating, following the rather different researches of Hortense Spillers and José Buscaglia-Salgado, that the Middle Passage begins along lines of longitude, north to the Mediterranean basin by the mid-1400s, well before the Iberian transatlantic enterprise is conceived, much less commenced. As the latter writes in his *Undoing Empire* (2003):

The fact is that when we think of the Atlantic contact zone as the place when the world of modernity/coloniality emerged, it is possible to say, at least regarding two of the components of the constitutive triumvirate, that there was a contact zone in the Old World before there was contact in the New World. In this sense . . . and contrary to commonly held beliefs and longstanding prejudices, the mulatto world [constituted along the African/European axis] predated and conditioned what would later become known as *mestizaje*. (48)

Whatever veracity there is to the description of the mulatto world as a contact zone, it is not the truth of the matter, any more than it is the truth of the matter to talk about racial slavery as one among many

forced migrations in modern history. Or to talk about racial slavery as a species of racial oppression or an aspect of the coloniality of power or a variety of social death or even a form of genocide. If one attends to the movement of Brand's thought here, and reads it alongside Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (2006), with which it remains in a sort of silent dialogue, one cannot but hear the resonance of the metaphysical destruction that the revolutionary from Martinique attributes to "the Slavery that dehumanized [his] ancestors"—a rupture in the quality of being.

When Fanon upbraids his comrade Jean-Paul Sartre for forgetting that "[the black] suffers in his [or her] body quite differently from the white" (117), he does not simply mean that the "species division" that characterizes racial slavery produces forms of suffering exclusive to the enslaved African, though this may indeed be the case. Fanon, like Brand, is identifying a *way* of suffering that has no analog and that can produce no witnesses, not only because the words of such testimony cannot but be smothered (Kofman), but also, and more importantly, because racial slavery is "a phantasmatic history of a never happened that keeps on happening." It is not only unrepresented or unrepresentable; it is "present but without presence" (Marriott 2007, 6). David Marriott will call this "the occult presence of racial slavery, nowhere but nevertheless everywhere, a dead time [that] never arrives and does not stop arriving"; not loss, "but the devastation of never having had" (xxi). His work, again, like Brand, is "about what lives on from that happening, and about a projected future so dismal that it is impossible to remember why we should long for it to be fulfilled" (xxi).

As noted, Hanchard speaks of the normative conditions that made the Middle Passage and racial slavery possible. I hear in that reference an attempt to supplement, without diminishing, the analysis of political economy by discerning the libidinal economy that underwrites and sutures its social dynamics. And so in its formulation of power, and particularly of the nature and role of violence, Afro-Modernity seeks not only to describe the operations of systems, structures, and institutions, but also to anatomize the fantasies of murderous hatred and sexual consumption and unlimited destruction that motivate the realization of such violence. It is an analysis, in other words, of how anti-black fantasies attain *objective* value in the political and economic life of society and in the psychic life of culture as well. These fantasies do not

render blacks, like much of the planet's inhabitants, subject to death in an economy of disposability; rather, they subject blacks to "the interminable time of meaningless, impersonal *dying*" (Marriott 2007, 230, emphasis added). There is a critical difference here. The legacy bequeathed by racial slavery, "that black life is meaningless and so black death is meaningless," is

a legacy in which death is nothing . . . neither a passage nor a journey, but simply the arbitrary visitation of a catastrophic violence . . . a *death that cannot ever die* because it depends on the total degradation and disavowal of black life. . . . This is no longer death but a *deathliness* that cannot be . . . brought into meaning. This is death as nothing, less than nothing; as such, this death is never assumable as possibility." (230, emphasis added)

In her own earlier critical idiom, Spillers approaches this domain in terms of "the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation" (208). What she finds, in a survey of American culture spanning the century and a half since the Emancipation Proclamation, is not some great variation and shifting in the discourse apropos of the career of the African American in the United States. Instead, she finds, in a famous passage, that "dominant symbolic activity . . . remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, show movement, as the human subject is 'murdered' over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise" (208). This finding, if taken seriously, chastens our *desire* to discover in political and popular culture something new about contemporary representations of racial blackness, whether we designate this moment post-civil rights, post-Cold War, post-9/11, and so on. It was an understanding of these murderous, archaic passions that pushed the late black feminist poet and journalist Judy Simmons to declare a generation ago: "The single most constant fact of my existence is their hatred." Her conclusion is stark and resonant: "I am too young for my history" (qtd. in Lorde, 156).

If the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation continue to ground dominant symbolic activity across the *longue durée*, it is nonetheless the case that their endless disguises continue to adapt and mutate to meet the exigencies of the now. Elsewhere I outline how this dominant symbolic activity informs the progressive political and intellectual discourse of nonblack nonwhite minorities in the United States

and, along a different itinerary, shapes the practice of native scholars and activists, and operates within the precincts of black studies itself.⁸ For now, I want to look across the political spectrum toward the contemporary “pro-life” movement in order to suggest something of the lability and lethality of these originating metaphors in the nexus of biopolitics and neoliberalism. In so doing, I am prompted by Dani McClain’s brief but insightful article, “The Murder of Black Youth is a Reproductive Justice Issue.” She writes therein of the need to reframe the matter of anti-black police violence as an element of the reproductive oppression of black women:

Often such events are covered as a story about race, police violence, white supremacy or laws that protect murderers from prosecution. But the killing of Michael Brown, like the killing of many young black people before him, is rarely framed as a feminist issue or as an issue of pressing importance to those who advocate for choice, self-determination and dignity as they relate to family life.⁹

To approach the matter of Ferguson through the conceptual lens of reproductive justice and to understand it more generally as a question of black feminist politics not only draws attention to the fact that black women and girls *also* suffer the forms of state-sanctioned violence typically associated with black men and boys—that is, they are killed directly by police officers, security guards, and vigilantes. It also holds in place the understanding that every time these same forces kill black men and boys they are *also* victimizing, directly and indirectly, those black women and girls who raise and care for them. One of the overarching advantages of this critical perspective is its ability to shift away from a narrow emphasis on the attack on black masculine empowerment—what used to be called “manhood rights”—to a far more expansive formulation of assault on black reproductive freedom. What might it mean to stand on its head the patriarchal assumption that black women’s suffering is a disgrace to black men and rethink the gendered violence against black men as a component of gendered violence against black women? This violence, properly understood, encompasses the broad capacity of black people to reproduce *as a people*, including the freedom from structural violence that might constitute conditions of livability, but it is aimed most precisely at the nullification of black female sexual autonomy—“the right to have children, not have children, and to parent the children we have in safe and healthy environments” (McClain).

On that score, many will recall that in the 2004 U.S. presidential election season, President George W. Bush signaled his pro-life voter base during a televised debate with Senator John Kerry when he offered that the principle criterion for selection of Supreme Court justice nominees should be “the *Dred Scott* case, which is where judges years ago said that the Constitution allowed slavery because of personal property rights. That’s personal opinion. That’s not what the Constitution says. The Constitution of the United States says we’re all—you know, it doesn’t say that. It doesn’t speak to the equality of America. And so I would pick people that would be strict constructionists.”¹⁰ Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Paul Greenberg writes, more clearly, that, for this generation, “our own Roger Taney,” chief justice of the United States Supreme Court in 1857, is Justice Harry Blackmun, “author of [the majority opinion in the 1973 case] *Roe v. Wade*, the *Dred Scott* decision of our time.” As these examples indicate, the contemporary pro-life movement claims *Dred Scott v. Sanford* as its legal and political touchstone, through which it mines a metaphorical lode in attempts to generate what historian Milton Sernett calls “public ethics by similitude” (461). In his examination of the “loop-back” tactic that draws a reactionary political movement as a parallel to or extension of “the whole Black freedom and civil rights struggle,” Sernett argues:

In retrospect, the campaign for Black freedom appears as an untarnished good, and the names of such evangelical zealots as Wilberforce, Woolman, and Weld echo down the corridors of history. In retrospect, the abolitionist impulse, which fostered tactics of moral suasion and political action, is seen as having opposed a moral blight gravely threatening to the highest Christian ideals and the social and moral order which was to be modeled on them. (474)

We might debate the idea that “in retrospect, the campaign for Black freedom appears as an untarnished good” to all concerned parties, but it does seem clear that the pro-life movement—like so many other post-civil rights campaigns left, right and center—is attempting rhetorically to establish “Black freedom” as “an untarnished good” insofar as their identification with or citation of such an ideal might afford the moral high ground. But when applied with some rigor, the analogy between the denial of legal personhood to the fetus and the denial of legal personhood to the slave, alongside the identification of the pro-life movement “with the moral forces generated by the social and political revolution

of . . . the whole Black freedom struggle," produces a number of perverse effects.

Taken at its most basic, the analogy of the fetus and the slave recasts the womb as a slave estate and the state of fetal development as a condition of servitude or, better, a state of captivity—fetal space is transmogrified into fatal space as the pro-life movement reveals its hostility not simply to abortion, but to pregnancy per se. It is on the basis of this misunderstanding that the Reverend Clenard Childress (2011), founder of the New Jersey-based Black Genocide Project, can transpose the conventional pro-life message for a presumptively black audience: "The most dangerous place for an African American to be is in the womb of their African American mother."¹¹ On first blush, the right to life for the fetus is conflated in this discourse with the right to liberty of the slave. However, to maintain consistency, or allow for mutual contamination, we must see that both rights would apply in both cases, such that the right to liberty for the fetus unfolds as a matter of *escape*, a liberty for infants with a fugitive status that will characterize their duration of residence in the free territory of the postnatal world—birth canal as Underground Railroad. The more radical prospects of the cessation of the slave trade and the abolition of slavery in this event would entail the total destruction of female reproductive capacities, sterilization performed by political obstetricians in the very place otherwise idealized and defended as the origin of life. In fact, the abolition of fetal slavery, as it were, would be secured only by the transcendence of sexual difference altogether.

If we reverse the direction of the metaphoric transfer, things become even more peculiar. The slave estate in its turn becomes a nurturing, presumptively white womb wherein the civilizing mission is incorporated into the innermost membrane, or intima, of the uterine lining. Racial blackness as the sine qua non of enslavement is devolved into a form of prenatal animation—"stuff floating," as one advocate terms it, in amniotic fluid somewhere between the embryonic and the fetal, between swelling and sucking, "a terrifying excess which, although it negates what we understand as 'humanity,' is inherent to being-human" (Badiou and Žižek, 82). Yet because the proslavery arguments of a Justice Taney would assert not only the perpetual servitude of the slave but also the perpetuity of the slave estate, the resultantly interminable pregnancy blurs the line between the womb and the tomb, deranges the

space and temporality of birth and death, and produces an unviable gestation that never comes to term. It produces, in a word, an *unbearable blackness*. Emancipation in this schema could only take the form of violent intervention, a caesarian birth, so named from the ancient Roman *Lex Caesarea* permitting the procedure for the sake of preserving the life of a royal child against complications fatal to the mother. For the slave power, the inevitably pre-term delivery of immaculately conceived interracial issue could only result in infant mortality (aka “the extinction thesis”) or adoption (aka “the repatriation thesis”).¹² In this scenario, then, sexual reproduction is not transcended; it is suspended indefinitely.

But whereas the authors of this analogy declare prenatal blackness to be unbearable because it is *unable* to leave the womb, the crossracial identification of a presumptively white pro-life activist inhabits the figural space of the unborn because it is *unwilling* to leave the womb. That is to say, a political initiative that in every respect betrays profound negrophobia turns out to be, at its most vulnerable and most strident moment, beholden to a repressed *desire to be black*, to be that indeterminate “stuff floating,” sustained by a ubiquitous and omnipotent force whose enveloping presence is directly sensed. The refusal thus lodges itself in a fantasy of *prenatal nonmortality*, a form of animate existence impervious to what Jacques Lacan (1998) alluded to as a castration *prior* to sexual difference; this is a hallucinatory projection of the primordial, elemental, undifferentiated *vita* that blacks, in the racist imagination, are supposed to enjoy. If, in her *Life as Surplus*, Melinda Cooper is correct in suggesting that dominant symbolic activity figures America as “the unborn born again” (152), then her analysis of the coalition of the institutions of finance capital, science and technology, and the religious right must be augmented to account for the darkness at the heart of this “lust for unalloyed life . . . a death drive that wishes death away” (Eigen, 81). And if the dehumanizing conditions of enslavement are defined, in part, by “the end of traceable beginnings” (Brand 2001, 5), then the political fantasy of a nondescript unborn sensuous *thing* is no less inhuman. Pro-life advocates, much like their proslavery progenitors, accuse the opposition of the “alienation of (natural) affections”—whether among members of the white race generally or between mother and child specifically—but their archaic minstrel dream fixates on a force greater than the putative threats of a desire that is

wayward (i.e., miscegenation) or unfruitful (i.e., abortion). The true preoccupation of the pro-life movement, its central object of dread and fascination, is the total *cancellation* of desire and, hence, the elimination of pleasure and pain, by an uninterrupted enjoyment.

In a provocative essay on the relationship between photography and lynching in his book *On Black Men* (2000), Marriott describes the production of racial blackness in the white imagination as an “afflicted,” “fatal way of being alive”: a figure reduced through captivity and mutilation to something that “don’t look human.” In the current conjuncture, as the violence of an authentic upheaval now turns in the void and the floating stuff of reactionary dreams is backlit by the diagnostic imaging of the three-dimensional sonogram, racial blackness reappears as an affected, fetal way of being alive, both unborn and undead: blackness unbearable and unburi-able. In his later text *Haunted Life* (2007), Marriott, in a rather direct line of thought, maintains:

Blackness has become a right to death that sees in death its most essential property. The essence of blackness, its origin or its possibility, would be this right to death; but a death denuded of that . . . sovereignty that gains from death its own sacrificial mastery . . . and maintains itself in it. This is life as the work of death, a work born of fidelity to death, but death without transcendence. (226)

The pursuit of this right to death—which is not to be confused with a right or a willingness or even a wish to *die*—poses an ethical question, posed most famously by Fanon, about whether “this death, which testifies to a lawless violence almost beyond representation, can be redeemed, in turn, by black revolutionary violence” (230–31), a violence set loose by nothing less than an affirmation of a tear in the world itself. And so I offer in closing one last contribution from Ricks, a fable about a day in the life of an Africanized honeybee. I preface it with a paragraph from the *Wikipedia* entry about the notorious species:

Africanized honey bees, known colloquially as “killer bees,” are some hybrid varieties of the Western honeybee species, (*Apis mellifera*), produced originally by cross-breeding of the African honey bee *A. m. scutellata*, with various European honeybees such as the Italian bee *A. m. ligustica* and the Iberian bee *A. m. iberiensis*. The hybrid bees are far more aggressive than any of the various European subspecies. Small swarms of Africanized bees are capable of taking over European honeybee hives by invading the hive and establishing their own queen.

Finally, “Africanized: A Story” (2012).

She swung at me with her open left hand. I had been deeply ensconced in my work—as workers must be—and I didn’t execute quickly enough. She grazed me with her pinky, and I felt the crushing pain of a broken wing as I spun a corkscrew across the back corner of the kitchen and ricocheted off of a rare, intact portion of the torn screen through which I had grown accustomed to entering.

When I touched a pulsating, translucent strand of hair that had emerged prematurely (and unattractively) from her 27-year-old chin, she hissed through her nostrils and twitched in her smug chauvinism at the merest hint of cross-species contact, causing me to slip and land with a thump near the wrist of her resting forearm.

It all took me by surprise. I had harassed many humans. None but those temporary squatters had dared take a swing at me in all my days—and certainly no one with such good hand-eye coordination had lived in this old bungalow since the days of the Originals. And so I had not been accustomed to landing so hard.

In the course of my twenty-three-day life as a worker, I had always been able to land with careful grace, where and when would best please the Queen. And I had avoided these kinds of fights with the same grace.

But this human was different.

She appeared to feel a deep sense of entitlement to this space, our space. And since our concerns could not be reconciled with hers, we couldn’t coexist here, and I surmised that she must be possessed of a passionately felt will to annihilate all my kind. Against this I would be *absolutely powerless*. And I faced the terrifying reality that I could not reason with her. It was all going to end here at the terminus of her slender, auburn-freckled arm.

I felt all my days collapse into this moment and decided for the only Last Act of Glory afforded me. I plunged my barbed stinger into an open pore.

The last thing I heard was a roar, probably an obscenity in some human language.

To me, it was *Gospel Music*.

I had wanted to die pretty much like this. Not old and full of weeks, and abandoned beneath some creeping vine where I had been competing with those fucking hummingbirds for all eternity. And not from the disoriented starvation of that dreadful electromagnetic field near the cell phone tower. This was the way to go. Locked in struggle with an organism that had directly threatened the hive. *For the Queen*.

And so I shifted what remained of my weight forward and felt the sublime *jouissance* of self-evisceration just milliseconds before the Screaming One squished the only body I had ever known.

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Notes

1. The phrase was coined by a trio of black feminist political organizers (Garza) and has been popularized in the present context by, among others, Tamara Lomax, editor of *The Feminist Wire*. See also Pierre-Louis; Smith.

2. This is, of course, Einstein's famous phrase describing his critique of quantum mechanics in the interwar years of the early twentieth century. See "Einstein's 'Spooky Action at a Distance.'" The idea of rethinking political action in light of developments in quantum physics, thereby updating figures of political theory drawn largely from the Newtonian paradigm, is being advanced most pertinently by Denise Ferreira da Silva (2013).

3. This speech act is often dramatized by a mocking choreography of group surrender, wherein demonstrators collectively display their empty hands, palms open and overhead, to the police. Some go so far as to kneel down and interlace their fingers behind their heads. Before long, others will lie face down. Perhaps eventually they will handcuff themselves and line up against the wall, or along the sidewalk. In satirizing this paradigmatic encounter between black people and the police, the scene nonetheless presents an aporia: "Is it possible to consider, let alone imagine, the agency of the performative when the black performative is inextricably linked with the specter of contented subjection, the tortuous display of the captive body, and the ravishing of the body that is the condition of the other's pleasure" (Hartman, 52)?

4. Judy Simmons, quoted in Lorde (2012), 156.

5. I am informed on this point by the ongoing public dialogue between Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek as encapsulated in their coauthored text, *Philosophy in the Present* (2009). Badiou states there: "'Inhuman' must be understood as the affirmative conceptual element from within which one thinks the displacement of the human. And this *displacement of the human* always presupposes that one has accepted that the initial correlation is the link between the human and the inhuman, and not the perpetuation of the human as such" (82). Žižek, in turn, elaborates on this link with a riff on the Kantian indefinite judgment, stating: "[Saying] 'he is not human' is not the same as [saying] 'he is inhuman'—'he is not human' means simply that he is external to humanity, animal or divine, while 'he is inhuman' means . . . that he is neither human nor [nonhuman], but marked by a terrifying excess which, although it negates what we understand as 'humanity,' is inherent to being-human" (21–22). On the notion of *black power*, a form of power that is

black, rather than Black Power, a form of power for blacks, see Darieck Scott's *Extravagant Abjection*, where he writes: "This power (which is also a way of speaking of freedom) is found at the point of the apparent erasure of ego-protections, at the point at which the constellation of tropes that we call *identity, body, race, nation* seem to reveal themselves as utterly penetrated and compromised, without defensible boundary. 'Power' in this context thus assumes a form that seems repugnant or even nonsensical, for its conditions of appearance are defeat and violation." (9).

6. Dionne Brand (2001) writes: "In the Diaspora, as in bad dreams, you are constantly overwhelmed by the persistence of the spectre of captivity" (29). For a brilliant discussion of the displacement of the human within the historical formation of black culture, see Keeling.

7. The question is deeply reminiscent of the political and intellectual labors of Joy James, evident from her first major work, *Resisting State Violence* (1996), to her recent volume, *Seeking the Beloved Community: A Feminist Race Reader* (2013).

8. See, respectively, my "People-of-Color-Blindness," "The *Vel* of Slavery: Tracking the Figure of the Unsovereign," and "African American Studies."

9. On this score, see also Lomax; Silliman et al.; Dorothy Roberts.

10. For a discussion of this comment in historical context, see Ethan Greenberg, especially part 3II.

11. For a critical discussion of African American participation in the "pro-life" and other right-wing movements, see, for instance, Dillard; Prisock.

12. For a good critical discussion of Frederick Hoffman's notorious 1897 "extinction thesis" regarding the fate of the American Negro, see Samuel Roberts's *Infectious Fear*, especially chapter 2. On the nineteenth-century movement to repatriate African-derived people in the United States, see Eric Burin's *Slavery and the Peculiar Solution*.

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