Unburied Bodies
Martel, James R.

Published by Amherst College Press

Martel, James R.
Unburied Bodies: Subversive Corpses and the Authority of the Dead.
Amherst College Press, 2018.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/85741

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3001807
Chapter Four
Unburied Bodies of Color

In this chapter, I will turn from a general conversation about the unburied dead to focus on what I started this book with: the image of Michael Brown lying dead in the street (and, by extension, the murdered bodies of color depicted in James Baldwin’s “Going to See the Man” as well). In the case of Michael Brown, the fact that he was a black man is far from incidental: he died because he was black, and he was left lying unburied (and uncovered) because he was black. In thinking about the dead body of color—and, in this case, the dead black body, in particular—we seem to come to the ultimate sign of state (and quasi-state) power. While formally the United States (among most other modern nation-states) disavows all forms of racism and violence against people of color (although under President Trump this disavowal has become much thinner, almost to the vanishing point), in fact, state and social violence against bodies of color has a history that is much longer than that of the country itself. As is well known, not only did the United States participate in the slave trade and practice widespread domestic slavery, but the Constitution itself allowed for, indeed enshrined, slaveholding. The liberal tale about racism always claims that it is a remnant from preliberal times, and if there is any racism in this country, it is merely because liberalism hasn’t been asserted enough. If liberalism were truly triumphant, this argument goes, there would be no racists and no racially motivated killings by the police and other state and governmental actors. The liberal universal, this argument goes on to say, is truly capacious enough to hold all human beings (never mind the quibbling over who counts and who doesn’t count as human).
Yet this story is perhaps the greatest phantasm—or projection—of them all. The United States is and has been actively racist—and white supremacist—from its inception, and its entire history has been one of enslaving, defrauding, and killing people of color; the atrocities depicted in “Going to Meet the Man” are the veritable tip of the iceberg. In this way, the frequency with which black, Latinx, Muslim, Native American, and Asian and Pacific Islanders are rounded up, tortured, beaten, and killed with no reason at all is not some fluke that somehow “just keeps happening.” It is part and parcel of a regime that is racist, and rotten, to the core.

**Race and Biopolitics**

As already noted, the kinds of extreme violence that racism tends to evoke are part and parcel of the age of biopolitics. As Michel Foucault shows us, racism is not merely a part of biopolitics—the form of rule that has both supplanted and merged with sovereignty in our time—but rather the core aspect of that practice. As Foucault famously describes it, “The right of sovereignty was the right to take life and let live. And then this new [biopolitical] right is established: the right to make live and let die.”

To “make live” involves the control of human bodies and lives right down to the most minute and intimate details: “the ratio of births to deaths, the rate of reproduction, the fertility of the population and so on.”

To “let die” indicates the changing nature of death as well. As Foucault asserts, under conditions of biopolitics, “death was no longer something that swooped down on life—as in an epidemic. Death was now something permanent, something that slips into life, perpetually gnaws at it, diminishes it and weakens it.” In the attempt to control life, there is also, as I have already discussed in previous chapters, a concomitant attempt to control death, to keep it at bay, or when the moment is deemed correct, to “let” it finally occur. (In fact, as with so many things, this pose of control disguises its opposite: an ongoing general—but not absolute, thanks to the workings of

---

2. Ibid., 243.
3. Ibid., 244.
modern medicine and other innovations—helplessness in the face of death.)

Just as in “Going to Meet the Man,” biopolitics represents an attempt to control—or if not to control, then to limit as much as possible—the presence of death. That struggle against death and mortality more generally moves from an individual body to the collective body of people (but crucially not all people).

As Foucault further reveals, once the move from sovereignty to biopolitics becomes more settled (not that sovereignty ever goes away; rather, it shifts in response to biopolitics and becomes what Bargu calls “biosovereignty”), the move from the state as the dealer of death (by execution) changes into the state as the regulator, along with many other forms of governmentality, seeking to “improve life by eliminating accidents, the random element, and deficiencies.” In this way, death becomes “beyond the reach of power, and power has a grip on it only in general, overall or statistical terms.”

For Foucault, the age of biopolitics is one in which death becomes a direct challenge to the dominant forms of power: “In the right of sovereignty, death was the moment of the most obvious and most spectacular manifestations of the absolute power of the sovereign; death now becomes, in contrast, the moment when the individual escapes all power, falls back on himself and retreats, so to speak, into his own privacy. Power no longer recognizes death. Power literally ignores death.” Although this seems to suggest that under conditions of sovereignty, death “works” for the state, I would slightly amend this to say that under conditions of sovereignty, it is the appearance that death is

4. In thinking about the modern attitude toward death, particularly in terms of the regime of medicine, I think of that old joke where someone who has a very disobedient dog tells the dog, “Just lie there; ignore me.” That illusion of control (where the dog then “obeys” what has been commanded) is similar to the “control” over death promised by medicine but also by archism more generally. When people die (as they inevitably will), the state or governmental regime more generally effectively says, “OK, now you can die. I will finally allow it,” as if it had the power to truly “let” someone die. Although, of course, the state and biopolitical actors can cause death (and do that all the time); they only have an impact on the matter of when someone dies, not over whether he or she dies at all. Similarly, medicine can prolong life, but it can’t make anyone escape death altogether.

5. Foucault, Society, 248.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
being “controlled” by the state that is more prominent due to the state’s easy, and visible, power to kill. In the current archist model framed by biopolitics, that control appears to be more elusive, hence the desire to “ignore” (i.e., to not believe in) death.

Because its original power over death must be manifestly visible, Foucault tells us that sovereignty necessarily takes on a new guise and role under conditions of biopolitics. Insofar as there is a shift in death (from the state meting it out to biopolitical regimes seeking to avoid death in any way possible), this poses a challenge for sovereignty. What can the state do when it can no longer kill? How will it justify or even express its existence? This, for Foucault, is where the question of race becomes preeminent for sovereign forms of authority. He writes,

I am certainly not saying that race was invented at this time. It had already been in existence for a very long time. But I think it functioned elsewhere. It is indeed the emergence of this biopower that inscribes it in the mechanisms of the State. It is at this moment that racism is inscribed as the basic mechanism of power, as it is exercised in modern States. As a result, the modern State can scarcely function without becoming involved with racism at some point, within certain limits and subject to certain conditions.8

Racism, Foucault goes on to say, “introduce[s] the break between what must live and what must die.”9 Furthermore, “the appearance within the biological continuum of the human race of races, the distinction among races, the hierarchy of races, the fact that certain races are described as good and that others, in contrast, are described as inferior: all this is a way of fragmenting the field of the biological that power controls. It is a way of separating out the groups that exist within a population . . . That is the first function of racism: to fragment, to create caesuras within the biological continuum addressed by biopower.”10

In other words, racism solves the dilemma of a state that has to help maintain the population it is interested in saving even as it must continue to deal out death. The state can continue to kill, continue to assert its “existence” (which it is forever compelled to do), under

---

8. Ibid., 254.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., 254–55.
conditions of biopolitics by cleaving off a part of the set of people it has to contend with and deeming them expendable. (In this regard, Agamben’s notion of *homo sacer* can be extended to whole groups and races of people; they too, it could be said, “may be killed and yet not sacrificed.”)\(^{11}\)

And Foucault identifies a second purpose for racism as well; extending the metaphor of war to the regulation of populations and the disciplining of bodies (which are not the same thing for Foucault), the state in effect says, “The very fact that you let more die will allow you to live more.”\(^{12}\) In other words, by removing this part of the population (either outright through genocide or through techniques such as mass incarceration, ghettoization, etc.), the conditions for approved—that is white, normative, and so on—life are improved or made possible. Foucault writes, “The fact that the other dies does not mean simply mean that I live in the sense that his death guarantees my safety; the death of the other, the death of the bad race, of the inferior race (or the degenerate, or the abnormal) is something that will make life in general healthier; healthier and purer.”\(^{13}\)

Here the sovereign function is not merely preserved for its own sake but becomes indispensable to biopolitical forms of authority as well. Consistent with the core of archist phantasms, the killing of others is seen as enhancing and even making possible the protection of and caretaking for the privileged population, thus ensuring that sovereign political forms and the state’s penchant for killing are preserved at the heart of the biopolitical (and now neoliberal) archist order.

This “them or us” model explains very well the phenomenon of lynching as described in “Going to Meet the Man” as well as the state’s relationship to terrorism more generally. It makes very clear how it is possible to give “life” to one community (i.e., a sense of their own transcendence of inevitable mortality) by giving “death” to another.

Although, on the surface, this model seems to “dehumanize” the populations targeted for death, my reading of “Going to Meet the Man” (with some help from Nietzsche) suggests that once

13. Ibid.
again the privileged population appears to attempt to escape human-
ness by transcending it, by exporting its death and humanness to other
people. Black people and other people of color are the mortal ones in
this rendition, and their condition is marked, above all, by the presence
and inevitability of death.

This is one place where thinking in terms of archism instead of
states per se becomes helpful, especially given the way the state and
other sovereign forms morph as they encounter other regimes
and disciplinary forms. If we think of states as the be all and end
all of politics, then we readily think that any threat to the state (such
as biopolitics or neoliberalism) is a threat to any form of rule, inviting
chaos and mayhem. To think instead of archism allows us to see, as
Foucault shows us, that there is no necessary distinction between states
and biopolitics and that they are subsumed under one complementary
mechanism of power, disciplinarity, and governmentality. If archism is
the broader phenomenon that encompasses not just states but govern-
mentality more generally, biopolitics, neoliberalism, and capitalism as
well are all interrelated. Even though we often think of these as being
unrelated (even opposing) forces, they all work together to demon-
strate and prove that they control and determine life, that the only
possible choice is to live under archism or face imminent death.

When it comes to questions of race, especially in terms of the popu-
lations that are excluded from the protections of the state, that act of
exclusion is not always straightforward. Even people of color—in the
U.S. context, anyway—are presumably included to some limited degree
within the biopolitical regime’s umbrella of protection, although in
their case, that patina of protection is razor thin, barely (if at all)
credible. To be black in America does not guarantee death, but it
does remove a level of protection and recognition, and the life of a
black person is therefore far more precarious and vulnerable (more
human, once again) than that of a white person. Some other regimes,
Nazi Germany being a prime example, drop this pretense completely

14. Here I am reminded of Trump’s “appeal” to black Americans. He asked, “What do
you have to lose [in supporting me]?” This question both cajoles (we can give you what
liberals have failed to give you for years) and threatens (you have one thing to lose: your
life, and that we will readily take away).
and declare full war on a targeted community (Jews, Roma, queer people, the disabled, communists, and others). Either way, the excluded community has a very tangible experience of its own marginalization, regardless of its official status or the degree to which its members are said to be included in the universal.

The Blankness of Race

In her own analysis of race as a means of determining human worth (who to “make live” and who to “let die,” in Foucault’s terms), Hortense Spillers argues that race “is not simply a metaphor and nothing more; it is the outcome of a politics . . . It is also a complicated figure, or metaphoricity, that demonstrates the power and danger of difference, that signs and assigns difference as a way to situate social subjects. If we did not already have ‘race’ and its quite impressive powers of proliferation, we would need to invent them. The social mechanism at work here is difference in, and as, hierarchy, although ‘race’ remains one of its most venerable master signs.”15 Race then for Spillers is the key marker of difference. It is how difference is considered and operationalized in contemporary states. It is present, she says, even in states that seem relatively racially homogenous. She argues, for example, that although Haiti, Somalia, and the former Yugoslavia seem not to be marked by “race as we understand it in the U.S. (i.e., as a question of skin color), nonetheless, in all three instances of community shattered by killing and violence, ‘color’ was—still is—displaced onto other features of the discriminatory. To that extent, ‘race’ marks both an in-itselfness and a figurative economy that can take on any number of different faces at the drop of a hat.”16 Thus race is a shifting, moving target; it is not inherent in skin color only (or even at all) but is generally a term for whatever mechanism of discrimination applies in a particular context.

As such, in thinking of Spillers’s arguments in light of Foucault’s own claims, it could be said that race is not only a projection; it is arguably the projection, the heart of the way that sovereignty and biopolitics


16. Ibid.
(i.e., once again, archism, at least in its current form) export and then seek to control their existential anxieties. Spillers argues that as the master signifier of difference (in keeping with Foucault’s reading of race’s role as well), race is also a kind of master fetish. She states that “unhooked from land, custom, language, lineage, and clan/tribal arrangements, modern ‘race’ joins the repertoire of fetish names bolstered by legislative strategy, public policy, and the entire apparatus of the courts and police force.”

For Spillers, the concept of race drowns out, submerges, and silences other forms of identity and solidarity: “What I am positing here is the blankness of ‘race’ where something else ought to be . . . the evacuation to be restituted and recalled as the discipline of a self-critical inquiry.”

The one thing I would add, taken from the previous discussion of Baldwin and Foucault, is that if race is, in fact, the master narrative of identity, the projection, its centrality is based, once again, on the way that it parses life from death—determining who must die so that others can escape, as it were, their own deaths.

Spillers’s own focus is not on the relation between race and death—the way it is constructed to enable the escaping or limitation of death for some at the expense of others—but rather on life and the way it offers its own forms of resistance. She seeks to recuperate from the lives of black people those means by which they deny and thwart the death-dealing that they receive.

Spillers’s reading of what she often calls “race” (in quotation marks) highlights its ambivalent qualities—its not-quite-realness and its metaphoricity. Given this vulnerability (which matches, and I would say reflects, the ephemeral and vulnerable nature of archism as well), Spillers speaks of “a power that counterveils another by an ethical decision.” She looks to the restitution and recall of that which race erases not so much to expose the “true nature” of identity beneath it but simply to recover all those qualities and attributes—all the life, that is—that race occludes as it divides and conquers.

17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 385.
19. Ibid.
For Spillers, Fanon’s own analysis of black subjectivity is problematic because it effectively describes an impossible situation. She writes, “It seems to me that the Fanonian approach to the psychoanalytic object [i.e., the nature of black subjectivity that he’d like to redeem] spins its wheels because it cannot discover a practice of ‘disalienation’ (Fanon’s word for it) within the resources of black culture, or an ethical position that is worth delineating according to the future of those cultures.”

For Spillers, Fanon’s error is to assume that the black subject has the white subject (and hence the colonial relationship) continually before her. Spillers looks to black culture, black experience, and black identity and kinship as an alternative: “In place of the Fanonian narrative, I should like to intrude a slightly different one: if psychic economy ‘grows,’ as it were, with the historical subject, doesn’t she have one long before she ‘knows’ that there is a ‘white man’ and certainly well in advance of her caring about him at all? If black is ‘normal,’ so long as . . ., then mustn’t this normalcy persist in an economized relationship to the shock/trauma of white encounter?” Spillers is looking for agency even in the context of the fetishism of the black/white binarism by decentering it. She does not so much move off from Fanon as seek to “have recourse to Fanon in a post-Fanonian juncture” based on his dynamism and the complexity and evolution of his thought.

Spillers makes a somewhat related point about W. E. B. DuBois. In his case, she argues:

…in working with the DuBoisian double [the double consciousness produced by the color line] we recover the sociopolitical dimensions that classical psychoanalysis and its aftermath sutured in a homogeneity of class interests, just as DuBois’ scheme must be pressured toward a reopened closure: the subject in the borrowed mirror is essentially mute. DuBois is speaking for him. It is time now, if it were not in 1903, for him to speak for himself, if he dares. That this speaking will not be simple is all the more reason why it must be done.

In both the case of Fanon and DuBois’s thought, Spillers is reckoning with the effects of projection and fetishism. The double consciousness

20. Ibid., 391; emphasis original.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., 393.
23. Ibid., 398.
DuBois evokes, or the effect of whiteness (a kind of colonization of the black subject) for Fanon, are products of that process of phantasmatic projection. Although she recognizes that these subjects of color are facing what can only be called a killing machine, Spillers is much more interested in what people of color—and, in particular, black people—can do about this while they are alive. She sees in life itself (and Saidiya Hartman, as I’ll discuss soon, has a similar view) the possibilities for resistance even despite the ongoing network of racism and violence that the black subject is continually exposed to.

In her desire to have the black subject speak for herself (a question I’ll also revisit in the conclusion), Spillers is offering that it is both possible and necessary to have agency and voice even amid the various projections that constitute the conditions of being a person of color in the contemporary world. Spillers’s work does not speak of an “authentic” black voice; her use of quotation marks around the term race suggests the way that identity is an ongoing and fluid phenomenon for her. Rather, the voice she is speaking of comes out of the same contingent and highly politicized grounds as the fetishized forms of subjectivity she is struggling against. Her point is that this fetishized subject is not the only kind of subject there is. Rather than cede the entirety of subjectivity to racist schemas, Spillers seeks to recuperate, from amid this troubled field of signification, a voice and a place for black people.

This is a contestation, as already noted, that arises from and among the living; Spillers’s interest is not in the dead, nor in “necroresistance.” In the conclusion, I argue that the dead can nonetheless contribute to the conversations among the living that Spillers is interested in having, and these ways of speaking are complementary (or perhaps coconspiratorial) to her own strategies and thoughts (and, once again, 24. Critically, this place is not “a place at the table” along with white people, the liberal answer to the problem of race. If I have been persuasive about the way race is tied up with death and archism, with allowing one group to transcend death by dealing that death to a different group, then to have blacks join whites would simply mean that some other group would have to die instead. “Whiteness” may be highly expandable (the Irish, the Jews, and perhaps now some groups of Asians have been and still can be integrated into its capacity), but it is not infinitely so in the sense that it could include literally everyone. Some other group needs to be condemned to violence so that whiteness itself can live and, more than live, transcend the death that otherwise delimits its life (and Frank Wilderson for one would deny that such an inclusion of black people could ever be possible).
recognize how race is always tied up with death and, more precisely, its denial, at least for some).

For the time being, however, in anticipation of that conversation, let me turn to a few other thinkers who do talk about race, sovereignty, and violence in ways that include the dead to show how death itself can have a salutary (or at least not utterly negative) and limiting effect on the otherwise seemingly endless power that comes with biopolitics and its violent effects.

**Necropower**

In his work, Achille Mbembe takes up where Foucault leaves off, arguing that biopower, in its desire to distinguish between who is disposable and who must be protected, produces a corollary power that Mbembe calls “necropower.”

This notion has already been alluded to in Bargu’s concept of “necropolitical violence.” Mbembe points to the modern-day administration and domination of Palestine, for example, as “the most accomplished form of necropower.” This power is marked by the fracturing of Palestinian territory into increasingly smaller and more delimited spaces both horizontally and vertically. The application of necropower, according to Mbembe, can be seen quite clearly in the West Bank, for example (or in particular), where the same spaces are occupied by two people: one set whose lives are to be protected at all costs (the Israelis) and one whose existence is constantly under question (the Palestinians). In this territory, a complex network of walls, highway overpasses (for the Israelis), dirt roads (for the Palestinians), checkpoints, drones, and bulldozers add up to what Mbembe calls “infrastructural warfare”:

The state of siege is itself a military institution. It allows a mode of killing that does not distinguish between the external and internal enemy. Entire populations are the target of the sovereign. The besieged villages and towns are sealed off and cut off from the world. Daily life is militarized. Freedom is given to local military commanders to use their discretion as to when and whom to shoot. Movement between the territorial cells requires formal permission. Local civic institutions are systematically destroyed. The besieged

26. Ibid.
27. Ibid, 29.
population is deprived of their means of income. Invisible killing is added to outright executions.28

This kind of total power is not limited to Palestine, of course. Mbembe notes how increasingly war is becoming routinized as a way of life, with many states in Africa and the Middle East increasingly decomposing into zones of conflict marked by intense resource extraction and the transformation of the local populations into “citizen soldiers, child soldiers, mercenaries and privateers” or their victims.29

According to Mbembe, this actually represents an increase from the violence of colonialization. He writes,

This form of governmentality is different from the colonial commande

merit. The techniques of policing and discipline and the choice between obedience and simulation that characterized the colonial and postcolonial potentate are gradually being replaced by an alternative that is more tragic because more extreme. Technologies of destruction have become more tactile, more anatomical and sensorial, in a context in which the choice is between life and death. If power still depends on tight control over bodies (or on concentrating them in camps), the new technologies of destruction are less concerned with inscribing bodies within disciplinary apparatuses as inscribing them, when the time comes, within the order of the maximal economy now represented by the “massacre.”30

Speaking specifically to the phenomenon of the suicide bomber, Mbembe says that with life so marginalized, the line between being alive and dead blurs. With the suicide bomber, homicide and suicide merge, and the death of the self becomes the death of the other at the same moment. For Mbembe, the power of necropolitics has been turned back upon itself; death, the ultimate limit of the biopolitical, becomes a weapon of resistance:

In its desire for eternity, the besieged body passes through two stages. First, it is transformed into a mere thing, malleable matter. Second, the manner in which it is put to death—suicide—affords it its ultimate signification. The matter of the body, or again the matter which is the body, is invested with properties that cannot be deduced from its character as a thing, but from a transcendental nomos outside it. The besieged body becomes a piece of metal

30. Ibid., 34.
whose function is, through sacrifice, to bring eternal life into being. The body duplicates itself and, in death, literally and metaphorically escapes the state of siege and occupation.31

Here, because the population has been rendered disposable and has only death to look forward to (via necropower), death itself becomes a source of agency. Mbembe writes that “death is precisely that from and over which I have power.”32 Insofar as in the modern world we have what Mbembe calls “death-worlds”—vast populations that have been reduced to a form of “living death”—necropolitics, that most violent and extreme form of biopolitics (the part of biopolitics concerned with the killing and disposal of the other), acts back upon biopolitics itself, becoming a basis of resistance via the very operations that have led the subject to its ultimate weakness and subjugation.33

As we have already seen, Bargu applies this same notion in her study of the Death Fasters in Turkey, and many other movements have used bodies and death as a form of resistance to biopower. Stuart Murray, in his own work, speaks of a “thanatopolitics”34 that becomes a form of resistance that escapes the totalizing logic of biopolitics precisely because it lies at the limit of what biopolitics can manage—namely, death itself.

Like Mbembe, Murray uses the concept of the suicide bomber as an example: “[The suicide bomber] destroys the very condition of possibility for biopolitical regulation and control.”35 Murray argues that while it is clearly a negative power, thanatopolitics is also “productive—it produces something, it has independent rhetorical effects which are not easily comprehended within a biopolitical logic.”36

In discussing these issues, I do not want to give the impression that engaging in thanatopolitics means that one has somehow escaped from projection or mythic violence. Clearly in the case of suicide bombers, in particular, even if they are destructive to biopolitics, they are often

31. Ibid., 37.
32. Ibid., 39.
33. Ibid., 40.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
motivated by ideologies that are based on other projections, phantasms, and ideologies that justify and sponsor their actions in the first place (and the case of ISIS and its attempted restoration of the caliphate, for one, indicates that these projections are not necessarily innocent of sovereignty and archism either). In that way, they could be said to be engaging in death instrumentally—that is, continuing to project onto death what the dead can do for the living.

As Bargu describes them, the Death Fasters, I would say, are generally operating with a different calculus; they turn to death as a way to break apart rather than to consolidate such projections. While they too turn to death as a way to break from biopolitical power, I think they are closer to the model of letting the dead influence the living than many suicide bombers (depending, of course, on the context and motivation of each actor). One could say that rather than seeking to instrumentalize death, the Death Fasters are letting death instrumentalize them. But that isn’t quite right either; I think in the case of the Death Fasters, we see not instrumentality at all but rather deinstrumentalization—a kind of comradeship between the living and the dead (including all the states in between). This represents a violation of the absolute limit drawn between life and death that is the hallmark of archism and its racist expressions and, in this way, is very radical indeed. The role of death changes from a limit to an opening, and a very different politic ensues.

As I’ve noted, the dead confer a kind of power on the living, if only the living are receptive to it. If that power is taken as a tool, an instrument against the state, neocolonialism, or other forms of illicit archist violence, then I think it is limited in terms of what it can accomplish. It may well destroy this or that particular objective, but I think it is the equivalent, to some extent, of the political strike Benjamin describes in his “Critique of Violence.” It uses, to some extent, the same mythic violence that can be found within sovereignty against that form of authority. In this way, it is, to use Audre Lorde’s adage, a case of “using the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house,” with predictably problematic outcomes.37

37. This is a loose paraphrase from Audre Lorde’s statement that “the Master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” the title of a talk she gave at the Second Sex Conference in 1979.
Because the Death Fasters allow death to be part of their lives and their resistance, they aren’t “using the master’s tools” so much as engaging with their own bodies in the fullest possible way, including their bodies’ own deaths (so that the master’s tools become something else, something akin to what Benjamin calls “pure means”). In this way, the Death Fasters “believe in death.” They come much closer to Benjamin’s model of the general strike; however, they are not striking back at the state with their own projection and mythic violence but allowing the antiprojective power of death to break apart the sovereign phantasms they are resisting.

The Death Fasters aren’t always specifically oriented against racialized sovereign violence, although the Turkish state certainly does express itself in a racialized medium. Even so, it offers a model for how death can be incorporated into forms of resistance in terms of more explicitly racialized forms of sovereign violence. If racism is the mechanism by which death is avoided or delimited by biopolitical power, the disruption of that mechanism by death shows that biopolitical power remains vulnerable, dependent on the phantasm that death can be overcome. Here again, the body can be the site of maximal sovereign and archist projection even as it is also the site of maximal resistance and undermining of that mechanism.

**Social Death and the Black Body in the United States**

If we turn from a discussion of racism, biopolitics, and necropolitics in general to the specific experience of people of color and, more specifically, black people in the United States, we come closer to understanding the circumstances that led to the display of Michael Brown’s dead body in the streets of Ferguson, Missouri. To begin with, black people in the United States—and in the western hemisphere more generally—have a particular history that goes beyond the confines of the discussion of racism that Foucault engages in. Orlando Patterson has helped popularize the phrase “social death” as it is applies to African Americans, and the African diaspora more generally, in light of their experience of the Middle Passage and slavery.

---

The phrase “social death” comes from the work of French anthropologists Claude Meillassoux and Michel Izard. Patterson quotes Meillassoux as writing about the experience of the newly enslaved that (according to Meillassoux) “the captive always appears therefore as marked by an original, indelible defect which weighs endlessly upon his destiny.”

Patterson goes on to write, “This is, in Izard’s words, a kind of ‘social death,’ He [the slave] can never be brought to life again as such since, in spite of some specious examples (themselves most instructive) of fictive rebirth, the slave will remain forever an unborn being (non-né).” For Patterson, slavery is thus not simply an economic arrangement but a kind of ontological transformation of the enslaved body. He writes, “Slavery is the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons.”

In a similar mode, citing the “new forms of bondage” that arose in post–Civil War relationships with formally freed slaves, Saidiya V. Hartman points out that “emancipation appears less the grand event of liberation than a point of transition between modes of servitude and racial subjection.” For Hartman, as for Patterson, the trauma of slavery cannot be reduced to the fact that human beings were being treated like objects. Far more insidious (and therefore lasting beyond the formal temporality of slavery itself) are the ways that slaves were understood as belonging to an entirely—and ontologically—different category than white people in the United States. Hartman goes on to say, “The value of blackness reside[s] in its metaphorical aptitude, whether literally understood as the fungibility of the commodity or understood as the imaginative surface upon which the master and the nation came to understand themselves.”

For Hartman, this fungible aspect of black identity, the way it serves as a screen for the anxieties and phantasms of white America—and even aided in its production—ensured that the transition from slavery

40. Ibid.
41. Ibid., 13.
43. Ibid., 7.
to freedom was nothing like the tremendous progress for black people it is often lauded as being. In the post–Civil War era, when it came to the question of black freedom and equality, Hartman argues, “although the Thirteenth Amendment abolished the institution of slavery, the vestiges of slavery still acted to constrict the scope of black freedom. It proved virtually impossible to break with the past because of the endurance of involuntary servitude and the reinscription of racial subjection. Rather, what becomes starkly apparent are the continuities of slavery and freedom as modes of domination, exploitation and subjection.” In Hartman’s view, racism was allowed to flourish alongside the creation of formal regimes of equality in the wake of the Thirteenth Amendment. Even as arguments over whether the abolishment of slavery was the equivalent of granting citizenship to former slaves were concluded in favor of such citizenship, a complex network of both overt and hidden forms of discrimination (ranging from the Black Codes to Plessy v. Ferguson) was developed to keep the black community dominated and disenfranchised. As Hartman further explains,

The federal government sanctioned the white supremacist laws of the states by recourse to the separation of powers, state sovereignty, and declared noninterference. The incapacity of federal law and the remove of the state regulated the very domain they identified as beyond their reach. The focus on sentiment and affinity disavowed the state’s role in the private and the governance of the social exercised through police power. Therefore, although it appeared that the state refused to intervene in the private by declaring it a law-free and voluntary sphere, the state was already there and actively governing the conduct of individuals. This disavowed regulation of the private engendered the subordination of blacks while claiming the noninvolvement of the state. Yet aversive sentiment rather than state policy was held responsible for this separation and isolation of blacks from the rest of the population.

Here racism is falsely held as a purely private and personal matter; the state’s active racist interventions are disguised, and the state is seen as racially “neutral” even as it serves as a major tool to continue unabated racial discrimination. This sets the stage for the state up to this very day, when mass black imprisonment, the murdering state

44. Ibid., 172.
45. Ibid., 201.
(including the killing of Michael Brown), and other aspects of active state racism are rampant and structural. The Trump administration’s intense and overt racism is not a radical break with past practices but rather just a new iteration of a racism that has always been central even if not always acknowledged.

Perhaps the key point I would stress in Hartman’s work is that via institutional racism, black people bear the full brunt of white projection and phantasm. Because of the fungibility she describes, although black people have narratives of their own, these are effectively robbed of their efficacy (as well as their counterprojectional power) as far as their social, political, and economic positions are concerned. In a society already constituted by what Walter Benjamin calls “mythic violence,” black people are generally on the receiving end in Hartman’s view. Their recourses are limited by the intense dissymmetry they experience in terms of narrative authority.

The Nonbeing of Blackness

Hartman’s work often overlaps with what has come to be known as “Afro-pessimism,” a school of thought perhaps best known from the works of Frank Wilderson III and Jared Sexton. These thinkers argue that the ontological status (or, more accurately, the lack of such a status) conferred upon black people has profound and permanent effects on the condition of black people not only in the United States but around the world. I’ve been speaking of black people and people of color more generally as being similarly targeted by the state and social forms of racism, but for these thinkers, there is something beyond racism involved in the treatment of black people; instead, there is a categorical denial of black people even from the ranks of personhood (something that is extended, in this view, to other people of color as badly and as violently as they have been treated).

As Wilderson writes, “Forced labor is not constitutive of enslavement because whereas it explains a common practice, it does not define the structure of the power relation between those who are slaves and those who are not…Patterson helps us denaturalize the link between force and labor so that we can theorize the former as a phenomenon.

46. I am indebted to Linette Park for this insight.
that positions a body, ontologically (paradigmatically), and the latter as a possible but not inevitable experience of someone who is socially dead.” For Wilderson, slavery per se—the forced labor of African people in various contexts, including in the United States—is not the critical factor in determining social death. Instead, social death is itself the category that presupposes slavery; it is a particular ontological status that persists regardless of any and all formal (or even informal) changes in the lives of black people.

Wilderson demonstrates what he means by social death when he considers Fanon’s thoughts about the suffering of Jews in the Holocaust versus black people’s suffering in the face of slavery. He writes,

Whereas Humans exist on some plane of being and thus can become existentially present through some struggle for, of, or through recognition, Blacks cannot reach this plane. Spillers, Fanon, and Hartman maintain that the violence that continually repositions the Black as a void of historical movement is without analog in the suffering dynamics of the ontologically alive. The violence that turns Africans into a thing is without analog because it does not simply oppress the Black through tactile and empirical technologies of oppression . . . The Black’s first ontological instance, the Middle Passage “wiped out [his or her] metaphysics . . . his [or her] customs and sources on which they are based.” Jews went into Auschwitz and came out as Jews. Africans went into the ships and came out as Blacks. The former is a Human holocaust; the latter is a Human and a metaphysical holocaust. That is why it makes little sense to attempt analogy; the Jews have the Dead (the Muselmann) among them; the Dead have the Blacks among them.

Leaving aside the fact that the whole point of Auschwitz was for Jews—and Roma, queers, communists, and others—to not come out at all, Wilderson is very clear about what he thinks is distinctive about the status of black people. It is not just that they have a worse ontological status than others but rather that they don’t actually have an ontological status at all.

This, then, is Wilderson’s definition of social death; he means the term quite literally. For Wilderson, blacks have been relegated to a subhuman or nonhuman category as an effect of social death (as when he writes about “the relationship between the world of Blacks and the

---

48. Ibid., 38. Wilderson is here quoting Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 110.
world of Humans”).49 This appears to fly in the face of my own earlier contention that the point of antiblackness is not so much to take humanity away from black people as to save white people from the fate of being merely human (leaving black people as being all too human in the process). Without getting into too much semantic parsing, I would say that for Wilderson, the emphasis is perhaps not on humanness so much as human being, which is to say that black people, as opposed to white people (and in his view, other people of color as well), aren’t at all. To say that black people are denied an ontological status means that their form of existence is not recognized as even counting as an existence, a position that is far different from the kinds of hierarchical relationships set up by racism (that’s why Afro-pessimists often speak of “antiblackness” instead of racism, treating it as a separate category). If Meillassoux and Izard speak of black people becoming unborn beings, perhaps for Wilderson one could speak of human unbeings.

In Wilderson’s view, the fact that there can be a black president, black colleagues mixing with whites and others at work and school, or black films projecting living, breathing black people is irrelevant. The equivalencies these instances suggest are based on analogies between blackness and nonblackness in his view, and as he shows in the passage above, those analogies are always false, with no basis in reality because reality itself, the ability to have an analogous life, is precisely what black people are denied.50

For Wilderson, the question of ontology is determinant (as ontological categories are wont to be), so in this way, the white Left is as guilty as the more overtly racist white Right of denying ontology to black people. Wilderson tells us that this refusal of ontology constitutes a “scandal” that interferes with and trounces leftist categories of

49. Ibid., 15.
50. In this way, Wilderson is not unlike Fanon, who also sees that reality is entirely constructed by colonialism. Thus in Black Skin, White Masks, Fanon writes, “Ontology—once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by the way side—does not permit us to understand the being of the black man. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. Some critics will take it on themselves to remind us that this proposition has a converse. I say that this is false. The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man.” Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 110.
This is a scandal because even the basic categories of Marxist (and particularly, in this case, Gramscian) analysis, such as proletariat and bourgeoisie, presuppose a racist division of labor that, for Wilderson, is prior to and required for those other antagonisms. Wilderson argues that “slavery... is closer to capital’s primal desire than is waged oppression—the ‘exploitation’ of unraced bodies.” From this, he concludes, “Thus the black subject position in America is an antagonism, a demand that can not be satisfied through a transfer of ownership/organization of existing rubrics; whereas the Gramscian subject, the worker, represents a demand that can indeed be satisfied by way of a successful War of Position, which brings about the end of exploitation.” In this way, we see that whereas intra-white oppression can be resolved, that resolution does not and cannot touch the more fundamental antagonism organized around black social death. The black subject’s nonontological status reveals the true heart of capitalist exploitation (what Wilderson also calls the “libidinal economy”) not merely to oppress but to utterly embody that oppression in black bodies in a way that cannot be remedied by mere redistributions of power or resources.

**Challenging Social Death**

The idea of “social death” is not uncontroversial (to put it mildly), and a great many scholars reject it outright. Neil Roberts, for one, argues that the idea of social death ignores a phenomenon that occurred both during slavery itself and in its aftermath—namely, the acts of marronage. Whereas for Wilderson black freedom is precisely what is impossible, for Roberts, marronage is a form of freedom based in flight. As already noted, it ranges from minor acts of insurgency on slave plantations to full-bore “sociogenic marronage,” the creation of new worlds and new lives on the periphery (but still in the context) of slavery and what follows. Roberts writes, “Marronage operates against the presumption that slaves exist in a state of ‘social death.’

52. Ibid., 229–30.
53. Ibid., 231.
In the language of voudou, social death is the life of a zombie, a being roaming the earth with glazed eyes, lacking the ability to control its actions, an entity neither dead nor alive . . . The idea of social death denies the significance of psychology to freedom, rendering it unable to explain how slaves are able to become free physically outside the actions and intentions of enslaving agents.\(^{56}\)

For Roberts a great deal of agency exists in even the most apparently passive and powerless of conditions (an idea I have already extended to include the murdered and unburied body). He rejects the idea of “social death” because he thinks, somewhat akin to Spillers, that within the confines of the black experience and black life, there are resources to draw upon to defy the doom that the concept of “social death” seems to describe.

Such a possibility can also be seen in Hartman’s work to some extent (although she is often herself considered an Afro-pessimist or at least someone who shares a lot of thinking with that point of view). In her understanding, alongside the impossible and subjected identities that African Americans have had to occupy and deploy amid the reign of state domination, violence, and murder, there is also a form of resistance that parallels and subverts such performances. Looking, for example, at slave dances, holiday fêtes, and other forms of what she calls “orchestrations of blackness,” Hartman writes,\(^{57}\) “How does one determine the difference between ‘puttin’ on ole massa’—the simulation of compliance for covert aims—and the grins and gesticulations of Sambo indicating the repressive construction of contented subjugation? At the level of appearance, these contending performances often differed little. At the level of effect, however, they diverged radically. One performance aimed to reproduce and secrete the relations of domination and the other to manipulate appearances in order to challenge those relations and create a space for action not generally available.”\(^{58}\)

This is akin to the kinds of “arts of resistance” that James Scott describes in his own work on forms of defiance and subversion that fly under the radar of dominant powers, often using acts of seeming

---

56. Ibid., 117.
58. Ibid.
subjection as a device to undermine that power relationship. As Scott tells us, when we only follow the dominant narrative of a particular political situation, shy of open revolt, we tend to read a situation as absolutely passive and quiescent. But when we pay attention to what Scott calls the “hidden transcript,” we see that resistance is going on all the time even if it is not recognized as such. The point of such thinking is to say, as with Roberts, that even the most abject situation is not free of resistance (and therefore not free of freedom either). And these forms of resistance are not merely a way to “blow off steam” or keep the status quo going; as Scott further states, these microresistances serve as dress rehearsals for open insurrection so that when that day comes, everyone already knows what to do.

Something of this argument is also present in Spillers’s desire to see African Americans speak with their own voices, even if these voices have seemingly been eclipsed or captured by dominant hierarchies. These resources and possibilities definitely come from the world of the living and not from the dead, even the socially dead.

Defying Nonontology

It seems, then, that there may be an irreconcilable divide between thinkers like Roberts on the one hand and Afro-pessimists like Wilderson on the other. A resolution between these positions may be neither possible nor even desirable. But clearly the idea of social death evokes ideas that I have been discussing in this book, especially in terms of the degree to which social death approaches actual death and its relationship to resistance.

The idea of social death offers us a bit of a paradox on this question. On the one hand, similar to previous points made in earlier chapters, being socially dead cannot be exactly the same as being actually dead. This again comes down to a question of projection. As long as they

60. Ibid.
61. For a set of writings that doesn’t try to reconcile these positions but seeks to occupy the space between them, see the special issue of *Theory and Event* 21, no. 1 (January 2018), on black feminism and Afro-pessimism, edited by Tiffany Willoughby Herard and M. Shadee Malaklou.
are living (even if not being), the socially dead remain creatures of projection (as Hartman also suggests). If dead bodies do a better job of avoiding projection than living ones, then the socially dead remain vulnerable to the traps and allures of archism, although not necessarily in any way that is final and determinant.

On the other hand, if we grant Wilderson the point that the socially dead are effectively the same as the actually dead, this may not be the end of the story. In my way of thinking, social death could be seen as an opportunity for accessing precisely those counterprojective powers of the dead that are not otherwise as readily available to the living, thus avoiding or at least tempering the loss of agency and personhood that otherwise goes with the position of social death.

Either way, I would say that the socially dead are not entirely cut off from the dead’s powers or influence and therefore have resources available to them that come through and from their position as such. The dead’s counterprojective powers are available to all, “even [to] the dead” themselves. The question then becomes, What approach toward death (and life) will or can the socially dead take? What choices are available to them?

Here it becomes important to recall my point that the antiblackness of archism stems from the desire to transcend or at least delimit and control death by exporting it and associating it with black bodies. If this argument is convincing, it demonstrates a key point of resistance for the socially dead—namely, the question that Baldwin poses of whether or not one can “believe” in or “earn” one’s death. Let me cite that passage from *The Fire Next Time* once again for reference:

> Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have. It seems to me that one ought to rejoice in the fact of death—ought to decide, indeed, to earn one’s death by confronting with passion the conundrum of life. One is responsible to life: it is the small beacon in that terrifying darkness from which we come and to which we must return. One must negotiate this passage as nobly as possible, for the sake of those who are coming after us. But white Americans do not believe in death, and this is why the darkness of my skin so intimidates them.\(^\text{62}\)

---

Here Baldwin is talking about the living, and the way that they are directly affected by death and the dead in a racialized context. Blackness, as he tells us, frightens whites because it suggests the failure of their own conquest of death, their own attempts to export it to black people. Whites do not believe in death because they have tried (and failed) to instrumentalize it; no amount of lynching and murder has succeeded in making them truly immortal, truly transcendent of the human condition. Black people, on the other hand, do believe in death (they have no choice but to do so in some sense because that death is rubbed in their faces every day), but they have a second goal to reach: not just to believe but to “earn” that death as well.

As I read Baldwin, this means that black people cannot simply rely on the way that the facticity of death affects them. If that were enough in and of itself, then the mere fact of being killed or even the fact of living in the shadow of death would be enough to resist white supremacy as such. To “earn” one’s death, then, is not simply to recognize the power and agency of death, the way it delimits life, but also in some sense to engage with that agency in a way that increases the agency of living black people as well. Saying, “One is responsible to life . . . One must negotiate this passage as nobly as possible for those who are coming after us,” Baldwin offers that a life lived in the face of death, perhaps even within the status of nonontology, can be a positive life, one that affects not only the living but also the not yet alive. But this positivity is not automatic; it is not the silver lining to oppression. That positive vision must be earned, thought and acted out. Here we can see how for the living, letting themselves be affected by the dead is not some easy quick fix but a long and difficult endeavor (as Antigone and the Death Fasters suggest as well).

In this way, Baldwin presents us with a choice, a question of how to respond to death. Whites can choose to continue to believe in the “Dream” of whiteness, of their own immortality and their ability to escape death by passing it on to people of color. They can continue to live a lie and to maintain their own nothingness (in the guise of doing the opposite). Black people can choose this route as well, turning to a language of victimization and rights as a way to minimize the degree to which death is dealt to them, trusting and hoping the
state won’t choose to kill them or their loved ones on that particular day (or ever).

To choose the other way, to come first to believe in death and then to earn it, means to give up on the dreams of immortality (if not literally, at least symbolically, which can have the power and effect of reality itself) and accept the status of mere—and mortal—humanity. For those whites at the pinnacle of archist authority, this choice may seem impossible; it means giving up everything they’ve been promised (even if they haven’t obtained everything, or even anything, that they believe to be their birthright). Even recognizing this as a possible choice is difficult because the power of white supremacy rests on naturalizing and obliterating its own constructed nature, its dependence on violence toward black and brown bodies to exist at all. (As Althusser writes, “Ideology never says: ‘I am ideological.’”63 Even so, recognized or misrecognized, this choice will always remain available to white people, and some will and some have chosen it.

For black people at the receiving end of murderous racist violence, this choice may seem far less impossible, as they have far less to lose. But even in this case, such a choice is not easy; it requires giving up on so much that is promised, so much of the recognition and associated rewards that the state and the liberal capitalist world pretend are available to all. To make this choice requires the courage of refusal, a courage that someone like Fanon (but also Hartman, Moten, Spillers, Coates, Roberts, Wilderson, and so many others) embodies and demonstrates.

This choice offers no guarantees whatsoever, but it might allow the subjects who learn to earn their death a form of agency that the confines of interpellated subjectivity, the strictures of racialized hierarchies, and the general pursuit of nothingness in the guise of authority and law (that is to say, the basis of archism) all serve to prevent and dispel. When they allow themselves to be affected by the dead, the living get an opportunity but nothing more; just as Baldwin says, they must earn what comes next. To earn one’s death also means to earn one’s life (this, I think, is implicit in everything that Baldwin says).

Although I have been speaking largely in terms of a black and white binary, I would, probably contra Wilderson and Sexton, include people of color more generally in this discussion. Even if we accept the argument about social death being something unique to black people (and this is hardly a settled argument), people of color more generally have certainly been the disproportionate recipients of state and social killing in the United States and other settler colonial nations. Even if there is no analogy with antiblackness to be made, there are resources in death that all people of color (and white co-conspirators for that matter) may partake in, ways to fight together and separately against the instrumentalized mechanics of archism and its death dealing ways.

All of the living can believe in death because every living person is mortal. Yet not all of the living are so shadowed by death that such a belief becomes tangible enough to override the vast complexes of misrecognition and phantasm that must be overcome. And, as already noted, not all receptions of violence and death may be the same. Social death may have its own particular effects and strategies, reflecting the way that the socially dead are not deemed to be beings at all. It may be too that when actually dead, a socially dead person’s status is unlike that of others who have been killed by the state (to keep with Wilderson’s idea of nonontology, because you can’t kill someone who is already dead). Even so, once actually and literally dead, all bodies resist the narratives of archist construction, including the category of social death itself. This is not to say that in death all bodies become the same (to think that would be to return us to yet another archist and liberal phantasm) but rather to say that in death, new forms of resistance become possible that supersede many of the strictures and dogmas that organize the world of the living, often with radical results.

In the difficult forms of negotiation that Baldwin calls for, the living have one critical coconspirator—the dead themselves. Although it is not quite right to speak of the dead as having a choice of their own, they do help make this choice more possible for those who are still alive, even the socially dead.

64. In “People-of-Color Blindness,” Jared Sexton explains his position that nonblackness and blackness are a better binary than whiteness and people of color insofar as blackness lies at the root of abjection, a fact no political movement can afford to forget. See Jared Sexton, “People-of-Color Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery,” Social Text 28, no. 2, 103 (Summer 2010): 31–56. I am indebted to Linette Park for this connection.
The dead stand as living proof, if you will, that the instrumentalization of life and death will ultimately fail, and in this failure, there is some degree of redemption—at least potentially—from the violence and phantasmic politics of archism, antiblackness, and racism more generally.

*The Murder of Michael Brown: Refusing to Stand*

This discussion sets the context to finally turn to an examination of the death of Michael Brown, just one of countless black people and other people of color whom the police or other biopolitical actors have wantonly killed and often left in full public view. His is just one body, but due to the endless repetitive nature of state and societal killing of black and brown people, he stands in for thousands or millions of other dead black bodies—some noted, the vast majority not. His body therefore bears an enormous representational weight, a weight put to powerful and radical purpose by Black Lives Matter.

Although Brown’s dead body is related to countless others, his body is, of course, also unique, as are all murdered bodies. He was and is a person with a name and a life that is cherished and remembered. Each of these murders, despite their connection to racism and antiblackness, is also a separate and individual event. These bodies are torn away from families, friends, and communities, and each has a name. And of course, not all murdered bodies are displayed. Sandra Bland, for one, died in a jail cell, so her body was not in public view. The #SayHerName campaign was part of an effort to recall Bland and countless others whose bodies were killed out of sight but no less violated.

If Brown is a representative of many other dead bodies of color even as he is also only himself, we must think about his death in both general and particular ways. One pair of thinkers, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, are perhaps especially helpful in thinking about Brown both as a figure for all the dead and as an individual black man (now dead) with his own narrative and position. In particular, they help us think about how even a dead body—in this case, *his* dead body—can have an agency and a power of its own, how it can be both singular and at the same time a body that speaks to and for the countless other bodies murdered by the state and by racist violence.

In looking at the scene of Brown’s death and its aftermath, Moten and Harney seek to use that moment to imagine a scene that is completely
different from the one people saw on TV or read about online or in newspapers. They write,

In the interest of imagining what exists, there is an image of Michael Brown we must refuse in favor of another image we don’t have. One is a lie, the other unavailable. If we refuse to show the image of a lonely body, of the outline of the space that body simultaneously took and left, we do so in order to imagine jurisgenerative black social life walking down the middle of the street—for a minute, but only a minute, unpoliced, another city gathers, dancing. We know it’s there, and here, and real; we know what we can’t have happens all the time.65

Moten and Harney are not denying that Brown is lying down dead; rather, they point to the standard way of reading what happened—reading him as victim, as purely passive in the face of a menacing and all-powerful police force—as “a lie” (i.e., a projection, a mythic reading of an act of mythic violence). In thinking about “another image we don’t have,” they seek to resignify Brown’s death, his supine corpse, as belonging to someone who acts from and through an entirely different political order. Perhaps more accurately, they want to allow this other order, something “real” that “happens all the time,” to become more legible. In this way, Moten and Harney are demonstrating a desire also expressed by Spillers and Roberts and Hartman, a desire not just to look at the ongoing disaster of white supremacy but to hear the much quieter—but extremely powerful—voices of resistance, survival, and even flourishing amid the state of war against black and brown bodies. They don’t “have” this image, but they insist on not just its possibility but its actuality, a fully extant rival for the archist notions of reality we all subscribe to.

To think of “jurisgenerative black social life walking down the middle of the street” (Brown initially drew Officer Darren Wilson’s attention by walking down the middle of the street) is to think of a life not condemned but productive, a life that is a life and not merely one marked for death (in the instrumentalist, archist sense).

Speaking further of this other vision of reality, Moten and Harney write, “Michael Brown gives us occasion once again to consider what it is to endure the disaster, to survive (in) genocide, to navigate unmappable differences as a range of localities that, in the end—either all the

way to the end or as our ongoing refusal of beginnings and ends—will always refuse to have been taken.”66 In this way, Moten and Harney are engaging in a radical form of marronage of their own wherein the alternative jurisgenerative space that they envision is not just amid the racist white supremacist world, but is actually more real, more true, than that world. The problem is that because our own sense of reality—as Fanon says as well—is based on the “lie” of archism, we are seduced away from those other worlds and realities.

The only way to make this other, more real world legible is through an act of refusal. Rather than accept the endless teleologies of death and necropolitics that seem to be the inevitable fate of African Americans in the United States, Moten and Harney’s refusal starts with the most basic apperceptions of reality.

Speaking in terms of this refusal specifically in the case of Michael Brown, Moten and Harney speak of his “endless refusal of standing.”67 This refusal has both a specific bodily referent (Brown is not standing but lying down; he is dead) and a more general secondary sense as refusing “standing”—that is, refusing subjection to whatever recognition or identity the state has to offer the subject of color.

For these authors, the question of standing is paramount. Taken as a term for the recognition of the state, for Moten and Harney, even the most abject subject of the killing state seeks that recognition: “What’s most disturbing about Michael Brown (aka Eric Garner, aka Renisha McBride, aka Trayvon Martin, aka Eleanor Bumpurs, aka Emmett Till, aka an endless stream of names and absent names) is our reaction to him, our misunderstanding of him, and the sources of that misunderstanding that manifest and reify a desire for standing, for stasis, within the state war machine which, contrary to popular belief, doesn’t confer citizenship upon its subjects at birth but, rather, at death, which is the proper name for entrance into its properly political confines.”68 There is a tendency, even among the most antiracist of subjects, to readily read these murders, and the dead bodies that they produce, through a distorted lens, a “misunderstanding” that reveals a “desire for

---

66. Ibid., 82.
67. Ibid., 83.
68. Ibid., 84.
standing . . . within the state war machine,” a desire to be recognized by
the forces of archism (with all the promises such recognition entails).
When these dead bodies are read through that desire, what we see is
what we are supposed to see: passivity, brokenness, weakness, quies-
cence. Refusal of this condition constitutes recuperating an entirely
different narrative from the exact same postures, the exact same events.

In struggling with these forms of misunderstanding, Moten and
Harney go on to specifically reference Brown’s seemingly most vulner-
able moment, his time as a corpse left on public display on the street:
“The prone, exposed, unburied body—the body that is given, in death,
its status as body precisely through and by way of the withholding of
fleshly ceremony—is what political standing looks like . . . The law
of the state is what Ida B. Wells rightly calls lynch law. And we extend
it in our appeals to it.”69 Moten and Harney show that in refusing one
kind of standing, Brown is taking on another. His dead body “is what
political standing looks like.” To see Brown as a victim is to funda-
mentally accept “lynch law,” to implicitly accept the state’s offer of
standing, of its conferring a kind of recognition to Brown even while
(but also as a result of) killing him. As noted in chapter 1, to appeal
to the state—to call for human rights, respect, and so on—is to play
into the hands of archist power. It is to speak in its language and accept
the demeaned status—the only kind of status—the state is willing to
confer onto this or any other body of color.

By reinterpreting Brown’s supine body as “refus[ing] to stand,” thus
refusing this kind of standing, Moten and Harney show that refusal
does not always have to look like living defiance, and in fact, sometimes
what looks like living defiance can be its own form of subjugation; no
act or moment is entirely pure. Refusal is less a question of what is
being done (or not done) and more a question of a generalized “no” to
the workings of racist biopolitical—and necropolitical—power akin,
once again, to Benjamin’s general strike (via Sorel), wherein the striker
refuses to engage with the state on its own terms (terms on which the
state will always ultimately win).70

69. Ibid.

70. See Georges Sorel, Reflections on Violence, ed. Jeremy Jennings (New York: Cambridge
University Press, 2004). See also, once again, Benjamin, “Critique of Violence.”
If so, to refuse all forms of state-sanctioned status (to “refuse to stand”), the subject of color, even if dead, effectively withdraws the state’s very lifeblood, the recognition and acknowledgment of its existence inherent in being a victim of state violence. It’s as if state violence is saying, “You try to deny me? By killing you and leaving you out in the open, I’m making you acknowledge me; your dead body is a testament to the irresistible power I have over you, my ability to command you to recognize me,” to which Moten and Harney (and through their intervention, Brown as well) simply say, “No.” It is here that we find the state at its most vulnerable once again because of the asymmetrical nature of recognition. As Althusser tells us, the state needs to be recognized by its subjects (perhaps especially by the subjects it oppresses the most) to exist at all. Those subjects, on the other hand, don’t need the state. For this reason, refusal of recognition confers a great power on the subject in question.

Rather than appeal to the state this refusal unmakes the state, counterprojecting the unreality and utopianism we normally (and falsely) attribute to other worlds back onto the state itself. Refusing to stand, denying his recognition, rather than becoming nothing himself, Brown can be read as returning the state back to its own nothingness; he gives the state back the death with which it sought to end him.

In this way, if black life matters, so does black death. The black community has a long history of treating funerals as opportunities not simply to mourn but to organize and resist. Emmett Till’s funeral—where his family allowed this fourteen-year-old boy’s mutilated corpse to be publicly displayed after his lynching, causing a major response—is probably the best-known example of turning a violent act against a black body into a form of resistance, turning Emmett Till’s death from an instrument of oppression into a form of overcoming. Here the funereal ritual, usually intended to return a body to a safely sanitized image, became instead a means of giving the body back its due; Emmett Till regained his agency in showing what he was, what he had become. Black Lives Matter has taken up this tradition as well, politicizing and radicalizing the funerals of those black people murdered by the state. In doing so, they—like Antigone and the Death Fasters—allow death to inform life, to make the dead something
other than what the state tells them they are, thereby refusing one form of standing in order to (re)gain another.

For Moten and Harney, Brown’s death is thus both a crime and an opportunity. The crime is clear, but they refuse to read it as tragic or fated, for this would be, once again, to resort to the language of archism, teleology, and normative forms of (mis)understanding. The opportunity comes from recognizing that the refusal they ascribe to Brown is not just negative, but has a positive aspect as well. They write, “We need to stop worrying so much about how [the state] kills, regulates and accumulates us, and worry more about how we kill, deregulate, and disperse it. We have to love and revere our survival which is (in) our resistance. We have to love our refusal of what has been refused.”

To “love our refusal” is another way to transition from the “lies” of a phantasmic world created by white supremacy to another, jurisgenerative world. This also strikes me as a very Nietzschean decision on the part of these authors, where yes turns into no and no turns into yes—part of what Nietzsche called amor fati, or love of one’s fate. Refusal of the lies of archism is at the same time a form of choosing or acceptance. Here amor fati means not passive quiescence in the face of progress but its opposite. It means the subject must choose her own present and her own condition—including her mortality and her death (to believe in it). From that position, the trap she finds herself in becomes something else, something that gives her agency rather than taking it away (albeit a very different form of agency than that promised by liberal universalism).

In thinking in these terms, Moten and Harney recognize the real danger of turning Brown, a dead individual, into a fetish of antifetishism—a kind of magical talisman that only creates more phantasm and that

72. See Friedrich Nietzsche, Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is (New York: Penguin, 1993), 37. In Black Skin, White Masks, Fanon comments on this same idea, writing, “I said in my introduction that man is a yes. I will never stop reiterating that. Yes to life. Yes to love. Yes to generosity. But man is also a no. No to scorn of man. No to degradation of man. No to exploitation of man. No to the butchery of what is most human in man: freedom. Man’s behavior is not only reactional. And there is always resentment in a reaction. Nietzsche had already pointed that out in The Will to Power. To educate man to be actional, preserving in all his relations his respect for the basic values that constitute a human world, is the prime task of him, who haven taken thought, prepares to act” (222).
further abstracts entirely from his own life and his own body, thereby falling right back into the archist fetishism that claimed his life in the first place. Moten and Harney write,

It would be wrong to say that Michael Brown has become, in death, more than himself. He already was that, as he said himself, in echo of so much more than himself. He was already more than that in being less than that, in being the least of these. To reduce Michael Brown to a cypher for our unfulfilled desire to be more than that, for our serially unachieved and constitutionally unachievable citizenship, is to do a kind of counterrevolutionary violence; it is to partake in the ghoulish, vampiric consumption of his body, of the body that became his, though it did not become him, in death, in the reductive stasis to which his flesh was subjected. Michael Brown’s flesh is our flesh; he is the flesh of our flesh of flames.73

This is why it is critical to remember that even as he stands for so many other murdered black and brown bodies, Michael Brown is also a singular and particular body (like Polynices), irreplaceable and unique. To turn Brown into a pure symbol of resistance would therefore be another way of acceding to the siren calls of biopolitical authority and archist violence (which amount to the same thing). When they write that “[Brown] was already more than [himself] in being less than that,” Moten and Harney are asserting that each subject is never just him- or herself; each person is a site upon which the state enacts its power and authority even as it is also the site of Moten and Harney’s own forms of refusal that they impute to him. Yet at the same time, if we think purely in these terms, we miss Brown’s own agency, his own counterpower as a corpse, and repeat the mistakes of archism by treating his body as a passive surface that serves as a battleground for competing readings of his life and his death (the state’s and Moten and Harney’s own), turning his “refusal to stand” into something that is not his at all.

That is why it is important to say that in being more than himself, Brown is also less than himself; even as he is this site of battle, he is also just himself, less than the great and inflated sense of his personhood that makes him larger than life. To think that way is to return to Brown himself, to his material body, his life, his name, his particularity.

To think about Brown as a unique person, as a dead body, is to allow his death—his particular and local death, that is—to act back upon the vast

symbolic warfare that is being committed in his name, to assert his own form of refusal into the mix. If the state and other biopolitical apparatuses seek to thoroughly control and determine “life” (i.e., life as they determine it), then, as Bargu, Mbembe, and Murray argue as well, death itself offers a different kind of life. But death in the abstract is itself too readily drawn into the phantasmic, which is why the state imagines that it “owns” death in some way or at least manages death as best it can. It takes actual, individual deaths such as Brown’s to resist the false “life” death is otherwise opposed to. In saying that Brown is “less” than himself, Moten and Harney recognize that reducing someone to his or her material body (and death does exactly that) is disappointing; it seems diminished, less than the kinds of expanded personhoods promised by liberal universalism. But this “less” is also “more,” because the expanded self promised to whites and people of color alike, although with radically different outcomes, is itself nonexistent, so on a phantasmic register, a body seems “less” but in reality is “more,” because it is tangible—it exists and has something to (un)say.

Imagining a very different reading of Brown’s final minutes as well as the aftermath, Moten and Harney write,

On August 9, like every day, like every other day, black life, in its irreducible sociality, having consented not to be single, got caught walking—with jurisgenerative fecundity—down the middle of the street. Michael Brown and his boys: black life breaking and making laws, against and underneath the state, surrounding it. They had foregone the melancholic appeal to which we now reduce them, for citizenship and subjectivity, and humanness. That they had done so is the source of Darren Wilson’s genocidal instrumentalization in the state’s defense. They were in a state of war and they knew it. Moreover, they were warriors in insurgent, if imperfect, beauty. What’s left for us to consider is the difference between the way of Michael Brown’s dance, his fall and rise—the way they refuse to take place when he takes to the streets, the way Ferguson takes to the streets—and to the way we seek to take but don’t seem to take to the streets: in protest, as mere petitioners, fruitlessly seeking energy in the pitiful, minimal, temporary shutdown of this or that freeway . . . What would it be and what would it mean for us jurisgeneratively to take the streets, to live in the streets, to gather together another city right here, right now?74

Turning Brown from a pure victim into a “warrior” who was “in a state of war and . . . knew it” completes the rereading and re-envisioning that

74. Ibid., 85–86.
Moten and Harney engage in; it allows his death to inform—and perhaps even transform—his life as well as the lives of other people of color and the living in general, to transform his death from something that was not his at all into something he can claim and can speak for and from.\textsuperscript{75} The warriors Moten and Harney describe are seeking not “a beautiful death,” an archist phantasm that is based on the instrumentalization of life and death alike, but rather a beautiful life, a jurisgenerative form of existence (akin to Roberts’s discussion of sociogenesis) that unites the living and the dead in one community of what could be called outlaws—not in the negative sense but in the positive sense of being outside of one kind of law and thus available for another.\textsuperscript{76}

For all this, in considering Moten and Harney’s rereading of Brown’s death and the spectacle of his unburied, murdered body, it might seem that they offer nothing but solace. After all, reinterpreting Brown as “refusing to stand” or as a warrior does not, in and of itself, change what happened. Brown is still dead; his murderer still got off scot-free. It does not bring him back to his family or to his friends. The fact that his death and the subsequent protests of his killing helped give momentum to Black Lives Matter is, of course, of huge importance, but how do Moten and Harney’s words add to or subtract from that situation?

Here again I would argue that although their intervention seems to lie purely at the level of the symbolic, the symbolic is critical when it comes to challenging both state and biopolitical authority. If those forms of authority actually had the ontological status they seek and claim to have, then it would indeed be pointless to try to reframe or reimagine Brown’s subject position as an unburied body. One would be facing the solidity of a phenomenon that could not be denied or undermined. But because these forms of power are so ephemeral, so vulnerable, because the state and other biopolitical actors (like the white mob in “Going to Meet the

\textsuperscript{75} Seeking to give Brown back his own voice, Moten and Harney quote a Facebook post he made a few days before being murdered where he said, “If i leave this earth today atleast youll know i care about others more than i cared about my damn self” (ibid.). Their response is to imagine his voice from beyond the grave, saying, “Go on call me ‘demon’ but I WILL love my damn self” (ibid., 84). This is an allusion to the fact that Darren Wilson in his testimony spoke of Michael Brown as looking like a “demon.” These two statements also serve as epigraphs to this book.

\textsuperscript{76} I am indebted to Sam Frost for suggesting the idea of the “outlaw.”
Man”) need these bodies to mean something particular, the symbolic becomes a vital and critical place in which to engage in semiotic warfare.

Accordingly, Brown is indeed a warrior; he is fighting, refusing, and undoing the phantasms that led to his death. He is an agent, and a powerful one at that—look at all the actions that have happened in his name! In this way too, Brown is not simply an instrument for Moten and Harney’s own purposes; I once again argue that they are instead allowing him to deinstrumentalize them, altering the concepts of life and death, permitting other forms of life and politics to become visible in the process. Even as a dead person—perhaps especially as a dead person—Brown is doing something. He is unmaking the web of seemingly inevitable truisms that forms the lifeblood of the state and biopolitics more generally, rendering it radically incredible and revealing archism’s lies as literally utopian (“nowhere”), while the resistance to those lies is all too tangible—present in Brown’s own dead, unburied body.

In this way, Brown’s counterprojective power affects not only Moten and Harney but many others as well, including members of his family. Like Antigone for her brother, Brown’s family is also able to speak for and to his death. Brown’s mother, Lesley McSpadden; his father, Michael Brown Sr.; and other members of his family have vocally spoken out and challenged police narratives.

And many other wives, husbands, partners, parents, siblings, and other relations, as well as friends and comrades, have spoken out about this and other killings as well. We see this once again in the #SayHerName campaign for Bland; we see this in the agitation on behalf of Philando Castile, initiated by his girlfriend, Diamond Reynolds, who was in the car with Castile and her four-year-old daughter. Reynolds recorded part of the incident that led to Castile’s death and put it on social media. More recently, Myeisha Johnson, wife of U.S. Army Sergeant La David Johnson, challenged President Trump’s narrative of when he made a bungled and disrespectful condolence call to her about her slain husband in which he did not even know (or say) his name. Although Johnson’s death in Niger does not follow the same pattern of state-sanctioned killing we see in Brown’s case, it remains true that his death comes into a racist and archist framework, and the voice of his grieving widow has been silenced—or at least attempted
to be silenced—as so many grieving and angry family members have been in the past.

These kinds of exchanges can be read once again through the lens of archist rights and victimhood, resubmitting the dead and their families to an archist and biopolitical discourse. (Brown’s family, for example, was awarded 1.5 million dollars in a civil suit for wrongful death.) Yet there is another way to think about these narratives: as voices that have been energized not only by anger and grief but also by an alternative source of power and authority that is also present, albeit usually eclipsed by normative narratives that seek to return everything to archist explanations and understandings. These counterpowers are always present, but it takes an act of refusal to bring them to the fore. Such a refusal turns what is otherwise just business as usual (grieving, raging, suing) into the source of a much more radical—and, I would add, anarchist—response, a way to earn a death that is also a way to make a life.

And this goes back to Michael Brown as well. Even as Moten and Harney try to give Brown back his own voice (i.e., project onto him what his voice might be), I argue that they are also, in effect, listening to that inaudible voice he himself already has as a member of the dead. If they are speaking for him, he is also speaking (or unspeaking) to them (and thereby to everyone else as well). It is this subtler dimension of engagement that I argue is not purely symbolic (or at least not symbolic in the way that term is usually understood) and that has the power to transform a semiotic struggle into an actual and political one. This transformation will be the subject of the final chapter.