

# People-of-Color-Blindness

*Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery*

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The camp, which is now firmly settled inside [the city], is the new biopolitical *nomos* of the planet.

—Giorgio Agamben

In the center of late capital is the ghetto.

—Donald Lowe

In *Means without End*, the theoretical précis of his *Homo Sacer* tetralogy,<sup>1</sup> Giorgio Agamben suggests that under present conditions “we will have to abandon decidedly, without reservation, the fundamental concepts through which we have so far represented the subjects of the political (Man, the Citizen and its rights, but also the sovereign people, the worker, and so forth) and build our political philosophy anew starting from the one and only figure of the refugee.”<sup>2</sup> The proposal derives from a paramount concern to counteract the increasing institutionalization of the state of exception throughout the political-juridical order of the modern nation-states, and it is premised on an understanding of the refugee as a limit-concept, a figure that “at once brings a radical crisis to the principles of the nation-state and clears the way for a renewal of categories that can no longer be delayed.”<sup>3</sup> This urgent renewal of categories is made possible by the conceptual crisis of the nation-state represented by the refugee insofar as she disarticulates “the trinity of state-nation-territory” and “the very principle of the inscription of nativity” upon which it is based.<sup>4</sup> The refugee is the contemporary political subject par excellence because she exposes to view “the originary fiction of sovereignty” and thereby renders it available to thought.

What is this fiction? It is not only the presumed identity between the human (*zoē*) and the citizen (*bios*)—the conceptual fissure that makes possible the modern production of bare life—and that between nativity and nationality—the conceptual distinction that makes possible the reciprocal naturalization of propagation and property in the name of race. It is also the conflation of the ruler (or ruling class) with sovereignty itself, the tautological claim that the law (*logos*) is ontologically prior to the establishment of its jurisdictional field, a space defined by relations of purely formal obedience. The state of exception would seem to betray the mystical foundation of authority because the sovereign power operates in suspension of positive law, enforcing the law paradoxically insofar as it is inapplicable at the time and place of its enforcement. However, the dynamic stability of that foundation—the space of obedience—is demonstrated by the terrible fact that the state of exception has been materialized repeatedly within a whole array of political formations across the preceding century and in the particular form of the camp. With the birth of the camp, the exception becomes the rule, consolidating a field of obedience in extremis—in place of rule by law, a paradigm of governance by the administration of the absence of order.<sup>5</sup>

However, if for Agamben the camp is “the new biopolitical *nomos* of the planet,” its novelty does not escape a certain conceptual belatedness with respect to those “repressed topographies of cruelty” that Achille Mbembe has identified in the formulation of “necropolitics.”<sup>6</sup> On my reading, the formulation of necropolitics is enabled by attending to the political and economic conditions of the African diaspora in the historic instance—both acknowledging the form and function of racial slavery for “any historical account of the rise of modern terror” and addressing the ways that “the political economy of statehood [particularly in Africa] has dramatically changed over the last quarter of the twentieth century” in connection with “the wars of the globalization era.”<sup>7</sup> Necropolitics is important for the historicist project of provincializing Agamben’s paradigmatic analysis, especially as it articulates the logic of race as something far more global than a conflict internal to Europe (or even Eurasia). Indeed, Mbembe initially describes racial slavery in the Atlantic world as “one of the first instances of biopolitical experimentation” and goes on to discuss it, following the work of Saidiya Hartman, as an exemplary manifestation of the state of exception in “the very structure of the plantation system and its aftermath.”<sup>8</sup>

Mbembe abandons too quickly this meditation on the peculiar institution in pursuit of the proper focus of his theoretical project: the formation of *colonial* sovereignty. In the process, he loses track of the fact, set forth in the opening pages of Hartman’s study, that the crucial aspects of “the peculiar terror formation” that Mbembe attributes to the emergence of

colonial rule are already institutionalized, perhaps more fundamentally, in and as the political-judicial structure of slavery.<sup>9</sup> More specifically, it is the legal and political status of the captive *female* that is paradigmatic for the “(re)production of enslavement,” in which “the normativity of sexual violence [i.e., the virtual absence of prohibitions or limitations in the determination of socially tolerable and necessary violence] establishes an inextricable link between racial formation and sexual subjection.”<sup>10</sup>

This is why for Hartman resistance is figured through the black female’s sexual self-defense, as exemplified by the 1855 circuit court case *State of Missouri v. Celia, a Slave*, in which the defendant was sentenced to death by hanging on the charge of murder for responding with deadly force to the sexual assault and attempted rape by a white male slaveholder.

Having engaged Hartman, Mbembe must write the following under the terms of a certain disavowal: “The most original feature of this terror formation [the colony] is its concatenation of biopower, the state of exception, and the state of siege. . . . the colony represents the site where sovereignty consists fundamentally in the exercise of power outside the law (*ab legibus solutus*) and where ‘peace’ is more likely to take on the face of a ‘war without end.’”<sup>11</sup> In the earlier text, Hartman describes “the particular mechanisms of tyrannical power that converge on the black body,” highlighting both “the absoluteness of power” under slavery in general and the particular ways that its gendered dimensions reveal that generality at its extreme:

In this instance, tyranny is not a rhetorical inflation, but a designation of the absoluteness of power. Gender, if at all appropriate in this scenario, must be understood as indissociable from violence, the vicious refiguration of rape as mutual and shared desire, the wanton exploitation of the captive body tacitly sanctioned as a legitimate use of property, the disavowal of injury, and the absolute possession of the body and its “issue.” In short, black and female difference is registered by virtue of the extremity of power operating on captive bodies and licensed within the scope of the humane and the tolerable.<sup>12</sup>

Mbembe’s formulation can suggest the originality of colonial sovereignty only insofar as it bypasses Hartman’s evidence and argument.<sup>13</sup> In fact, it does so by artfully recuperating the very sources that Hartman brings in for critique. In note 30 of “Necropolitics,” Mbembe cites affirmatively Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection* (alongside Manuel Moreno Fraginal’s 1964 Marxist history of Cuban slavery, *The Sugar Mill*, and Susan Buck-Morss’s 2000 *Critical Inquiry* article, “Hegel and Haiti”) in support of his claim that “the very structure of the plantation system and its aftermath manifests the emblematic and paradoxical figure of the state of exception.”<sup>14</sup> In notes 34 and 36 of the same article, however, Mbembe

cites affirmatively two sources in contradiction of Hartman's position: the well-known passage from the 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* in which the narrator describes the "terrible spectacle" of the torture of his Aunt Hester by the overseer, Mr. Plumber; and the work of folklorist Roger Abrahams on the form and function of "corn shucking" as slave performance in the antebellum United States.

It is curious that Mbembe avails himself of these precise references given that, in the second paragraph of the first page of *Scenes*, Hartman states: "I have chosen not to reproduce Douglass's account of the beating of Aunt Hester in order to call attention to the ease with which such scenes are usually reiterated, the casualness with which they are circulated, and the consequences of this routine display of the slave's ravaged body. Rather than inciting indignation, too often they immure us to pain by virtue of their familiarity. . . . and especially because they reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering."<sup>15</sup> For these reasons, Hartman explicitly rejects such "invocations of the shocking and the terrible" as a means to "convey the routinized violence of slavery and its aftermath," opting instead to "consider those scenes in which terror can hardly be discerned—slaves dancing in the quarter, the outrageous darky antics of the minstrel stage, the constitution of humanity in slave law, and the fashioning of the self-possessed individual."<sup>16</sup> That is to say, the reiteration and circulation of passages like Douglass's description of Aunt Hester's torture do not help to establish for readers "the violent tenor of the slave's life," as Mbembe would have it, but rather serve to obscure and to naturalize it.<sup>17</sup>

In pursuit of her thesis, Hartman challenges the prevailing modes of historical writing about slavery, including the sort of folkloric ethnography for which Abrahams gained an international scholarly reputation. Hartman extends the work of Hayden White (in his *Metahistory* and *Tropics of Discourse*) in reading the text of Abrahams's 1992 *Singing the Master* as typical of the pastoral genre that emplots history as comic romance. "When history is emplotted in the comic mode," she suggests, "its mode of historical explanation tends to be organicist and its ideological implications conservative."<sup>18</sup> Abrahams celebrates the capacities of the slave to subvert the regime through her signifying beyond the master's awareness and comprehension, but Hartman demonstrates how this celebration relies upon an erasure of the structural violence, the hardly discernible terror, of compelled performance. Mbembe thus defends Abrahams's American pastoral against Hartman's criticism when he mobilizes the former as support for the idea that

in spite of the terror and the symbolic sealing off of the slave, he or she maintains alternative perspectives toward time, work, and self. This is the second paradoxical element of the plantation world as a manifestation of the state

of exception. Treated as if he or she no longer existed except as a mere tool and instrument of production, the slave nevertheless is able to draw almost any object, instrument, language, or gesture into a performance and then stylize it. Breaking with uprootedness and the pure world of things of which he or she is but a fragment, the slave is able to demonstrate the protean capabilities of the human bond through music and the very body that was supposedly possessed by another.<sup>19</sup>

Mbembe's conjectural phrasing—asserting a *supposed* possession of the body rather than a political-juridical order that enforces its *actuality*—has the effect of diminishing the violence of slave law in the very scenes of subjection that Hartman shows to be central to “the construction of racial difference and the absolute distinctions of status between free white persons and black captives.”<sup>20</sup> It also seeks to discredit the scholarship that operates according to such assumptions. Put slightly differently, it seeks to resurrect the same problematic attributions of “humanity,” “agency,” and “personhood” that Hartman identifies as key components of the racial domination of blacks in “the tragic continuities between slavery and freedom.” Uncritical, and ultimately romantic, ethnographic claims, like those Mbembe draws upon, about the slave's capacity and capability for “stylization” are theoretically untenable since the publication of *Scenes of Subjection* over a decade ago. I am talking broadly here about the sort of claims about slavery that rely on phrases like “In spite of the terror” and “. . . nevertheless. . . .”<sup>21</sup>

This is not likely evidence of oversight or lack of rigor, but rather misrecognition of the theoretical level at which Hartman's critique is posed. Hortense Spillers limns something like this critical distinction in her landmark 1996 essay on psychoanalysis and race, “‘All the Things You Could Be by Now, If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother.’”<sup>22</sup> Midway through that study, Spillers quotes Jürgen Habermas from his 1968 *Knowledge and Human Interests*: “A critically mediated knowledge of laws cannot through reflection alone render the law itself inoperative, but it can render it inapplicable.” Her point will not be to endorse straightaway “Habermas's self-reflection, in which case the laws are *operative* but do not *apply*,” both because it “appears to be predicated on the agency of self-knowing” that the Du Boisian figure of double consciousness significantly complicates and because, pace Marx (and, in his own social-democratic way, Habermas too), it is not enough simply “to see with greater clarity what the problem is.”<sup>23</sup> Yet Spillers finds useful the conceptual discrimination between the domain of the *operation* of the law (in which it is historically determinate of social, political, and economic existence) and the domain of the *application* of the law (in which it solicits the consent of the governed or, in another parlance, the identification of the dominated position). A law may be or

may become inapplicable, enabling an array of subversion and resistance at the level of infrapolitics or, better, providing preconditions for effective opposition, but that does not thereby make it inoperative—maybe not even a little bit. Ultimately, it is a question of evaluative criteria: are we judging the significance of a practice based on whether or to what extent it renders a law inapplicable or inoperative? One would think that the inevitably political dimension of analysis holds the latter firmly in place as its horizon.<sup>24</sup>

But even the inapplicability of the law cannot be safely assumed, given not only the complications of double consciousness for the slave but also the obscure versatility of slave law's functioning. Again, Hartman is instructive: what appears in the first instance to be evidence of an agency that indexes the law's inapplicability for the slave may upon closer scrutiny reveal a convoluted form of consent. There are questions of the operation and application of slave law for the free as well. Regarding the former, we note the fact that "the absolute submission mandated by law was not simply that of slave to his or her owner, but the submission of the enslaved before all whites."<sup>25</sup> The latter group is better termed *all nonblacks* (or, less economically, the unequally arrayed category of nonblackness), because it is racial blackness as a necessary condition for enslavement that matters most, rather than whiteness as a sufficient condition for freedom. The structural position of the Indian slaveholder—or, for that matter, the smattering of free black slaveholders in the United States or the slaveholding mulatto elite in the Caribbean—is a case in point.<sup>26</sup> Freedom from the rule of slave law requires only that one be considered nonblack, whether that nonblack racial designation be "white" or "Indian" or, in the rare case, "Oriental"—this despite the fact that each of these groups has at one point or another labored in conditions similar to or contiguous with enslaved African-derived groups. In other words, it is not *labor* relations, but *property* relations that are constitutive of slavery.

Not all free persons are white (nor are they equal or equally free), but slaves are paradigmatically black. And because blackness serves as the basis of enslavement in the logic of a transnational political and legal culture, it permanently destabilizes the position of any nominally free black population. Stuart Hall might call this the articulation of elements of a discourse, the production of a "non-necessary correspondence" between the signifiers of racial blackness and slavery.<sup>27</sup> But it is the historical *materialization* of the logic of a transnational political and legal culture such that the contingency of its articulation is generally lost to the infrastructure of the Atlantic world that provides Frank Wilderson a basis for the concept of a "political ontology of race."<sup>28</sup> The United States provides the point of focus here, but the dynamics under examination are not restricted to its bounds. Political ontology is not a metaphysical notion, because it is the

explicit outcome of a politics and thereby available to historic challenge through collective struggle. But it is not simply a description of a political status either, even an oppressed political status, because it functions *as if* it were a metaphysical property across the *longue durée* of the premodern, modern, and now postmodern eras. That is to say, the application of the law of racial slavery is pervasive, regardless of variance or permutation in its operation across the better part of a millennium.<sup>29</sup>

In Wilderson's terms, the libidinal economy of antiblackness is pervasive, regardless of variance or permutation in its political economy. In fact, the application of slave law among the free (that is, the disposition that "with respect to the African shows no internal recognition of the libidinal costs of turning human bodies into sentient flesh") has outlived in the postemancipation world a certain form of its prior operation—the property relations specific to the institution of chattel and the plantation-based agrarian economy in which it was sustained. Hartman describes this in her 2007 memoir, *Lose Your Mother*, as *the afterlife of slavery*: "a measure of man and a ranking of life and worth that has yet to be undone . . . a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago."<sup>30</sup> On that note, it is not inappropriate to say that the continuing application of slave law facilitated the *reconfiguration* of its operation with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, rather than its abolition (in the conventional reading) or even its circumscription "as punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted" (on the progressive reading of contemporary critics of the prison-industrial complex). It is the paramount value of Loïc Wacquant's historical sociology, especially in Wilderson's hands, that it provides a schema for tracking such reconfigurations of anti-blackness "from slavery to mass imprisonment" without losing track of its structural dimensions, its political ontology.<sup>31</sup>

Mbembe's misconstrued engagement with Hartman makes more than likely a disavowal of the transatlantic connection (of categorical eligibility for enslavement) that racial slavery forges among African-derived populations in favor of a "third worldist" conception of the colonized warranting analytic comparison and political solidarity between the sub-Saharan African postcolony and the living legacy of colonialism in the Middle East.<sup>32</sup> What the latter share is a problematic of decolonization broached by way of a subsumption of slavery under the rubric of colonialism (simply because slavery was instituted within the colonies), making of slavery one more instance of a general phenomenon—"modern terror" or "*the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations.*"<sup>33</sup> This emphasis on "generalized instrumentalization" goes some way in explaining how Mbembe can justify theoretically a leap from discussion of the "death-in-life" commerce

of racial slavery from (at least) the mid-sixteenth-century Dutch Golden Age to the formation of the mid-twentieth-century apartheid regime to the broader political economy of statehood in the African postcolony to the ongoing “colonial occupation of Palestine,” which Mbembe describes as “the most accomplished form of necropower” in the contemporary world.<sup>34</sup> The generalized instrumentalization of human existence spanning across these distinct, if overlapping, social formations is a regrettably imprecise hypothesis and, as a result, loses track of the *singular commodification of human existence* (not simply its labor power) under racial slavery, that structure of gratuitous violence in which a body is rendered as flesh to be accumulated and exchanged.

The final object of contemplation in Mbembe’s rewriting of Agamben’s rewriting of Foucault’s biopolitics is the fin de siècle figure of resistance to the colonial occupation of Palestine: the (presumptively male) suicide bomber. The slave, “able to demonstrate the protean capabilities of the human bond through music and the very body that was supposedly possessed by another,” is thus contrasted subtly with the colonized native, whose “body is transformed into a weapon, not in a metaphorical sense but in a truly ballistic sense” — a cultural politics in lieu of an armed struggle in which “to large extent, resistance and self-destruction are synonymous.”<sup>35</sup> Resistance to slavery in this account is self-preservative and forged by way of a demonstration of the capabilities of the human bond, whereas resistance to colonial occupation is self-destructive and consists in a demonstration of the failure of the human bond, the limits of its protean capabilities. One could object, in an empiricist vein, that the slave too resists in ways that are quite nearly as self-destructive as an improvised explosive device and that the colonial subject too resists through the creation and performance of music and the stylization of the body, but that would be to miss the symptomatic value of Mbembe’s theorization.

Mbembe describes suicide bombing as being organized by “two apparently irreconcilable logics,” “the logic of martyrdom and the logic of survival,” and it is the express purpose of the rubric of necropolitics to meditate upon this unlikely logical convergence.<sup>36</sup> However, there is a discrepancy at the heart of the enterprise. Rightly so, the theorization of necropolitics as a friendly critique of Agamben’s notion of bare life involves an excursus on certain “repressed topographies of cruelty,” including, first of all, slavery, in which “the lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom become blurred.”<sup>37</sup> Yet, as noted, the logic of resistance-as-suicide-as-sacrifice-as-martyrdom is for Mbembe epitomized by the presumptively male suicide bomber at war with colonial occupation, “the most accomplished form of necropower” in the contemporary world, rather than Hartman’s resistant female slave, Celia, engaged in close-quarters combat with the sexual economy of slave society,

“the emblematic and paradoxical figure of the state of exception.”<sup>38</sup> Why the unannounced transposition? Because the restricted notion of *homo sacer*—alongside the related notions of bare life and the state of exception—is being used in confusion to account for the effects of the biopolitics of race too generally. The *homo sacer*, “divested of political status and reduced to bare life,” is distinguished not by her vulnerability to a specific form or degree of state-sanctioned violence but by her social proscription from the honor of sacrifice.<sup>39</sup> The *homo sacer* is banned from the witness-bearing function of martyrdom (from the ancient Greek *martys*, “witness”). Her suffering is therefore imperceptible or illegible as a rule. It is against the law to recognize her sovereignty or self-possession.

This sort of conceptual conflation is pronounced in recent discussions of racial inequality within the United States as well, where post-colonial immigration has become the political watchword. Two figures are held up as exemplary: the immigrant worker from Mexico or Central America profiled and harassed by the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement and terrorized by a militarized U.S. Border Patrol (and various vigilante efforts) as her unskilled and semiskilled labor is exploited for the productive and service sectors of the national economy; and the immigrant worker from the Middle East or South Asia profiled and harassed by the Special Registration Program of the National Security Entry-Exit Registry System (now US-VISIT) and terrorized by a militarized Transportation Security Administration (and various vigilante efforts) as her unskilled and semiskilled labor is exploited for the productive and service sectors of the national economy. The various state agencies of this systematic discrimination are consolidated within the Department of Homeland Security, and that institution serves as the grand target of much immigrant rights activism.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Agamben himself is not far from this position, given that the ethical elevation of the figure of the refugee is motivated by his analysis of the dynamics of xenophobia in contemporary Europe (given too that the Eurocentric political exile of the refugee remains a species of immigration that “persists in the hope of justice under capitalism”).<sup>41</sup>

In *Means without End*, Agamben is in mind of the atrocities committed during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992–95), the “camps of ethnic rape” in which Bosniak women were systematically targeted by Serbian military, paramilitary, and police forces for this particular form of sexual violence in order to degrade or destroy the capacities of the (largely Muslim) Bosniak population to reproduce itself as Bosniak. The project of “ethnic cleansing” was extended in this way beyond the means of direct killing, massacre, imprisonment, torture, and deportation (including acts of genocide in Srebrenica and Foča) to include the forced reproduction of what was understood to be a form of biological impurity. For Agamben, the reproductive impetus of interethnic mass rape under conditions of warfare

indexes a profound unmooring of “the principle of birth, which ensured the inscription of life in the order of the nation-state,” a global development in excess of the regional military hostilities.<sup>42</sup> *This is the novel element of the camp in our age, and this is why Agamben declares the camp—“the camps of ethnic rape”—to be the new biopolitical nomos of the planet.* In other words, Agamben is marking a critical distinction between the prosecution of Serbian officials during the 1990s by the UN International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the UN International Court of Justice in the Hague and the prosecution of Nazi officials after World War II by the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg: “the Nazis,” writes Agamben, “never thought of carrying out the ‘final solution’ by impregnating Jewish women.”<sup>43</sup>

Agamben is correct to identify the permanent crisis of the political system of the modern nation-state with “the original biopolitical fracture” of the third term of its conceptual trinity: birth.<sup>44</sup> The malfunction of “the traditional mechanisms that used to regulate” the transformation of “*birth* into *nation*,” the failure of the inscription of nativity upon which is founded the “functional nexus between a determinate localization (territory) and a determinate order (state)” is remedied, as it were, by the state’s increasingly direct “management of the biological life of the nation.”<sup>45</sup> The camp—“a space in which, for all intents and purposes, the normal rule of law is suspended and in which the fact that atrocities may or may not be committed does not depend on the law but rather on the civility and ethical sense of the police”—reinscribes naked life in the order of the nation-state by *force*.<sup>46</sup> The violence of this reinscription is meant both to arrest and remove the “people of the excluded” (the “minority” slated for indefinite isolation, expulsion, elimination, etc., even when in the numerical majority) and to ensure the properly political existence of the remainder of the population, the People as an “integral body politic” (the “majority” whose integrity is nonetheless reduced to a remainder by virtue of their constitutive exclusion from the space of the camp, even when in the numerical minority).<sup>47</sup>

Agamben is incorrect to date the onset of this crisis and the advent of the paradigm of the camp with the “new laws on citizenship and on the denationalization of citizens” in Europe of the interwar years, that is, the rise of martial law in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>48</sup> The general *failure* of the inscription of nativity in the order of the nation-state and the state’s management of the biological life of the nation is predated and prepared by the strict *prohibition* of nativity under the regime of racial slavery and the state’s management of the biological life of the enslaved throughout the Atlantic world, most pointedly through the sexual regulation of race in the British North American colonies and the United States.<sup>49</sup> *And the racial circumscription of political life (bios) under slavery predates and prepares the rise of the modern democratic state, providing*

the central counterpoint and condition of possibility for the symbolic and material articulation of its form and function.<sup>50</sup> If in Agamben's analysis the inscription of nativity in Euro-America is disquieted in the twentieth century by postcolonial immigration, the native-born black population in the United States—known in the historic instance as “the descendants of slaves”—suffers the status of being neither the native nor the foreigner, neither the colonizer nor the colonized.<sup>51</sup> The nativity of the slave is not inscribed elsewhere in some other (even subordinated) jurisdiction, but rather nowhere at all. The nativity of the slave is foreclosed, undermining from within the potential for citizenship, but also opening the possibility of a truly nonoriginal origin, a political existence that signifies “the presence of an absence that discloses the absence inherent in all presence and every present.”<sup>52</sup> Agamben overestimates the extent to which the question of nativity is displaced by the figure of the refugee. It is perhaps better to say that it is disturbed by the presence of strangers in a strange land. More simply, we might say to the refugee that you may lose your motherland, but you will not “lose your mother.”<sup>53</sup> The latter condition, the “social death” in which one is denied kinship entirely by the force of law, is reserved for the “natal alienation” and “genealogical isolation” characterizing slavery. Here is Orlando Patterson, from his encyclopedic 1982 study:

I prefer the term “natal alienation” because it goes directly to the heart of what is critical in the slave's forced alienation, the loss of ties of birth in both ascending and descending generations. It also has the important nuance of a loss of native status, of deracination. It was this alienation of the slave from all formal, legally enforceable ties of “blood,” and from any attachment to groups or localities other than those chosen for him by the master, that gave the relation of slavery its peculiar value to the master. The slave was the ultimate human tool, as imprintable and as disposable as the master wished. And this was true, at least in theory, of all slaves, no matter how elevated.<sup>54</sup>

True, even if one attains the income and educational levels of the mythic American middle class, the celebrity of a Hollywood icon, or the political position of the so-called leader of the free world. The alienation and isolation of the slave is not just vertical, canceling out ties to past and future generations (“the descendants of slaves” now understood as a strict oxymoron). It is also horizontal, canceling out ties to the slave's contemporaries as well. The deracination of the slave, reduced to a tool, is total, more fundamental than the displacement of the refugee, whose status obtains in a network of persecuted human relations in exile rather than in a collection or dispersal of a class of things. Crucially, deracination is strictly correlative to the “absolute submission mandated by law” discussed by Hartman above, the most perfect example of the space of purely formal obedience defining the jurisdictional field of sovereignty.

Because the forced submission of the slave is absolute, any signs whatsoever of “reasoning . . . intent and rationality” are recognized “solely in the context of criminal liability.” That is, “the slave’s will [is] acknowledged only as it [is] prohibited or punished.”<sup>55</sup> A criminal will, a criminal reasoning, a criminal intent, a criminal rationality: with these erstwhile human capacities construed as indices of culpability before the law, even the potentiality of slave resistance is rendered illegitimate and illegible a priori. Again, this is true not only for the slave’s resistance to submission to this or that slaveholder but to the whole of the free population, what I called earlier the unequally arrayed category of nonblackness.

The disqualification of black resistance is not unrelated to the peculiar and long-standing cross-racial phenomenon in which the white bourgeois and proletarian revolutions on both sides of the Atlantic can allegorize themselves as revolts against slavery, while the hemispheric black struggle against actually existing slavery and its afterlife cannot authorize itself literally in those same terms. The latter must code itself as the apotheosis of the French and American revolutions (with their themes of Judeo-Christian deliverance) or, later, the Russian and Chinese revolutions (with their themes of secular messianic transformation) or, still later, the broad anticolonial movements in Asia, Africa, and Latin America of the mid-twentieth century (with their themes of indigenous reclamation and renaissance).<sup>56</sup> The metaphoric transfer that dismisses the legitimacy of black struggles against racial slavery (and what Wacquant calls its “functional surrogates”) while it appropriates black suffering as the template for nonblack grievances remains one of the defining features of contemporary political culture. That notable black academics, artists, and activists participate in this gesture is nothing new, of course, but their increasing degrees of self-consciousness and virulence in so doing signal the hegemony it presently enjoys.

A case in point: the summer 2008 issue of the *American Scholar*, the literary quarterly of the Phi Beta Kappa Society, featured a cover article titled “The End of the Black American Narrative,” written by MacArthur Fellow and National Book Award–winner Charles Johnson.<sup>57</sup> Johnson describes himself as “a writer, philosopher, artist, and black American” and demonstrates an intimate knowledge of black American history, culture, and politics, but only to establish the authority upon which he will subsequently disabuse himself and his readers of the very narrative that organized his rise to prominence. His thesis—“It simply is no longer the case that the essence of black American life is racial victimization and disenfranchisement”—is unoriginal, poorly drawn, and argued by assertion rather than evidence, but it resonates nonetheless with the political common sense I am attempting to challenge. Though Johnson’s fiction has been justly lauded by the critical establishment, his social commen-

tary on this score lacks acumen, to say the least. He does not just refer to this story of “victimization and disenfranchisement” as being “very old” but also “obsolete” and “antique”; not just obsolete and antique, but also “medieval” and “Ptolemaic”; not just premodern, but prior even to the Dark Ages—ancient.

In the final analysis, though, it is the charge of “ahistorical” that matters most here. To think “that the essence of black American life is racial victimization and disenfranchisement” is, for Johnson, to have a psychological problem, a fixation, a form of delusion that prevents one from apprehending the dynamic of history and seeing “the things themselves” all around us. What are these things? Quite simply, the empirical facts of black American economic, educational, and occupational diversity and rising numbers of immigrants from the West Indies and Africa, immigrants who apparently do not identify with the black American narrative as (something related to) their own story (despite the now belabored fact that the whole range of dispersed African-derived populations is structurally positioned by the history of racial slavery). Johnson thus regards this caricatured version of black American history as so much “rubbish that stands in the way of knowledge.” In this way, Johnson assists the idea of an obsolete black American narrative as the premise—the grand assumption—for entire fields of academic inquiry, policymaking, media punditry, service provision, political lobbying, and community organization that have for the better part of a generation advocated for an end to “the black-white binary” analysis of race and racism. The call for paradigm shift has become the hallmark of the post-civil rights era, in which the initiatives of multiracial coalition politics, immigrant rights, liberal multiculturalism, and conservative colorblindness operate uneasily—and often unwittingly—within a broad-based strategic integration.

In this light, we might augment the post-9/11 critique of the racial state regarding the Bush administration’s initiation of the ongoing war on terror, the passage of the PATRIOT Acts, the formation of the Department of Homeland Security, the “anti-terrorist” roundups of 2001, the torture of “enemy combatants” at U.S. military prisons, and so on.<sup>58</sup> This redacted commentary might productively shift the prevailing conceptualization of American empire and especially the use of imprisonment and police profiling as tropes of the *racialized* political oppression it engenders, both nationally and internationally. We are in a position now to see how the deployment of this rhetorical device (for example, “Flying While Brown” is like “Driving While Black”; the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride “builds on the history of the noble US civil rights movement”; the prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib is reminiscent of the lynching of blacks)<sup>59</sup> is made possible by a misrecognition of the lived experience of the black. This point is developed by Wilderson with reference to the distinction between political conflict

(involving a demand that can be satisfied by the end of exploitation or the restoration of sovereignty) and political antagonism (involving a demand that cannot be satisfied through a transfer of ownership or organization of land and labor) or, in related fashion, between contingent forms of suffering (state violence incurred by breaching the modality of hegemony) and structural forms of suffering (state violence experienced as gratuitous, a direct relation of force).<sup>60</sup> The former designation in each case encompasses a wide range of exploitation and exclusion, including colonization, occupation, and even extermination, while the latter indicates the singularity of racial slavery and its afterlife, the lasting paradox of a sentient and sapient being “sealed into crushing objecthood.”<sup>61</sup>

By way of illustration, let us consider briefly Haile Gerima’s powerful 1976 film, *Bush Mama*, one of the signal contributions to the black independent film movement of the early post-civil rights era.<sup>62</sup> The most striking aspect of *Bush Mama* is not, as might be expected, the motif of disorientation: its ceaseless, frenetic action and escalating turmoil. Surely, the crowded and unforgiving urban ghetto is the referent and context of Gerima’s work and, in a sense, serves to constitute the projection of a besieged black interiority, the production of a lived space without reprieve and a juridical existence without recourse.<sup>63</sup> One gets the sense that to be black in an antiblack world, a world captured brilliantly by Charles Burnett’s tense and jagged cinematography, is to be inundated and under assault at every turn, pushed into an endlessly kinetic movement; which is to say subjected to an open and absolute vulnerability—not so much controlled by the transnational channels of “disciplined mobility” as pressed by the forces of a merciless routing.<sup>64</sup>

Nor is it the explicit and nearly overwhelming thematic of conversion: from quotidian urgency and the pressurized hustle of everyday ghetto life to political insurgency and the principled rupture of historic change. There is a seductive, perhaps anodyne political reading of the film as a threat of riot or, more generously, a call to arms or, at least, an intuition of political opposition, even if it has not yet attained the language or the power to articulate platform and program. Yet it cannot escape our attention that this deservedly well-known production takes shape in the twilight of the black movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s; in the wake of an unparalleled, though not unprecedented, domestic state repression; amid the dimming cinders of the hundreds of scenes of urban uprising unfolding across the United States in the preceding decade; in the denouement of the great anticolonial revolts throughout Africa and the third world that would supply profound inspiration as points of identification and solidarity. *Bush Mama* is produced in the aftermath of rebellion, its containment and incorporation by adjustments of public policy and military strategy,

the return or mutation of a mood that exercises even the conceptual limits of melancholia.

The most stunning aspect of the film is, then, its recurrent torpor and heaviness, its palpably depressive atmosphere, its leitmotif of *exhaustion*. One thinks, for instance, of the many scenes of indefinite waiting, of vacant gazes drifting about unspecified points in the distance, of stolid faces peering through the steel bars of the prison-house cage, of being simply stuck here or there, of killing (and being killed by) time, of meandering reminiscence and pronouncement and exhortation, of hopelessly needing to be two or three places at once. The patent anxiety generated by this layering of impasses does not culminate in the film's accelerating surface tempo or its taxing stretch across narrative tenterhooks. **The more profound effect is, on the contrary, to slow the pace of this confrontation to a veritable standstill and to produce an affective condition beyond or beneath the tremors of panic. However, this is not to say that the film exhibits fatalism, defeatism, or despair.**

Exhaustion in no way precludes the labor of critical reflection, the hope of organized political action, or, for that matter, the enjoyment of a vibrant and sustaining cultural life. Nor does it disable engagement with what might be a complex and quite expected range of emotional stances as warranted by the situation: fear, outrage, doubt, sadness, evasion, desperation, even guarded buoyancy. Indeed, there are traces of all such energies in *Bush Mama* (so too for Gerima's 1993 *Sankofa*), even where they are laced with the pathos of suffering that circulates along the blocked and barren carceral pathways of the ghetto. Exhaustion is operative at another cinematic level, produced through an amplification of the structuring breach in the conjunction of state and civil society, the point at which the black comes into radical acquaintance with herself: living scandal to the dead logic of capital, condition of possibility and impossibility for the operations of the commodity form, internal foreign object to the institutions of liberal democracy and mockery to its conceptions of citizen and subject, the conceits of its rule of law, the full repertoire of its criteria for human being. **Ultimately, *Bush Mama* is a film about a fight that unfurls without the political vanity of struggle or the moral nobility of resilience, without the existential comforts of spirit and soul, without the historic promise of transformation, reconstruction, or even a form of alternate sociality—a fight without guarantees. As such, *Bush Mama* may have an audience or, like *Celia*, a jury, but it has no community.<sup>65</sup>**

Our protagonist, Dorothy (Barbara O. Johnson), is embattled from the start. In the opening scene, she weathers a midday mugging by an importunate and ragged young black boy (interestingly, the scene is intercut with unannounced documentary footage in which the crew of *Bush Mama* weathers a midday mugging by suspicious uniformed officers of the

Los Angeles Police Department).<sup>66</sup> Beyond the daily threat of such pedestrian street violence, she is beset by the structural deprivations of acute poverty (dilapidated housing, malnutrition, atrophied social services, etc.), the ravages of compulsive drinking (compounded by the berating of her “support” group), the reproductive controls of a punitive welfare agency (which, among other things, coerces abortion by threatening withdrawal of financial assistance), and the ubiquitous predations of local police (who arrest and imprison her male lover early in the film for an unspecified—and immaterial—charge, subtracting his expected wages and affective labor from the household; shoot dead a deranged and perhaps mentally ill black man on the sidewalk as Dorothy looks on; and, most important, commit a brutal sexual assault against her daughter, Luann [Susan Williams], after harassing her on the sidewalk and then forcing their way into the apartment. After Dorothy’s arrest and imprisonment on the charge of murder for responding with deadly force to her daughter’s assailant, the police torture her in custody, inducing miscarriage as a result and realizing, as it were, the malevolent designs of government “aid” that open the film).

Though it is not difficult to itemize the atrocities Dorothy suffers, both directly and indirectly, and to theorize their relations and sources, I suggest that her position—and Luann’s as well—is not comprehensible by way of the analogical gestures of anticolonialism that animate the freedom dreams of the prison letters between Dorothy and her imprisoned lover, Ben (Ben Collins), that close the film. Reading from this angle (a reading that should not necessarily be avoided) may yield a compelling narrative of oppression, but what the film indexes, even when the diegesis cannot sustain it, is an ontological condition of gratuitous violence exterior to the interlarded rationales of the colonial enterprise (including its systems of patriarchy and class warfare). It is the exteriority of this violence subtending the various systems of oppression that signals the *sine qua non* of racial slavery. As such, the superimposed images of Dorothy, the titular “bush mama,” and that distant “bush mama” of the Movimento Popular de Libertacao de Angola (MPLA), whose prominently displayed agitprop portrait raises the specter of national liberation *within* the internal colonies of the United States, are held together by dint of an occlusion: “The vulnerability of the postcolonial is open, but not absolute [as is the slave’s]: materially speaking s/he carves out zones of respite by pushing the Settler, whether back to the European zone or into the sea. This also means that the postcolonial’s *psychic* vulnerability is not absolute—one can dream of land lost and land restored. In this respect, Haile Gerima’s Dorothy is *not exactly* the *Bush Mama* in the MPLA poster.”<sup>67</sup> That is to say, what qualifies the condition of the slave is a suffering that not only wrecks the coordinates of any humanism but also, for the same reason, precludes the generation of a proper political demand directed at a definable object or

objective. What is produced instead is an abstract political *insistence*—a politics of the (death) drive.<sup>68</sup>

One can perhaps forgive Gerima for not enlarging upon this complication while subscribing to more likely frames of political intelligibility. Indeed, this gesture of strained political identification replicates the conceptual trouble endemic to his contemporaries in their formulation of Black Power and eventually Black Liberation, insofar as they were envisioned and articulated as a politics of third-world solidarity.<sup>69</sup> As Wilderson persuasively claims, as an instance of the “shift in the politics of cinematic thought and the cinematic unrest which it catalyzed,” *Bush Mama* is made possible not so much by the good judgment and artistic genius of Gerima and his counterparts in the movement of black independent filmmakers (though these are undeniable factors) as by the activity of radical black political formations and the urban rebellion of significant segments of black communities across the country: “Black folks on the move.”<sup>70</sup> The problem is not so much the principled or strategic interest in a global solidarity but rather the tactical translation of such sentiments into arrangements of alliance and the guiding assumptions on which the alliance is based. Wacquant would call this solidarity in “the form of an emotive amalgamation rather than of a reasoned comparison.”<sup>71</sup> How, then, to think about “the position of the unthought” in a world for which (the afterlife of) slavery continues to provide the grounding metaphor of social misery?

If the oppression of nonblack people of color in, and perhaps beyond, the United States seems conditional to the historic instance and functions at a more restricted empirical scope, antiblackness seems invariant and limitless (which does not mean that the former is somehow negligible and short-lived or that the latter is exhaustive and unchanging). If pursued with some consistency, the sort of comparative analysis outlined above would likely impact the formulation of political strategy and modify the demeanor of our political culture. In fact, it might denature the comparative instinct altogether in favor of a *relational* analysis more adequate to the task. Yet all of this is obviated by the silencing mechanism par excellence in Left political and intellectual circles today: “Don’t play Oppression Olympics!” The Oppression Olympics dogma levels a charge amounting to little more than a leftist version of “playing the race card.” To fuss with details of comparative (or relational) analysis is to play into the hands of divide-and-conquer tactics and to promote a callous immorality.<sup>72</sup> However, as in its conservative complement, one notes in this catchphrase the unwarranted translation of an inquiring position of comparison into an insidious posture of competition, the translation of ethical critique into unethical attack. This point allows us to understand better the intimate relationship between the censure of black inquiry and the recurrent analogizing to black suffering mentioned above: they bear a common refusal to admit to significant dif-

ferences of structural position born of discrepant histories between blacks and their political allies, actual or potential. We might, finally, name this refusal *people-of-color-blindness*, a form of colorblindness inherent to the concept of “people of color” to the precise extent that it misunderstands the specificity of antiblackness and presumes or insists upon the monolithic character of victimization under white supremacy<sup>73</sup>—thinking (the afterlife of) slavery as a form of exploitation or colonization or a species of racial oppression among others.<sup>74</sup>

The upshot of this predicament is that obscuring the structural position of the category of blackness will inevitably undermine multiracial coalition building as a politics of *radical* opposition and, to that extent, force the question of black liberation back to the center of discussion. Every analysis that attempts to understand the complexities of racial rule and the machinations of the racial state without accounting for black existence within its framework—which does not mean simply listing it among a chain of equivalents or returning to it as an afterthought—is doomed to miss what is essential about the situation. Black existence does not represent the total reality of the racial formation—it is not the beginning and the end of the story—but it does relate to the totality; it indicates the (repressed) truth of the political and economic system. That is to say, the whole range of positions within the racial formation is most fully understood from this vantage point, not unlike the way in which the range of gender and sexual variance under patriarchal and heteronormative regimes is most fully understood through lenses that are feminist and queer.<sup>75</sup> What is lost for the study of black existence in the proposal for a decentered, “postblack” paradigm is a proper analysis of the true scale and nature of black suffering and of the struggles—political, aesthetic, intellectual, and so on—that have sought to transform and undo it. What is lost for the study of nonblack nonwhite existence is a proper analysis of the true scale and nature of its material and symbolic power *relative* to the category of blackness.<sup>76</sup>

This is why every attempt to defend the rights and liberties of the latest victims of state repression will fail to make substantial gains insofar as it forfeits or sidelines the fate of blacks, the prototypical targets of the panoply of police practices and the juridical infrastructure built up around them. Without blacks on board, the only viable political option and the only effective defense against the intensifying cross fire will involve greater alliance with an antiblack civil society and further capitulation to the magnification of state power. At the apex of the midcentury social movements, Kwame Ture and Charles Hamilton wrote in their 1968 classic, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*, that black freedom entails “the necessarily total revamping of the society.”<sup>77</sup> For Hartman, thinking of the entanglements of the African diaspora in this context, the necessarily total

revamping of the society is more appropriately envisioned as the creation of an entirely new world:

I knew that no matter how far from home I traveled, I would never be able to leave my past behind. I would never be able to imagine being the kind of person who had not been made and marked by slavery. I was black and a history of terror had produced that identity. Terror was “captivity without the possibility of flight,” inescapable violence, precarious life. There was no going back to a time or place before slavery, and going beyond it no doubt would entail nothing less momentous than yet another revolution.<sup>78</sup>

## Notes

1. The tetralogy includes Agamben’s *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone, 1999), *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), and a fourth text yet to be published. See Jenny Edkins, “Whatever Politics,” in *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life*, ed. Matthew Calarco and Steven DeCaroli (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 70–91, for a discussion of the tetralogy and its relation to Agamben’s conception of “whatever politics” as outlined in his *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

2. Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binelli and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 16.

3. *Ibid.*, 23.

4. *Ibid.*, 24.

5. See Ulrich Raulff, “An Interview with Giorgio Agamben,” trans. Morag Goodwin, *German Law Journal* 6 (2004): 609–14.

6. Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15 (2003): 40.

7. *Ibid.*, 21, 30–32.

8. *Ibid.*, 21.

9. This problem does not first arise for Mbembe with the publication of “Necropolitics.” It is already apparent in the framing of *On the Postcolony*, trans. A. M. Berrett, Murray Last, Steven Rendall, and Janet Roitman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), a collection of essays that theorize “the African subject emerging, focusing on him/herself, withdrawing, in the act and context of *displacement and entanglement*” (15) as that problematic emerges—or develops—after the advent of the abolitionist era and dating roughly from the nineteenth century. In other words, it is a meditation on the colony and the postcolony, rather than slavery and its afterlife.

10. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 85.

11. Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 22–23.

12. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 86.

13. Mbembe’s argument ignores not only Hartman but work of a host of scholars in the field of African American and black Atlantic studies, including Lindon Barrett, *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double* (New York: Cambridge University

Press, 1998); Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Stephen Best, *The Fugitive's Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern, 1492–1800* (New York: Verso, 1997); Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practices of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Sibylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Lewis Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism* (Amherst, MA: Humanity, 1995); Ronald Judy, *(Dis)forming the American Canon: African-Arabic Slave Narratives and the Vernacular* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); David Marriot, *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007); Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Jenny Sharpe, *Ghosts of Slavery: A Literary Archeology of Black Women's Lives* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2003); Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); and Alexander Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

14. Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 21.

15. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 3.

16. *Ibid.*, 4.

17. Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 21.

18. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 215n14.

19. Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 22. See also his "African Modes of Self-Writing," *Public Culture* 14 (2002): 239–73, where he continues the meditation on what he terms "self-styling" in the postcolony.

20. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 83.

21. This is as good a place as any to note that what I find problematic in Mbembe's treatment of Hartman's work on the power relations of New World slavery is, to some extent, rooted in a local (which is not to say parochial) argument among scholars in the field of African studies and involves contests over the institutional trajectory of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA). Mbembe served as executive director of CODESRIA from 1996 to 2000, and his series of articles published in English translation in the journal *Public Culture*—of which Mbembe is a contributing editor—should (also) be read in light of this partisan struggle. See, for instance, Francis Njubi Nesbitt, "Post-Colonial Anxieties: (Re)presenting African Intellectuals," *African Affairs* 107 (2008): 273–82. The tensions in Mbembe's work have become more apparent with the dissemination of Mbembe's first major English-language translation, *On the Postcolony*, in 2001. In fact, while Mbembe has repeatedly criticized the "Afro-radicalism" of Marxist scholars like Claude Aké, Samir Amin, Mahmood Mamdani, and Walter Rodney, he has also made approving references to the black radical tradition as it developed in the North American and Caribbean contexts, especially those trends examined in Robinson's *Black Marxism*. See Achille Mbembe, "On the Postcolony: A Brief Response to Critics," *African Identities* 4, no. 2 (2006): 143–78. Hartman's work

would hardly fit into the description of either of Mbembe's favorite targets—Marxism and Nationalism, or, when taken together, what he calls “Afro-pessimism”—but her analysis suffers the same fate due mainly, I think, to the idea Mbembe implicitly (and wrongly) attributes to her position: that “the African is said to express himself in the world only as a *wounded and traumatized subject*” (Achille Mbembe, “Subject and Experience,” in *Keywords: Experience*, ed. Nadia Tazi [New York: Other Press, 2004], 4)—an easy enough misreading and one that Mbembe shares with some of the early reviews of *Scenes of Subjection* (see Saidiya V. Hartman, “The Position of the Unthought: An Interview with Frank B. Wilderson, III,” *Qui Parle* 13 [2003]: 181–201). To say that “the text of black agency” is legible to the world in “the criminal record” (Hartman, “Position of the Unthought,” 192) forecloses upon the idea that a countervailing practice of appropriation and stylization can be derived for the slave on the basis of “alternative perspectives toward time, work and self” (Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 22). Neither the complications of double consciousness nor the material limitations of resistance as “alternative perspectives” are so easily bypassed.

22. Hortense Spillers, “‘All the Things You Could Be by Now, If Sigmund Freud’s Wife Was Your Mother’: Psychoanalysis and Race,” *boundary 2* 23, no. 3 (1996): 75–141. The provocative title is borrowed from Charlie Mingus’s 1960 song of the same name.

23. Spillers, “‘All the Things,’” 100, 104.

24. For a critique of infrapolitics, see Michael Hanchard, *Party/Politics: Horizons in Black Political Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

25. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 83.

26. See, for instance, Larry Koger, “Black Masters: The Misunderstood Slave-owners,” *Southern Quarterly* 43 (2006): 52–73; and Tiya Miles and Sharon Holland, eds., *Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds: The African Diaspora in Indian Country* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

27. Stuart Hall, “The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without Guarantees,” in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan Hsing-Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996), 25–46.

28. Frank B. Wilderson III, “Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2005).

29. The pervasiveness and longevity of the ideology that constructs/conflates racial blackness and/as eligibility for enslavement is detailed by **historian David Eltis and cultural critic Ian Baucom**. For Eltis, the motives for the historic designation of African slavery were importantly noneconomic and actually ran counter to the cold calculus of profit maximization: “No West European power after the late Middle Ages crossed the basic divide separating European workers from full chattel slavery. And while serfdom fell and rose in different parts of early modern Europe and shared characteristics with slavery, serfs were not outsiders either before or after enslavement. The phrase long-distance serf trade is an oxymoron. . . . Although there is no evidence that Europeans ever considered instituting full chattel slavery of Europeans in their overseas settlements, the striking paradox is that *no sound economic reasons spoke against it*. **By the seventeenth century, the most cursory examination of relative costs suggests that European slaves *should have been preferred* to either European indentured labor or African slaves. And while native Americans were cheap to enslave, their life expectancy and productivity in post-Columbian plantation conditions hardly compared with that of pre-industrial or, indeed, post-industrial Europeans**” (Eltis, *Rise of African Slavery in the Americas*, 64–65; emphasis added). For Baucom, the commodification of human being that enables the transatlantic slave

trade also underwrites the emergence of the system of modern finance: “The slaves were thus treated not only as a type of commodity but as a type of interest-bearing money. They functioned in this system simultaneously as commodities for sale and as the reserve deposits of a loosely organized, decentered, but vast trans-Atlantic banking system: deposits made at the moment of sale and instantly reconverted into short-term bonds” (Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, 61).

30. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 6.

31. Loïc Wacquant is especially useful to this discussion given his argument about the “structural symbiosis and functional surrogacy” that obtains between slavery, Jim Crow, the ghetto, and the prison—the four “peculiar institutions” that have “successively operated to define, confine, and control African Americans in the history of the United States” (Wacquant, “From Slavery to Mass Incarceration,” *New Left Review* 13 [2002]: 41). More important is his displacement of empirical chimeras like “bias” or “disparity” in favor of a historical sociology that accounts for the evolving continuity not simply of racial *inequality* (which is suffered variously by all nonwhites) but of racial *domination*: “Viewed against the backdrop of the full historical trajectory of racial domination in the United States . . . the glaring and growing ‘disproportionality’ in incarceration that has afflicted African Americans over the past three decades can be understood as a result of the ‘extra-penological’ functions that the prison system has come to shoulder in the wake of the crisis of the ghetto and of the continuing stigma that afflicts the descendants of slaves by virtue of their membership in a group constitutively deprived of ethnic honor (Max Weber’s *Massehre*)” (42).

32. This despite Mbembe’s repeated dismissal of “Afro-radicalism,” which he describes glibly as “a form of Marxist political economy” that “asked the wrong questions about . . . slavery, colonialism, and apartheid” or, less generously, as “a jumble of dogmas and doctrines that are repeatedly intoned rather than systems of questioning” (Mbembe, “Subject and Experience,” 3).

33. Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 14; emphasis in original.

34. *Ibid.*, 27.

35. *Ibid.*, 22, 36.

36. *Ibid.*, 35.

37. *Ibid.*, 40.

38. *Ibid.*, 36, 27, 21.

39. *Ibid.*, 12.

40. See Jared Sexton, “Racial Profiling and the Societies of Control,” in *Warfare in the American Homeland: Policing and Prison in a Penal Democracy*, ed. Joy James (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 197–218.

41. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 395.

42. Agamben, *Means without End*, 45.

43. *Ibid.*, 44. Agamben’s discussion of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina is passing and does not attempt to do justice to the complexity of the series of Balkan wars during the decade. For a discussion of the intersecting conflicts and the central role played by NATO in their unfolding, see Tariq Ali, ed., *Masters of the Universe: NATO’s Balkan Crusade* (New York: Verso, 2000).

44. Agamben, *Means without End*, 34.

45. *Ibid.*, 43.

46. *Ibid.*, 42.

47. *Ibid.*, 35.

48. *Ibid.*, 43.

49. See Rachel Moran, *Interracial Intimacy: The Regulation of Race and Romance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

50. See Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: Norton, 1995).

51. Of course, this raises immediately the question of black immigrant groups. Though they are distinguished often enough, and often enough distinguish themselves, from the native-born black population in the United States, black immigrants cannot avail themselves of the racial capital of nonblack immigrants of color. **Instead, they find themselves consistently folded back into the category of homegrown blackness, as it were, and subject to the same protocols of social, political, and economic violence, especially in subsequent generations.** It gets worse, not better, as is the case with other immigrant populations. See Douglas Massey, “The Residential Segregation of Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians, 1970–1990,” in *Immigration and Race: New Challenges for American Democracy*, ed. Gerald Jaynes (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 44–73. **Black immigrants do not so much disrupt the paradigm as demonstrate why it is correct to speak at this level of an irresolvable discrepancy between blackness and immigrant status. We are back to that “transatlantic connection (of categorical eligibility for enslavement) that racial slavery forges among African-derived populations” mentioned above.**

52. Mark C. Taylor, *Altarity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 93.

53. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*.

54. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 7–8.

55. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 82.

56. As in the case of black immigrants to the United States, the movements for decolonization in Africa encounter the “racial calculus and political arithmetic” (Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 6) of slavery as an internal limit on their capacity to claim (national or regional or continental) sovereignty and independence in the manner of their Asian and Latin American comrades.

57. Charles Johnson, “The End of the Black American Narrative,” *American Scholar*, Summer 2008, [www.theamericanscholar.org/the-end-of-the-black-american-narrative/](http://www.theamericanscholar.org/the-end-of-the-black-american-narrative/).

58. The relevant literature is too vast to cite, but see, for example, Nancy Chang, *Silencing Political Dissent: How Post–September 11 Anti-Terrorism Measures Threaten Our Civil Liberties* (New York: Seven Stories, 2002); Danny Goldberg, Victor Goldberg, and Robert Greenwald, eds., *It’s a Free Country: Personal Freedom in America after September 11* (New York: Nation, 2003); Richard Leone and Greg Anrig, eds., *The War on Our Freedoms: Civil Liberties in an Age of Terrorism* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003); Marcus Raskin and A. Carl LeVan, eds., *In Democracy’s Shadow: The Secret World of National Security* (New York: Nation, 2005). For a critique of the use of the lynching metaphor in discussion of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, see Jared Sexton and Elizabeth Lee, “Figuring the Prison: Prerequisites of Torture at Abu Ghraib,” *Antipode* 38 (2006): 1005–22.

59. See, respectively, Richard Muhammad, “Voices from the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride,” *AlterNet* 25 September 2003, [www.alternet.org/story/16835](http://www.alternet.org/story/16835); Kareem Shora, “Guilty of Flying While Brown,” *Air and Space Lawyer* 1 (2002), [www.adc.org/index.php?id=456](http://www.adc.org/index.php?id=456); Susan Sontag, “Regarding the Torture of Others,” *New York Times*, 23 May 2004, 25.

60. Frank B. Wilderson III, "Gramsci's Black Marx," *Social Identities* 9 (2003): 229–31.

61. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Markmann (New York: Grove, 1967), 109. It goes without saying that the slave *also* suffers the exploitation of her labor, the expropriation of her land and resources, the loss of her political sovereignty, the disruption of her cultural heritage, but she suffers all of this as *contingencies* of her captivity, rather than as the *essence* of her dominated position. Which is to say that socializing the economy, reclaiming the land, and reviving languages and customs offer no reparation in lieu of her freedom. Such welcome developments would be necessary but insufficient.

62. See Wilderson, "Red, White, and Black," for an excellent treatment of *Bush Mama* and its engagement with the matter of political violence, especially its affective proximity to the clandestine paramilitary operations of the Black Liberation Army in the 1970s. For additional approaches to Gerima, see Steve Howard, "A Cinema of Transformation: The Films of Haile Gerima," *Cineaste* 14 (1985): 28–29, 39; Ntongela Masilela, "The Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers," in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993), 107–17; Paula Massood, *Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003); Mike Murashige, "Haile Gerima and the Political Economy of Cinematic Resistance," in *Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video*, ed. Valeria Smith (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 183–204; Tony Safford and William Triplett, "Haile Gerima: Radical Departures to a New Black Cinema," *Journal of the University Film and Video Association* 35 (1983): 59–65.

63. See Wacquant for an understanding of the ghetto as an analytic concept designating "a highly peculiar form of urbanization warped by asymmetric relations of power between ethnoracial groupings: a special form of *collective violence concretized in urban space*," rather than as a folk concept designating something akin to a slum or a segregated neighborhood or area of concentrated poverty (Wacquant, "From Slavery to Mass Incarceration," 3). It is the specific genealogy that links slavery to Jim Crow to the ghetto to the prison that warrants my claim about the singularity of the racial domination of blacks, even when other nonblack groups find themselves in similar institutional settings (for example, Southeast Asians in segregated enclaves and Chicanos in prison) as a result of profoundly different historical processes and trajectories.

64. Lawrence Grossberg writes of "a new regime of everyday life . . . not merely the reconstruction and reorganization of everyday life, but the transformation of everyday life into a specific form of structured mobility, a disciplined mobilization. Everyday life becomes the site for and the mode of a new apparatus of power, aimed at depoliticizing significant segments of the population by erasing the lines that connect everyday life to the political and economic realities that are its conditions of possibility" (Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* [New York: Routledge, 1992], 294).

65. Ronald Judy has effectively repealed the accoutrements of black community in the historic instance. **His discussion of the cultural ramifications of capital's immanence and the coterminous transmutation of black existence—from wholesale confinement as factors of fixed capital to unyielding expulsion to the poor fortunes of political economic obsolescence—forecloses the possibility of the black's redemption through work and its correlate organization in the institutions of civil society.** More to the point, it radically wards against the possibility of an *oppositional* blackness. Rightly recasting the romance of community, with its belief in an "immaterial

purity” beyond power, as an affair with the police, Judy asks pointedly: “Can there even be a ‘community’ of niggers, as opposed to a ‘bunch’ or ‘collection?’” (Ronald Judy, “On the Question of Nigga Authenticity,” *boundary 2* 21 [1994]: 222).

66. “The state simply invades both the diegesis and the apparatus of *Bush Mama* because, like its main character, like the flesh of Black bodies, and the narration of Black stories, the institutionality of Black cinema is open and vulnerable in absolute terms” (Wilderson, “Red, White, and Black,” 358).

67. Wilderson, “Red, White, and Black,” 357.

68. This point is fully consonant with Wilderson’s discussion of political antagonism and structural suffering. The psychoanalytic notion of the drive distinguishes it from (biological) needs, which can be satisfied, and reveals that it does not so much aim *at* an object as it derives enjoyment (*jouissance*) from its repetitive movement along a circular path *around* the object. The drive does not have an object *per se*, but it does have an aim—the enjoyment of its own movement. Perhaps this gives new meaning to the old leftist saying that “there is joy in the struggle itself.” Perhaps it also goes some way toward explaining the perennial racist lament that blacks always seem to demand everything but never seem to be politically satisfied with anything! For an extended discussion of a politics of the death drive, see Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

69. Midway through *Bush Mama*, during an evening political education session at Dorothy’s kitchen table, Luann’s friend Angie, the resident militant, declares: “I bet if all us mad folks unite, like the Indians, Chicanos, the Blacks, and the Asians, we’d shape up the white folks and they’d have to act differently.” Angie makes the classic mistake of believing that political coalitions can and should be built around supposedly shared sentiments, rather than, say, a convergence of interests and independent bases of power. On this and other “myths of coalition,” see Kwame Ture and Charles Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (New York: Vintage, 1992), especially chap. 3.

70. Wilderson, “Red, White, and Black,” 361.

71. Loïc Wacquant, “French Working-Class Banlieue and Black American Ghetto: From Conflation to Comparison,” *Qui Parle* 16 (Spring 2007): 2.

72. See Elizabeth Martínez, *De Colores Means All of Us: Latina Views for a Multi-Colored Century* (Boston: South End, 1998). As noted in my discussion of Mbembe and Johnson above, the dogma is aided and abetted by certain black intellectuals as well. Take, as a further example, the chastising statement made by longtime civil rights activist Rev. Richard Lowery on the occasion of the 2003 Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride: “We may have come over on different ships but we’re all in the same damn boat now” (cited in Chris McGann, “Busloads of Activists,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 8 July 2003, [seattlepi.nwsource.com/local/129926\\_freedom08.html](http://seattlepi.nwsource.com/local/129926_freedom08.html)). The “many ships, same boat” sentiment was echoed more recently in the inaugural address of Massachusetts’s first black governor, Deval Patrick (D), on January 4, 2007: “People have come to these shores from all over the world, in all manner of boats, and built from a wilderness one of the most remarkable societies in human history.” See [www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2007/01/04/text\\_of\\_governor\\_deval\\_1\\_patricks\\_inaugural\\_address/](http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2007/01/04/text_of_governor_deval_1_patricks_inaugural_address/).

73. See David Hollinger, “Amalgamation and Hypodescent: The Question of Ethn racial Mixture in the History of the United States,” *American Historical Review* 108 (2003), [www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/108.5/hollinger.html](http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/108.5/hollinger.html).

74. I will develop this concept further in my book-in-progress, “The Shadow of a Color Line: Racial Politics beyond Coalition.”

75. We should be careful not to confuse “the vantage of black existence” with “the views of black people.” The two will likely overlap, but they are not identical. A sensibility derived from attention to the structural position of the category of blackness is likely to be produced by people designated or self-identified as black, but it will neither be exclusive to nor inherent in their intellectual practice. Also, the reader should not mistake this claim as a totalizing gesture. Arguing that black existence indicates the truth of the racial formation is not to say that there is nothing else besides the category of blackness (Jared Sexton and Huey Copeland, “Raw Life: An Introduction,” *Qui Parle* 13 [2003]: 57–58, 61, notes 17–19). Rather, it is to say that the slave embodies what Slavoj Žižek would call the “universal particular”: not another particular group among others, but “a singularity of the social structure” that “relate(s) to the totality,” a point of identification with constitutive—not contingent—exclusion (Slavoj Žižek, “Repeating Lenin,” *Lacan Dot Com*, 2001, [www.lacan.com/replenin](http://www.lacan.com/replenin)). See also Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (New York: Verso, 1999), especially part 2. As Wilderson demonstrates in “Red, White, and Black,” the commodification of human being that establishes racial blackness as a world-historical development linked to the rise of global capitalism underwrites, materially and symbolically, the emergence of modern colonial rule and the exploitation of waged labor. A revised and expanded version of the arguments set forth in the dissertation is forthcoming under the same title from Duke University Press. For a literary rendering of this position, see Frank B. Wilderson III, *Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid* (Boston: South End, 2008).

76. Here I am extending arguments made by bell hooks in her seminal essay “Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory,” in *The Black Feminist Reader*, ed. Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting (New York: Blackwell, 2000), 131–45: “By projecting onto black women a mythical power and strength, white women both promote a false image of themselves as powerless, passive victims and deflect attention away from their aggressiveness, their power (however limited in a white supremacist, male-dominated state), their willingness to dominate and control others. These unacknowledged aspects of the social status of many white women prevent them from transcending racism and limit the scope of their understanding of women’s overall social status in the United States” (143).

77. Ture and Hamilton, *Black Power*, 60.

78. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 40.