

ARTICLE

Sense of Things

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Abstract

An inquiry into onto-epistemology, this essay investigates the reciprocal production of aesthesis and empiricism, both the seemingly scientific and the perceptual knowledge that signifies otherwise under conditions of imperial Western humanism. In a reading of Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998), I argue that as an enabling condition of imperial Western humanism, the black mater(nal) is foreclosed by the dialectics of hegemonic common sense and that the anxieties stimulated by related signifiers, such as the black(ened) maternal image, voice, and lifeworld, allude to the latent symbolic-material capacities of the black mater(nal), as *mater*, as matter, to destabilize or even rupture the reigning order of representation that grounds the thought-world relation. In other words, the specter of the black mater(nal)—that is, nonrepresentability—haunts the terms and operations tasked with adjudicating the thought-world correlate or the proper perception of “the world” such as hierarchical distinctions between reality and illusion, Reason and its absence, subject and object, science and fiction, and speculation and realism, which turn on attendant aporias pertaining to immanence and transcendence. Exploring the mind-body-social nexus in Hopkinson's fiction, I contend that in *Brown Girl* vertigo is evoked as both a symptom and a metaphor of inhabiting a reality

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discredited (a blackened reality) that is at once the experience of the carceral and the apprehension of a radically redistributed sensorium. I argue the black mater(nal) holds the potential to transform the terms of reality and feeling, therefore rewriting the conditions of possibility of the empirical.

But can we escape becoming dizzy? And who can affirm that vertigo does not haunt the whole of existence?

Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (p. 253)

[I] comforted myself that my sense of alienation and now-heightened visibility were not inherent to my blackness and my femaleness, but an uncomfortable atmospheric condition afflicting everyone. But at the gyroscopic heart of me, there was and is a deep realization that I have never left the planet earth. I know that my feelings of exaggerated visibility and invisibility are the product of my not being part of the larger cultural picture. I know too that the larger cultural picture is an illusion, albeit a powerful one, concocted from a perceptual consensus to which I am not a party; and that while these perceptions operate as dictators of truth, they are after all merely perceptions.

Patricia J. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, (p. 56)

The Door of No Return—real and metaphoric as some places are, mythic to those of us scattered in the Americas today. To have one's belonging lodged in a metaphor is voluptuous intrigue; to inhabit a trope; to be a kind of fiction. To live in the Black Diaspora is I think to live as a fiction—a creation of empires, and also self-creation. It is to be a being living inside and outside of herself. It is to apprehend the sign one makes yet to be unable to escape it except in radiant moments of ordinariness made like art. To be a fiction in search of its most resonant metaphor then is even more intriguing.

Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*, (p. 2)

Subjects of all human orders had once known their physical environment only in terms prescribed by their modes of subjective understanding and cultural representational schemas. The revolution of imperial Western humanism made possible the ongoing displacement of local knowledge (or culture-specific orders) by a hegemonically (re)produced but no less epistemically violent Western scientific conception of the cosmos.¹ A transculturally verifiable image of the earth, or positivist knowledge as aspirational horizon, has been pursued via a combination of material-discursive force and a coercive (dis)possession of processes of sense perception and cognition on a global scale, in which, according to Sylvia Wynter (1995), the novel form has played no small part.

In “Novel and History, Plot and Plantation,” Wynter (1971) states, “The novel form and our societies are twin children of the same parents” (p. 95). That is to say, our contemporary racial capitalist societies and the novel form itself are both cause and effect of the market economy, “an emergence which marked a change of such world-historical magnitude, that we are all, without exception still ‘enchanted,’ imprisoned, deformed and schizophrenic in its bewitched reality” (p. 95). Drawing on and augmenting György Lukács and Lucien Goldmann’s theories of the novel and Eric Williams’s history of Caribbean slavery, Wynter maintains that the emergence of the novel form is inextricably linked with the historical developments of the conquest of the Americas and the plantation-societies of the Caribbean, as the latter provided the “raw material” for the extension and dominance of the market economy and initiated a globally expansive re-ordering of aesthesis and imaginative capacities. It is in this context that *Robinson Crusoe*, *Oroonoko*, and *The Blazing World* in English and *Don Quixote* and *Sinapia* in Spanish, with their imperial thematics and speculative elements, inaugurate a new literary form.²

In “The Ceremony Must Be Found,” Wynter (1984) deepens the argument of “Novel and History, Plot and Plantation” with the claim that not only are “Literature” and racial capitalism mutually constitutive but also that by the nineteenth century literature was increasingly regarded as the

“highest manifestation of language” and, therefore, considered to be an essential measure of the capacity for technological progress and scientific reason. Wynter argues that with the secularization of knowledge and the constitution of “man” in the post-Cartesian terms of Foucault’s “empirico-transcendental doublet,” “literature” came to function as the transcendentalized index of degree of “Culture” which a group, understood in the biologized terms of race and national identity, had achieved or could achieve based on their immanent “nature”: “Culture, in the new episteme, now took the place that Reason had played in the Classical episteme, as the index for determining the degree to which a particular group knew ‘Self/World’ in the metaphysical terms of the current order’s ‘rational’ world view which by extension determined bio-ontological value and vice-versa” (p. 46). The reported presence (or absence) of the novel form coupled with assessments of literature’s aesthetic value along lines of race and/or national origin were embedded in the techno-scientific conception of progress that organized Man in the Hegelian terms of a teleology.

While this is not to say, as Wynter (1996) maintains (citing Valentin Mudimbe), that “African world views and African traditional systems of thought are ‘unthinkable and cannot be made explicit within the framework of their own rationality’, the fact remains that ‘the ways in which they have been evaluated and the means used to explain them relate to theories and methods whose constraints, rules, and systems of operation suppose a non-African epistemological locus,’ and, in effect, suppose ‘a silent dependence on a Western episteme’” (p. 503). However, the West itself is an iteratively dependent construction; its renewal depends on the ritual purification of knowledge produced by and expropriated from those indigenous onto-epistemic architects the West casts as benighted and, therefore, bereft of knowledge, such that “the Western tradition” emerges as an imperious effect of adaptive processes and multiscale mutations of matter and meaning.³ Moreover, the upheavals of political and cultural thought most commonly attributed to the respective events of 1492 and the Copernican Revolution made possible that mutation at the level of sensorium, which led, in turn, to the rise of natural science and its

racialized taxonomies and teleological mode of Reason and Universality.

Editor and speculative fiction writer Nalo Hopkinson draws from Greek myth and diverse Caribbean linguistic conventions, folklore, and spiritual practices in order to create fictive narratives and lifeworlds that often explore allegorically the vexed figure of the black female body in Western scientific discourse and metaphysics, rewriting the conventions of Western literary genres, in particular science fiction, realism, and fantasy, along the way. As Jessica Langer (2011) observes of postcolonial science fiction more generally, “There are levels upon levels of hybridity here: hybridity of form, of genre, of criticism, of concept . . .” (p.109).⁴ The observation that “postcolonial SF” introduces new complexity into literary theory may also require, as Luke Gibbons (1998) suggests, new methods of interpretation: “Theory itself needs to be recast from the periphery and acquire hybrid forms, bringing the plurality of voices associated with the creative energies of colonial cultures to bear on criticism itself” (p. 27). Hopkinson’s Locus Award-winning novel, *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998)—with its levels upon levels of hybridity—provokes such a reconsideration of theory and an experiment in method on at least two counts: 1) it centralizes the role of antiblackness and slavery to the postcolonial, inviting a reworking of prevailing postcolonial paradigms that disaggregate racial slavery from colonialism, and 2) it centrally stages and performs speculation as an intervention *into* and *as* theory, intensifying speculation’s performance as theory and theory’s performance by blackness.⁵

In a reading of Nalo Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998), I argue that, as an enabling condition of imperial Western humanism, the black mater(nal) is foreclosed by the dialectics of hegemonic common sense, and the anxieties stimulated by related signifiers, such as the black(ened) maternal image, voice, and lifeworld, allude to the latent symbolic-material capacities of the black mater(nal), as *mater*, as matter, to destabilize or even rupture the reigning order of representation that grounds the thought-world relation.⁶ In other words, the specter of the black mater(nal)—that is, nonrepresentability—haunts the terms and

operations tasked with adjudicating the thought-world correlate or the proper perception of “the world,” such as hierarchical distinctions between reality and illusion, Reason and its absence, subject and object, science and fiction, speculation and realism, which turn on attendant aporias pertaining to immanence and transcendence.⁷

While the immanence-transcendence dualism has a long religio-philosophical inheritance, Hegel (1997) is perhaps the emblematic figure for the racialization of this prevailing dualism, providing raciality with what would become the essential touchstones of its logic: teleology and determinism. At the incipency of globality as an idea, Hegel argued that racial polarity is both the means and the ends of the universal-historical order, whereby transcendence is privileged over immanence and the two principles are understood in the oppositional terms of raciality.⁸ Citing reports on African religion that claimed Africans worshiped nature or themselves, Hegel concluded that Africans are governed by the senses and, as a result, are incapable of acquiring adequate distance from nature, a distance that would allow them to oppose nature and the bestial dimensions of the self. For Hegel, opposing both is required for the achievement of Spirit, reason, and self-governance: “Inward freedom” is first attained through opposing one’s immediate existence (natural environment) and one’s natural existence (animal existence); this opposition then provides the condition of possibility for higher order thinking and self-governance. According to Hegel, one must rise above one’s natural/sensuous existence via internal reflection to attain spiritual freedom, and this transcendence then becomes the basis of one’s entry into the domain of culture and history. Ultimately, Hegel concluded: “the African” is *eternally* an “animal man” because Africans are trapped *within* immanence, or immediate experience, and are, therefore, unable to achieve transcendence or apprehend transcendent knowledge. In this, Hegel co-constitutes human-animal, nature-culture, and immanence-transcendence dualisms *within* the imaginary of global raciality.⁹

While it is crucial to demonstrate the perniciousness of Hegel’s philosophical premises and vocabulary, as Hegelianism remains the

reigning framework of universalist historicity, it is just as necessary to engage onto-epistemological frameworks that challenge antiblack modes of being and epistemic authority. With *Brown Girl in the Ring*, Hopkinson makes it possible to read what is invisible (but nonetheless present) or what is constitutive yet absent at the manifest level of Hegel's text, namely the foreclosure of the black mater(nal), its latent capacities, and its effects on orbiting discursive-material formations of knowledge and being.¹⁰ The term "nonrepresentability" as applied to the black mater(nal) in these pages alludes to a central and ever-present unsettling excess that nevertheless eludes representation.

If Wynter (1984) is correct that by the nineteenth century, "Literature" was understood as the very incarnation of "Culture's" definition—the defining language of a collective impulse whereby poetry, drama, and fiction represented the "self-transcendence" of a people—then, in essence, *Brown Girl in the Ring* is both an effect and a critique of the very narrative processes and metaphors that have produced the Hegelian "myth of history" and "aesthetico-ontology." By turning on its head the (racial) teleology attributed to the novelistic form, Hopkinson reveals the function of myth in the production of racial teleology and harnesses the power of myth in a generative critique of antiblackness. To put it more pointedly, if a Manichean myth of history, reason, and "scientific fact" could produce a world-historical order predicated on the conjunctive abjection of black female gender and nullification of black maternity, then Hopkinson's novel effectively counters this order by, in turn, performing its intervention at the register of myth. Writing in an allegorical mode, Hopkinson redirects Hegelian tropes of blackness, of "the African" in particular, in a manner that exposes the essential but invisibilized role of the black mater(nal) in Hegel's system as well as the irreducible aporia of scientific reason and myth.

Hopkinson's text recasts the metaphor of literature and blackness precisely by exploiting the equation of blackness, and in particular Africaness, with irrationality and teratology—by troping the trope of African religion. Though commonly apprehended in the narratives of Western

science and philosophy through the terms of objective empirical fact, the “black female body” and her world are, as Hopkinson’s text implies, better understood as enabling myths. In order to bring out the slippage between scientific empiricism and myth where black (maternal) female figures are concerned, Hopkinson turns the realist world of science fiction into one where myth and empirical reality not only coexist but also wherein myth is *embedded* in realism. By doing so, the protagonist Ti-Jeanne and the reader are provoked by “second sight” to confront the manner in which myth, in particular myths of history and of scientific fact, structure and obscure the black female figure and, therefore, foreclose the comprehension of a perspective and comprehension from a perspective of the black mater(nal). In the novel, vertigo functions as a symptom and a metaphor for this predicament, as a disruption in proprioception or the corporeal sense of the body *in space* and *in the making of space*.¹¹ In using myth to counter “myths of history,” the novel reveals that myth often shrouds “fact” and claims to objective reality, and for this very reason myth—or, more precisely, a non-representationalist mode of reason or onto-epistemology—may hold the potential to unsettle hegemonic modes of racist reality and their constituent myths. As such, the novel makes available a transvaluation of representation by investing myth differently.¹²

The problem under consideration in these pages is not simply that of the gap between the referent and the sign—the classical problem of representationalism being the misalignment in spacetime of the thing and its representation—but rather that of a sublimity attributed to the signifier “black female” and the *dematerialization* this attribution engenders.¹³ The black mater(nal) serves an enabling function that, while it can be *thought* precisely as a condition of possibility, in its all at-once-ness it nevertheless exceeds what we can rightfully claim to *know*; it eludes both measurement and imagination, and the novel provides a way to read that approaches such *nonrepresentability*.¹⁴ I follow Hortense Spillers in this essay by investigating two meanings of “representation” in the discursive practices of imperial Western humanism: representative and re-presentation. The black mater(nal) is non-represent-ability because the black mater(nal)

signifies the foreclosed enabling condition of the modern grammar of representation: a space of nonsense or aphasia and correspondingly *without a representative* in the “I and thou” dialectical processes of recognition, value, and decision.¹⁵ Regarding re-presentation, in the grammar described, there are “black (maternal) female” figures (or representations) that appear, but they function at the register of myth and, therefore, reveal that representation *performs* rather than functions *mimetically* as the notion “re-presentation” suggests. In what follows, I investigate both meanings of representation and trace how each works on the other in Hopkinson’s text.¹⁶ The approach here diverges from one that evaluates representation exclusively based on a representation’s supposed accuracy or inaccuracy, in other words, its ability to re-present the real thing. While the text certainly problematizes calcified representations of black womanhood, the novel does not then reinvest in the proper re-presentation of black women but rather performs representation in a speculative mode. The text does not (re)produce black women as an empiricist object or within the terms of her production as a transparent foundational object of science. Rather than functioning within the limited discourse of empirical facts or seeking the authority of scientific method, black female representations in *Brown Girl in the Ring* underscore the manner in which representation performs in worlds and in the (un)making of worlds.¹⁷ Moving away from science fiction’s defining investments in scientific fact, the novel provokes a consideration of the problem of representing a sublime function that necessarily exceeds any claim to knowledge but that can only be approached in a gesture of representation.¹⁸ Moreover, one could argue that the longstanding black feminist preoccupation with representation, in particular the seemingly inescapable burden of paradoxical modes of visibility/invisibility, do not primarily gesture towards the (in)accuracy of representations but rather toward the performative labor representation does in worlding processes.

Brown Girl in the Ring contemplates the stakes and possibilities of a mode of non-self-identical onto-epistemology to emerge, some other relation of being to knowing than what organizes our antiblack present—

not based on re-presenting “the voice” or “experience of the oppressed black woman” or simply affirming subaltern knowledge in the form of African religion—but by investigating the conditions of possibility for representation itself. In a reading that insists upon aesthetics and empiricism’s inextricability, whether the epistemological context is the seemingly scientific or concerns perceptual knowledge that signifies otherwise, I will argue that the modern grammar of representation takes as its enabling figure (if figure is the appropriate concept here; portal is probably more accurate) that which is not only unrepresented but, more precisely, nonrepresentable—politicizing both the sense of commonality implied in the notion of common sense and sense perception itself. The regulating terms of the dominant grammar of representation (re)produce black(ened) *mater* as always and already trapped *within* immanence, burdening black (maternal) female figures in particular with functioning as a signifier that points to what Sylvia Wynter (1990) terms “demonic ground,” or what is foreclosed from representability: the nonrepresentable beyond dividing what is sensible from what is nullified and precluded from representability. Thereby, the modern grammar of representation imposes the inhumanity it presumes. This predicament is signaled in the text by Ti-Jeanne’s vertigo, whereby vertigo functions as a metaphor for the onto-epistemological predicament of black women in particular and of blackness more generally under conditions of imperial Western modernity or the conception of Man within the terms of a telos.¹⁹

I am interested in tracing how an injunction against an avowed commonality *in* being, or humanity, by an ontologized conception of gendered race paradoxically provides access to an alternative—a realm of reality (commonly disqualified and discredited by a racially exclusionary common sense), a sense-ability that “operates or becomes manifest as an ability *in* the realities from which this other realm or mode is excluded” (Scott, 2010, p. 175). The mind-body-social nexus in *Brown Girl in the Ring* indicates a reality discredited (a blackened reality) at once the experience of the carceral and the apprehension of a radically “redistributed sensorium.”²⁰ I argue the black mater(nal) holds the

potential to transform the terms of reality and feeling, therefore rewriting the conditions of possibility of the empirical. If, as Darieck Scott (2010) instructs, Blackness is “an embodied metaphor, the lived representation that grants access to un-lived possibilities” (p. 120), I seek to limn what vertiginous states introduce as possibility in the narrative. I ask, if an essential feature of your existence is that the norm is not able to take hold, what mode of being becomes available, and what mode might you invent?

Hopkinson’s story focuses on three generations of black Caribbean-Canadian “seer women” and their struggle for physical and psychic survival in the isolated, walled-off urban centre of Toronto known as “The Burn.” The names of the women, Mami-Gros Jeanne, her daughter Mi-Jeanne, and granddaughter Ti-Jeanne, are an allusion to the Derek Walcott play *Ti-Jean and his Brothers* (1957), which explores the epistemological problems wrought by slavery and colonialism, particularly the loss of indigenous knowledge and the gap between colonial knowledge and its applicability in the lifeworld of a colonized person. In an exploration of similar questions, *Brown Girl in the Ring* uses tropes of “African religion,” in particular spirit possession and aspects of “double-consciousness” such as burdened “gift” and “second sight,” to explore the modern grammar of representation and its economies of value. In the interest of space, I will limit my analysis to a reading of the scene when Ti-Jeanne initially experiences visions while on the streets of The Burn, but I will discuss this scene’s significance for the novel as a whole and underscore its implications for the theorization of onto-epistemology and representationalism at stake in my analysis.²¹

“The Burn” is the cordoned off, economically devastated urban core of near-future Toronto. In the aftermath of the city’s economic collapse and the large-scale riot that emerged in its wake, with the city aflame and in an extreme case of “white flight,” those who could flee to the suburban perimeter did so (Wood, 2005, p. 317). They took along with them the city’s goods and administrative services. Abandoned by state representatives and economically at the mercy of centrifugal forces, inner city Toronto developed an alternative informal economy, one that is

governed by a ruthless drug lord named Rudy. The Premier of Toronto, suffering from heart failure, recently became aware of something the public had not: the sudden emergence of a zoonotic virus made it untenable to continue the porcine organ donor program. No longer under the cover of rights and protection and in an attempt to expropriate what resources remain in the Burn, representatives of the ailing Premier hire Rudy and his “posse” to procure a human heart from someone in “the Burn.” Posse members include Crapaud, Crack Monkey, Jay, and Tony, all characters introduced on the streets of the Burn at the start of Ti-Jeanne’s epic quest to defeat Rudy and his posse, but unfortunately she is not able to do so before they claim her grandmother’s heart for the Premier. In order to confront the tragic mystery surrounding her mother and grandmother, Ti-Jeanne must open herself to supernatural powers and counterintuitive truths that exceed her sense of self and reality as well as challenge the coordinates of the given world.

When the reader is first introduced to the narrative’s protagonist, Ti-Jeanne, we learn that “Ti-Jeanne could see with more than sight” (p. 9). Tormented by prescient images of death and dying, “Ti-Jeanne hated the visions” (p. 9). Her spectacular yet proliferate visions of the premature deaths of others in the Burn threatened a total loss of self and initiated fear “like ice in her chest” (p. 19), followed by feelings of vertigo. Ti-Jeanne’s burdened “gift” of “second sight” opens up the question of reality for Ti-Jeanne. She hated the visions not only because of their frightening content and overwhelming immediacy but also because no one else could see them and, thus, they threatened her sense of self and reality. But Ti-Jeanne was not alone in experiencing visions. Other women in her family had the “second sight.” As the story unfolds Ti-Jeanne learns “second sight” is a “gift,” an ability inside of debility, and that she must invent a way of being and knowing in the world that approached this constitutive paradox.²² Departing from DuBois’s formulation, Ti-Jeanne’s “second sight” is not deployed by Hopkinson in pursuit of recognition within the terms of mimetic reality. Rather the female subject of double-consciousness in Hopkinson’s text explores the limits of representability

itself, ultimately exchanging recognition for myth. The prelude to the narrative's first full account of Ti-Jeanne's prophetic yet terrifying vision was a scene of sexual street harassment immediately followed by a frightening encounter with her mother, whom she only knows as "blind Crazy Betty," on the streets of the Burn while running a simple errand for Mami-Gros Jeanne.

While making her way through the streets of The Burn, Ti-Jeanne caught a glimpse of Rudy's posse, men she knew and was accustomed to avoiding. Tony, a man we will come to learn is the father of the baby she held in her arms, is among them. Pulse thumping, gaze averted while edging past the men, Ti-Jeanne tried to appear very interested in picking her way through the garbage littered sidewalk (p.16). A voice called out to her, "Hey, sister, is time we get to know one another better, you know!..." "Ah say," the man she knew as Crack Monkey hollered, "is time I get to know you better!" The men's mocking laughter spurred Ti-Jeanne to walk faster, hug her child closer to her, while scowling at the man (p.16). As a vision manifests, Ti-Jeanne is taken out of herself, her voice, vision, and inner thoughts recede as the emergent sense of "second sight" takes over.

When Ti-Jeanne saw her first vision, she abruptly froze, "not trusting her eyes any longer to pick reality from fantasy" (p.16). She saw before her Crack Monkey, Rudy's "right-hand man" (p.16), "*a wasted thing, falling to the ground and gasping his last*" (p. 16). For one of the other men, Crapaud: "*Metabolic acidosis. Cirrhosis of the liver. Rum*" (p. 16). The third man, Jay, killed "*running to the aid of his sweetheart*" (p.16), a trans sex worker; her would-be attacker, a john with knife in hand, would eventually alter course with the gutting of Jay. Interspersed with folksongs and italicized, the shift in tense and references to rhymes and riddles inject the narrative's realism with the mythical quality of time suspended or a dreamlike or magical state. Ti-Jeanne could not see her own death, however, nor that of her child, Baby, nor of her on-again, off-again boyfriend, Tony. She could not see the deaths of anyone close to her; she also could not see "blind Crazy Betty" until the woman was right in front of her, her mother's sightless eyes turned toward Baby exclaiming, "That is

my child! He's mine!" (p. 17). Announcing the ambivalence that accompanied Baby's birth stemming from constrained circumstances, irreducible to the sum of socio-economic factors, for a woman still young in age, Crazy Betty continued: "What you doin' with my baby? You can't make a child pretty so! You did never want he! Give he to me!" (p. 17).²³ The resonant quality of the woman's words sprang from the circumstance that, unbeknownst to Ti-Jeanne, the woman was in fact her mother, Mi-Jeanne, and like Ti-Jeanne she was a "seer woman." The "gift" of "second sight" ran along the maternal line, and the woman Ti-Jeanne had known as "blind Crazy Betty" or simply as a "bag lady," had not benefited from having her gift cultivated and supported by relations—psychic, spiritual, social—that would sustain her.

For most of the narrative, Mi-Jeanne's identity as Ti-Jeanne's mother is concealed by her ominous image as "blind Crazy Betty." Although Mi-Jeanne is presumed missing, as "blind Crazy Betty" she recursively appears in the narrative as the specter of madness and incommunicability. The mystery surrounding Mi-Jeanne's identity and the revelation of its content is primarily relayed through the fragmented perspective and memory of others, especially that of Mami Gros-Jeanne and Ti-Jeanne. The precipitating events that led to Mi-Jeanne's disappearance are relayed through flashback and the exchange of traumatic memories between Ti-Jeanne and Mami. Like Ti-Jeanne, Mi-Jeanne was a seer, and like Ti-Jeanne she refused Mami Gros-Jeanne's help but for different reasons. Mi-Jeanne's psyche was overcome by waking nightmares that presaged the violent traumatic events of the Riots. By the time Mami realized her daughter was having visions, the enormity and intensity of the visions had already overwhelmed Mi-Jeanne, "[a]nd the powers of the visions had driven her mad" (p. 48). Mami hopes that through the cultivation of Ti-Jeanne's "gift" of "second sight," Ti-Jeanne might be spared from what happened to her mother. But for that to be possible Ti-Jeanne would have to reimagine the nature of her "second sight" and the coordinates of the given world. For the time being, Ti-Jeanne rebuffs: "What I tell you Mami? I don't want to know nothing 'bout

obeah, oui” (p. 47). To which Mami replied, hoping to clarify both the significance of Ti-Jeanne’s visions and convey the urgency of Ti-Jeanne’s predicament, “Girl child, you know better than to call it obeah....Is a good thing, not a evil thing. But, child if you don’t learn how to use it, it will use you, just like it take your mother”(p. 47). Frightened, Ti-Jeanne could just stare at Mami (p. 47). In hoping that “if she ignored the second sight, it would just go away” and dismissing her grandmother’s teachings as “old time nonsense,” Ti-Jeanne clung to an empirical reality ordered by a teleological mode of Reason and Universality (p. 20, 37). But ignoring the visions was not diminishing their unsettling power. Ti-Jeanne worries: “Mami, this ain’t the first time I see something like this. I going mad like Mummy ain’t, it?” (p. 46). In moments when Ti-Jeanne suspects her own madness, memories of her mother and of the frightening encounter with “blind Crazy Betty” alternate in her mind without Ti-Jeanne ever realizing that her mother and “blind Crazy Betty” are the same person.

In accordance with the modern grammar of representation, in Ti-Jeanne’s memory, her mother inhabits a space in and as madness, nonsense, and chaos. In other words, the black maternal figure was a signifier that apports and delimits Reason and the Universal.²⁴ In the aftermath of the Riots, her mother became nearly synonymous with the disorienting enormity and chaotic origin of The Burn. For Ti-Jeanne, the Riots “were mixed up in her mind with memories of her mother lying helpless in her bed, besieged with images of the worst of the rioting *before* it happened” (p. 48). Ti-Jeanne remembered that her mother had a vision back when the Riots were just starting. In the days that followed, her mother appeared to go mad, “complaining that she was hearing voices in her head” (p. 20). Her mother disappeared soon after the voices had started, “run away into the craziness that Toronto had become. She had never come back” (p. 20).²⁵ Ti-Jeanne worried, “Maybe it is hereditary?” This was an anxiety that overdetermined the apprehension of both her mother and grandmother as well as obscured the power and force of the abilities constitutive to the disorienting debility of her own “second sight” (p. 20).

When the visions start, Ti-Jeanne attempts, by the forces of Will and Reason, to dis-identify with that which would potentially sustain her and by implication elude the matrilineal mark of symbolic foreclosure ascribed to the black mater(nal) and to related racially abject worldmaking practices. Having already dismissed what Mami was trying to teach her as “old time nonsense,” Ti-Jeanne would initially refuse to accept the disruption of common reality that her sense-ability both exposed and represented, even as hegemonic reality foreclosed the perception of her reality and of a shared being *in* a reality such as hers—a reality that necessarily could not be held in common; in fact, its foreclosure inaugurated the common (sense) (p. 37). In the case of her mother, a sense (ability) without a spiritual (initiation and ritual practice) and social locus, Mi-Jeanne’s psyche was in ruins. Her reality and the capacities her sense-ability indexed were foreclosed by a common sense that apprehends her as monstrosity. Mythologized as “blind Crazy Betty,” she became an anonymous feature of the generalized image of the Burn as antipodean dilapidation. When the black female (maternal) figure appears, if she appears, she appears as the work and revelation of myth.

There were many names for what Mami, Mi-Jeanne, and Ti-Jeanne were: “myalist, bush doctor, iyalarisha, curandera, four-eye” (p. 218); the supposed incontrovertible “truth” of Black worldmaking as paradigmatic teratology and “nonsense” has the racialized exchange and circulation of the derisive term “obeah” (and related) markers such as “mumbo-jumbo”) as an essential exponent. The term “obeah” (and the lifeworld it is purported to represent) is a recurring flashpoint for characters in the novel: a dramatic contest over the meaning of “obeah” punctuates the narrative’s arc, making it arguably the central conflict of the novel, one that emblemizes the unsettled convergence of the racialization of epistemic authority and sense perception with that of the time and place of Africa in New World blackness under conditions of imperial Western modernity. While undoubtedly Ti-Jeanne is the narrative’s central consciousness, the recursive shifts in narrative perspective to that of Mami-Gros Jeanne—as a griot figure, healer, symbol of communalism—and the non-linear work of

time and memory function to place pressure on or introduce irony into Ti-Jeanne's perspective. Exploring the caesura between the grandmother's voice and the vital knowledge it both possesses and is possessed by and troubling an ocularcentric apprehension of reality that is similarly haunted by raciality, the novel re-signifies double-consciousness wherein Ti-Jeanne's passage between the "two worlds" and its accompanying vertigo marks a desire for that which is anticipated but cannot be fully brought into legibility from *within* the terms of the modern grammar of representation in any form other than nonsense.²⁶ Like Mi-Jeanne before her, Ti-Jeanne risks her sense-ability—its transformative, anticipatory function, which is contiguous with its debilitating power—in an attempt to seek a place and an explanation within a science-fictional reality wherein all phenomena can be presumably explained within the terms of Western (scientific) rationality.²⁷ While Ti-Jeanne understands herself in the terms of a Hegelian "rational" subject, both the science fictional world she seeks and the Hegelian discourse that undergirds it position her and her grandmother in the same space as "blind Crazy Betty," a reality Ti-Jeanne is not yet ready to confront.

On that street that day of her first vision, upon looking into her mother's face and its self-inflicted, dug-out eyes, Ti-Jeanne saw the specter of her own (un)becoming: "The old fear of madness made Ti-Jeanne go cold.... Madwoman in front of her. Hard-eyed men just behind" (p. 17). She thought, "But at least the men had *something* behind their eyes, some spark of humanity" (p.17). Face-to-face with dually gendered images of social death—in the forms of her mother's visage, which she no longer recognizes, and the huddle of men, a site of gendered violence's spatial and substitutive logics—Ti-Jeanne clung to a common reality and sense of humanity that she will eventually have to shed in order to, however provisionally, spark life on non-hegemonic terms and to keep her sense-ability intact. In the interval, Ti-Jeanne chose the men's "something" over her mother's seeming nothingness. She attempted to turn and run back the way she had come only to find herself transported to a green tropical meadow, where, at the end of a narrow, downward-

curving dirt path, a figure came over the rise, leaping and dancing up the path:

Man-like, man-tall, on long, wobbly legs look as if they hitch on backward. Red, red all over: red eyes, red hair, nasty, pointy red tail jocking up into air. Face like a grinning African mask. Only is not a mask; the lips-them moving, and it have real teeth behind them lips, attached to real gums. He waving a stick, and even the stick self-paint-up red, with some pick and crimson rags hanging from the one end. Is dance he dancing on them wobbly legs, flapping he knees in and out like if he drunk jabbing he stick in the air, and now I could hear the beat he moving to, hear the words of the chant: Diab'-diab'! Diab'-diab'! Diab'-diab'! (p.18)

Upon opening her eyes, she finds Tony standing beside her in Roopsingh's Roti shop. "In disorientation," Ti-Jeanne asks over a raucous sonic mix of soca and customers yelling their orders through aroma-filled air boasting of curry, frying oil, and stew peas with rice, "What happened? Is where we was?" (p.19). While Ti-Jeanne had hoped "if she ignored the second sight, it would just go away," the visions overwhelmed her liberal humanist sense of self-willed occularcentric agency and thwarted her attempts at backward movement. Her visions' sublime vertiginous disruption of proprioception creates an interval for Ti-Jeanne to move beyond representationalism and Western scientific empiricism, in particular. But precisely because it is a threat to identity in the terms of "Self/World" described by Wynter (1984) at the beginning of this essay, she initially resists its force and effect.

For Ti-Jeanne, the approach of the Jab-Jab is synonymous with the arrival of death in the form of atavism and disordered being: The Jab-Jab's wobbly legs and tail portend the threat of life out of order, a disabled life, a figure described as having a "face like a grinning African mask" (p. 18). As observed by many scholars, "the African mask," a fetish of nineteenth-century anthropology, exceeds mere representation as the fetishized mask is perceived as the *embodiment* of the African's purported atemporal opacity and disordered metaphysics more generally, such that

African masks and people are not merely correlates but appear interchangeable.²⁸ Michelle Wallace (2004) has described the fungibility of African art and African people in the following terms:

The fate of African art objects was not unrelated to the fate of the human bodies also removed from Africa under less than ideal circumstances—some of them sold or just handed over and some of them kidnapped...The greatest difference then, between the bodies of our ancestors and these tribal objects is that the bodies were allowed to die (therefore enabling us to replace them), whereas the tribal objects can never die, given their curious half-life on the back shelves of Western art...It might be useful to think of them [museum and gallery collections] as ruins (p.465, 467)²⁹

The authorized disposability of black people that Wallace describes with the rather truncated phrase—“allowed to die”—sits somewhat ironically, even if not altogether unsurprisingly, next to her observation that “African objects were *salvaged* for exhibition or sale” (p. 463) only to find a deadly synthesis in *the exhibition and sale* of black people: “entire villages were sometimes shipped over to Europe, England, and the United States and placed on display in zoos and circuses” in the “general chaos” that accompanied the annexation and colonization of the African continent in the late nineteenth century (p.463).³⁰ Wallace concludes, “No doubt, many of the objects that made it either to the New World, Britain, and Europe were probably destroyed one way or another” (p. 463). No doubt, indeed. We know that the name “Venus,” practically synonymous with the terror and pleasure of exhibiting people, does not index a single life, but many.³¹

Moreover, Black people’s relation to the world of objects cannot be properly understood in the terms of what Quentin Meillassoux calls Kantian correlationism or of the question of perceptual integrity between subject and object, *as black peoples’ fungibility with objects* is a primary function of blackness in “the” world (in the making of “the” world) and forms an essential condition of possibility for both Kant’s questioning of subject-object relations and the emergence of globality as a conceptual

horizon.³² So it is not that for black people the question of perceptual integrity is not a problem for contemplation; rather, the question of subject-object is thought in a world that *primarily* announces blackness as the fungibility of people and objects while steadfastly equating subjecthood with the possession and dispossession of objects (human and nonhuman)—objects that necessarily haunt the distorted perceptual terms of the Kantian-subject and thought-world relationship, whereby the black mater(nal) signifies the form(lessness) of noise, and noise is produced as isomorphic to the black mater(nal), reciprocally.³³ Therefore, black contemplation of the question of subject-object, including thought that exceeds its logic, must contend with and cannot help but occur in a context effected by the indistinction and distortion race introduces into these very terms.³⁴

Given Man's historical horizon of possibility—slavery, conquest, colonialism—the Western metaphysical matrix has race at its center in the form of a chiasmus: the metaphysics of race (“What is the ‘reality’ of race?”) and the racialization of the question of metaphysics (“Under whose terms will the nature of time, knowledge, space, objecthood, being, and causality come to be defined?”). In other words, the question of race's reality has and continues to bear directly on hierarchies of knowledge pertaining to the nature of reality itself. Though the notoriously antiblack pronouncements of exalted figures like G.W.F. Hegel, Immanuel Kant, or David Hume, for instance, mark neither the invention of metaphysics nor its conclusive end, the metaphysical question of race and that of the foreclosed black mater(nal) in particular as race's status-organizing principle marks an innovation in the governing terms of metaphysics, one that would increasingly purport to resolve metaphysical questions in terms of relative proximity to the spectral figure of “the African female” or, more specifically, that of the black mater(nal). In probing and radicalizing the indefinite distinction between immanence and transcendence, their gendered and racialized prefigurement as the staging of the black mater(nal)'s nonrepresentability, Hopkinson's novel challenges the terms that ground both attempts to distinguish and combine science and fiction

as well as speculation and realism.³⁵

What I want to stress here is that both the reigning hegemonic conception of the human thought-world correlate as well as the idea that ontological unification is both desirable and attainable by means other than violence are essential onto-epistemic aspects of antiblackness historically and contemporarily. The dominant order of appearances and its representationalist logics are forged through and by what Denise Ferreira Da Silva (2007) has termed the “global idea of race,” yet this onto-epistemic violence is commonly understood as *merely* the proper apprehension of reality and justified on that basis.

Representationalism’s ontological propositions and effects, in particular, commonly rely on a problematic material reductionism that, I argue, is secured by the idea of race: the presumed primacy and transparency of matter is called upon to adjudicate “reality,” “fact,” and “truth,” in general. The matter of racial being and its “hieroglyphics of the flesh” have been the primary measure of (human)being and a principal site for maintaining and extending representationalist rationality.³⁶ In the process, non-representationalist systems of inquiry and modes of ontology are cast in the racialized terms of a teratology, whereby the so-called fetish is its signal anxiety.

Simon Gikandi (2003) has described the doubleness of the fetish as “a figure that is located at the heart of culture and ritual and yet seems to appear to us in its perceptual nature, against reality” (p. 465). Embalmed in a paranoid discourse that mystifies their ritualized forms and functions in the movement of West African religion and everyday life, whether in the explicit terms of “race” or the supplementary discourse of “culture,” African objects, and masks in particular, appear, one could argue, as not only “against reality” but as the foreclosing of the reality principle—in this sense, masks become fungible or metonymic with the related signifiers of the black mater(nal).³⁷ The mask’s frightening appearance stems from a selective, yet law-like, figuration of anxiety in antiblack gendered terms, regarding “a dangerous potentiality in *all perception and representation*” that “reality itself is open to construction,” such that the relation between

observable experience and external reality is one of vast potentiality rather than determinism (Simpson, 1982, p. 11, emphasis mine).

Indeed, the world is not as it appears. It is revealed later in the novel that the Jab-Jab is a manifestation of Ti-Jeanne's patron spirit Papa Legbara or Eshu—though, in her consternation, she initially misrecognizes him and the helpful messages he provides. Throughout the novel, the appearance of Eshu and possession by Eshu will be one of her greatest sources of strength for defeating the ruthless druglord Rudy and, more importantly, for her and her mother's survival (Coleman, 2009). That her patron spirit is Eshu is significant at the very least because the Eshu in *Brown Girl* is a messenger and, like Ti-Jeanne, passes between worlds. Nevertheless, in Ti-Jeanne's attempt to confirm the integrity of her own relation of form to image, she necessarily has to pass, at the very least, through the gendered, antiblack associative links I have just described. The image of the Jab-Jab recalls the fungibility of African objects (masks) and people as well as the conflation of Africa, more generally, and West African religion, in particular, with mythic irreality and the teratological, associations that *precede* Ti-Jeanne's attempts to order her reality. It is no wonder that such circular logics and paranoid relations would induce misapprehension and the dread of vertigo.

In the passage above, vertigo—that sense of unhinged reality, a communion with death and that realm which exceeds life—seems to threaten a total loss of self as incommensurable metaphysical frameworks and sensory maps meet. This episodic experience is made possible by what Frank Wilderson (2011) has called a “paradigmatic necessity,” namely that blackness is “a life constituted by disorientation rather than a life interrupted by disorientation” (p. 3). A life constituted by disorientation has as its essential feature what Fanon (2008) diagnosed as an “aberration of affect”—autophobia and self-aversion—an effect of realizing selfhood in the terms of our present global hegemonic *mode of the subject*: its transindividual and systemic scales of value “woven out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories” imposes an antiblack system of meaning and affective economy (Wynter, 1995, p. 45). In global

hegemonic terms, the African is cast “out of the world” and is thus without standing in relation to the constitution of the reality construct.³⁸ It is not an absence of alternative metaphysical frameworks and perceptual matrices that produces the vertigo I describe; rather, vertigo is an effect of the inability of these alternatives to find footing *within “the world”* due to ever-renewed processes of foreclosure that take the nullification of the black mater(nal) as the horizon of the reality concept and threshold of the sensible world.

For Ti-Jeanne, “to assume a culture, to support a civilization” under these terms is to be possessed by a metaphysics that produces egoic and filial conflicts and disintegration in the forms of deferral, isolation, anonymity, and a desire for “one human being who was totally dependent on her and would never leave her” (Hopkinson, 1998, p. 25). Within the logic of the specific civilization in which she finds herself, within the language which it speaks and which speaks it, as a “Negro,” one will find herself biochemically altered, its physicalist correlation vertiginous (Wynter, 2001). In a gloss of the work of physicist David Bohm, Wynter (2001) concludes, “Transformed *meanings* have led to transformed *matter*, to a transformed mode of experiencing the *self* . . .” (p. 38). Assuming the rhetorics of possession, Wynter (2001) states further, “[A]nother mode of conscious experience takes over. This mode is one that compels her to know her body *through* the terms of an always already imposed ‘historico-racial schema’; a schema that predefines her body as an impurity to be cured, a lack, a defect, to be amended into the “true” being of whiteness” (p. 41).³⁹ Thus, sensorium and its faculties are “culturally determined through the mediation of the socialized *sense of self*, as well as the “social” situation in which the *self* is placed” (p. 37).

In *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre (1993) describes existential vertigo in terms that return us to the site of an ominous narrow path, one whose feared balefulness is not manifestly figural, as in the form of a Jab Jab, but whose causality is annunciated affectively. And yet its existential terms also recall the racialized, gendered, and sexual conditioning of anxiety:

Vertigo announces itself through fear; I am on a narrow path—without a guard rail—which goes along a precipice. The precipice presents itself to me *as to be avoided*; it represents a danger of death. At the same time I conceive of a certain number of causes...which can transform that threat of death into reality...Through these various anticipations, I am given to myself as a thing; I am passive in relation to these possibilities; they come to me from without; in so far as I am also an object in the world, subject to gravitation, they are my possibilities. (p. 66)

Reading this canonical passage on existential vertigo in light of the gendered sexual history of conquest and enslavement makes perceptible the visceral nature of anxieties that orbit the status of objects. Framed in essentialist terms, blackness marks a violation of gendered and sexual norms such that race—once ontologized—fixes blackness, regardless of “sex,” in the “feminine position” as that passivity and stasis ascribed to objecthood and death, or objecthood as a form of living death. In this frame, the predominant one—blackness, womanhood, female sex, objecthood, passivity, inertia, and death—form an unbreakable chain and negative telos or declension. For a black woman, such as Ti-Jeanne, to be “riddin by spirits” is to be possessed by a gendered sexual redundancy, an intensification of death *in and by* objecthood. Paradoxically, objecthood, here, serves to feminize a womanhood considered to be of questionable feminine standing by way of placing her being *in* common under erasure; in other words, it genders black womanhood on the register of her object status only to dispossess her gender of the fullness of being (human). In sum, according to the ontologized, gendered metrics described, the object’s nonbeing as blackened status figures black womanhood a superposition or the state of occupying two distinct and seemingly contradictory human and object worlds simultaneously— a predicament that underwrites both the separation of “subject” and “object” in Western ontological discourse and exposes the impossibility of consistently keeping them apart. Thus, I argue that, rather than simply restore activity to matter or militate against the charge of passivity in the

exclusive terms of defining agency by activity, an alteration of the object's blackened gendered status necessitates a transvaluation of the gendered symbolics of passivity and the inoperability of its sliding substitutions.

Brown Girl in the Ring is a novel that perhaps should be understood not as a mixing of genres but rather as a performance of their deconstruction—literary genres and those genres of the human that apprehend black maternity as the precipice of a void. In posing the question of onto-epistemology at the register Hopkinson's text poses it, as an intervention into the modern grammar of representation, operative dualisms—science-fiction, fact-belief, observation-projection, realism-fantasy—are destabilized, problematizing generic codes and conventions, their terms of legibility and historical-national organization, and their bonds of signification and constitutive oppositions. These narrative strategies underscore the manner with which *Brown Girl in the Ring* refuses to be an "object of anthropological desire" (da Silva, 2007, p. xxii). *Brown Girl in the Ring's* philosophical inquiry into onto-epistemology and perceptual reality destabilizes the ground of "ethnographic authority" rather than invites it and deauthorizes not only Hegel's racial telos but also the foundational empiricism of Franz Boas as well. Da Silva (2007) has shown that as a knowledge project that addresses man as an object, Franz Boas's cultural anthropology tied certain bodily and mental configurations to different global regions as Boas's conceptualization of "the primitive mind" sought to explain sense perception in terms of the "laws" of "cultural development" that relied upon and extended a logic that made globality and raciality coextensive.⁴⁰

Rather than read *Brown Girl in the Ring* through the imperative of anthropological translation or map its proximity to some ideal of Western secular scientific rationality, I am most interested in the way Yoruba and related cosmological systems function in the novel as tropes in service to a generative critique of the racialized, gendered, sexual fictions of ontology and subjectivity I have just described. Diasporic practices of worldmaking potentially act as a mode of redress for onto-epistemic violence to the extent that said praxes preclude the monopolization of

sense that authorizes antiblack (euro)modernity. Ti-Jeanne ticked them off on her fingers: “Shango, Ogun, Osain, Shakpana, Emanjah, Oshun, Oya, and Eshu” and would need to call upon them, the “old-time stories,” and even Crazy Betty/Mi-Jeanne to possess and aid her in her battle with Rudy, ultimately recovering her mother in the process (p. 204).⁴¹ *Troping rather than rehearsing Yoruba religious practice*, in *Brown Girl in the Ring*, the invocation of the orishas does not so much act as a guarantor of Africa as the “essential base” of New World cosmological praxis. Rather, it marks the process of altering terms and objects *from* that of “Africa” as a paranoid discourse *to* that of blackness as an existential predicament such that Africa is understood and problematized as an *invention* of imperial Western modernity and its grammar of representation.⁴² This is a vertiginous circuit whose vicissitudes and paradoxes must necessarily include both the anticipation *and* indeterminacy of alternation between paranoid and deliberative modes of onto-epistemology.

Awaiting neither “the science of culture” (anthropological historicity) nor the authentication of what is or is not “Caribbean” or “African” (“ethnographic authority”), this altered course reveals that blackness is an existential predicament that precisely and decisively unmoors the fictions of origin and integral human(being). The Middle Passage is neither place nor historical past but statelessness, a processual (un)becoming, the (dis)continuous iterative unsettling of origin and being, a challenge to the question and terms of origin writ large, and therefore it confounds rather than permits the compensatory gestures discourses of “hybridity” and “syncretism” offer to (racial) ontology.⁴³

Even when it is to their great detriment, or perhaps even especially in those instances, the novel’s characters of different, racial, gender, age, and class positionalities participate in a signifying process that negates, rejects, misapprehends, and misnames what has already been prefigured void. Mami-Gros Jeanne’s empiricist praxis and interventions, her onto-epistemology, lie buried under the signifiers of superstition and nonsense. The author’s use of dramatic irony performs and exposes the impossibility of the black mater(nal) to be either re-presented or known in the modern

grammar of dialectical subjecthood and authority; what emerges from this narrative strategy is not an affirmation of the positive value of either “immanence” or “transcendence” but rather a (re)valuation of deferral, the ongoing pursuit of a signifier, a name, that is not already determined by those terms, fails to signify in those terms and mutates those terms and their grammar beyond recognition.

As the novel unfolds, Ti-Jeanne gradually relinquishes a fantasy of the will (unified and rational self-directed subjectivity), or sovereignty, as the seat of agency, a fantasy perhaps all the more beguiling because of the ways abandonment, disposability, and segregation act to ensure life’s irresolution in *The Burn*, an irresolution that extends into existence as the ever-presence of dreadful anticipation, psychic diremption, and (dis)possession of the flesh. Ultimately, Ti-Jeanne discovers that receptivity to and assumption of the orishas as ontological co-constituents may not only provide a means for survival but may offer a sense of life beyond mere survival. Thus, Ti-Jeanne’s (dis)abling predicament, or vertiginous state, provides Ti-Jeanne some other mode of relating where the Other is neither an agent of your aggrandizement nor of your diminishment but the arrival of the inoperability of the binary between the two and a suspension of relation on those terms, thus making way for the unforeseen. Going deeper into blackness rather than fleeing its trace, *Brown Girl in the Ring* is an allegory for unsettling modes of cognition and sense-making that authorize antiblack metaphysics.

Antiblack metaphysics, as foreclosure, positions the existence of blackened reality beyond the conceptual borders of the dialectical encounter that underwrites representationalism’s hegemonic processes of worlding. However, the novel does not simply advocate one representationalist schema, presumed to be more comprehensive or offer more accurate representations of existing entities, over another; rather, it allegorizes the potential enabling effects of disordering the hegemonic mode of reality and self-world relation. In *Brown Girl in the Ring*, Ti-Jeanne must forego faith in the idea that there is an all-encompassing transcendental structure—“reality,” “the world,” “truth”—that settles matters

of existence once and for all. Instead, she measures claims to existence based on their metaphorical resonance and ontological effects upon a world *within* “the world.” In ineluctable co-constitution, where self and world are internal (but not reducible) to each other, what arrangement of existence, modes of relationality, and agential possibilities emerge? Rather than assume that the epistemic purchase of inquiry into ontology resides in the measurable distance between representation and referent, Ti-Jeanne asks, instead, what worldings do particular ontological claims (dis)enable? In this important sense, Ti-Jeanne’s reorientation to the question of world serves as an analytic for interrogating what representationalism claims to do.⁴⁴

In conclusion, in *Brown Girl in the Ring*, vertigo functions as the precipice of a new consciousness and “inchoate theoretics” (Scott, 2010, p. 64)—where “sense and non-sense have yet to be differentiated” (Marriott, 2014, p. 522). Vertigo provides an alternative to “the tyrannies of our common reality,” where positivist knowledge is forged through epistemic coercion, expropriation, and relations of direct domination (Scott, 2010, p. 26). I have argued that Western science and philosophy’s foundational authority and the reproduction of the scientific matrix of classification necessitates and is maintained by the recursive symbolic foreclosure of the black mater(nal) and dislocation of black gender, maternity, and sexuality in hegemonic philosophies of ontology. Vertigo, here, is a measure and means for the disordering and inoperability of a metaphysics that takes the black mater(nal)’s nonrepresentability as its enabling condition. In vertigo, we may limn the potential to queer metaphysics via a transvaluation of (human) being and a reconfiguration of gendered sexual embodiment by means of an emergent sensorium. Disordering metaphysics, and metaphysics disordered: “Ti-Jeanne felt the gears slipping between the two worlds” (Hopkinson, 1998, p. 19). In this, Ti-Jeanne’s vertigo is both the apprehension of unlived possibilities and the salvific eruption into consciousness of discredited sensation, of other ways of living, other modes of life that provide a dizzying sense of vivifying potentiality.

Notes

¹ I use the term “local” not to signify “isolation” or a lack of politically complex encounters with discontinuous onto-epistemologies near and far; rather, the use of “local” here is meant in the relative sense given the relatively recent emergence of the planetary scale introduced by processes of enslavement and imperial domination. See, for instance, Jayasuriya & Pankhurst (2003), Jayasuriya (2008), and Alpers (2009). I thank LaMonda Horton-Stallings for bringing these texts to my attention. See Gayatri Spivak’s (1999) *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* for her use of “epistemic violence.”

² *Robinson Crusoe*, *Oroonoko*, and *The Blazing World* in English and *Don Quixote* in Spanish have been variously described as the first novels in either English or Spanish. *Sinapia* is generally regarded as the first Spanish utopia, and *Blazing World*, similarly, is often considered the first work of science fiction.

³ To take but one example, in a process that contemporarily often goes by the name of biopiracy or bioprospecting, Western biomedicine and pharmaceutical corporations “discover,” expropriate, and recast indigenous knowledge of plant and animal species. Through the enactment of purportedly secular rituals of copyright, patent, and commercialization, indigenous knowledge is cleaved from the onto-epistemologies with which it is embedded, and once purified this newly repackaged knowledge is then prepared for sale and distribution in accordance with market logics. See Mgbeoji (2014) and Shiva (2016).

⁴ Many thanks to Amanda Renée Rico for bringing to my attention the Jessica Langer text.

⁵ Definitions of “postcolonial SF” vary. For instance, in *Science Fiction, Imperialism and the Third World*, Andy Sawyer's "Forward," (2010)

suggests that "an explicitly postcolonial science fiction not only has to be written from outside the traditional strands of Western science fiction ... but explained and criticized from outside them too" (p.1-2), and Hoagland and Sarwal's (2010) "Introduction" more broadly defines postcolonial SF as "texts that draw such explicit and critical attention to how imperialist history is constructed and maintained" (p. 10). On postcolonial SF see, Raja et. al. (2011) and Hopkinson & Mehan (2004). David Higgins's (2014) review of *Science Fiction, Imperialism and the Third World* provides a productive introduction to some of the issues regarding definition.

⁶ The black mater(nal), as mater, as matter, gestures towards a web of interconnected signifiers such as materiality, black femininity, maternity, natality, and relation to the mother.

⁷ For more on the racialized distinction between immanence and transcendence, "belief" and "scientific fact," see Bruno Latour's (2010) "On the Cult of the Factish Gods."

⁸ For a fuller discussion of raciality in Hegel's arguments on world history, please see Denise Ferreira Da Silva's (2007) superb reading of Hegel in *Toward a Global Idea of Race*.

⁹ Andrews (2015) and Colucciello Barber's (2013) respective Deleuzian approaches to immanence attempt to think the fullness of immanence and problematize historical, hierarchical dualisms between transcendence and immanence. However, this essay seeks to identify the powerful and seemingly inescapable ways that the reciprocal productions of race and gender haunt both the ongoing perpetuation of this dualism and its critiques as the very terms themselves are racialized and gendered.

¹⁰ This argument is informed by Jacques Derrida's important work in *Of Grammatology* and *Margins of Philosophy* concerning "structure of absence" and "différance."

¹¹ I thank Vanessa Agard-Jones for urging me to think more about what

space is doing in this work.

¹² My use of the term “myth” is primarily informed by Hortense Spillers’s (1987) concept of “mythic time” in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” which reworks the concept of myth in Roland Barthes’s *Mythologies*. In Spillers’s deployment of myth, black femaleness is the iterative and recursive material-discursive site, where the dominant system of values variably (re)produces itself in “mythic time” rather than in a temporally-and/or socially-progressivist manner. However, a number of scholars have written about myth in *Brown Girl* primarily as it relates to folklore and religious studies, works that do not emphasize the social structural function of myth in the sense that Spiller’s does and I extend. See, for example, Coleman (2009), Baker (2004), and Anatol (2004).

¹³ Besides Spillers, Morrison, Crenshaw, Wynter, and Hammonds’s indispensable engagements with the problem of black(ened) female sexuation in the field of representation, namely that “she” is both essential to the dominant mode and grammar of representation and necessarily invisible, Meg Armstrong (1996) provides an excellent introduction to the role of black women in Kant and Burke’s theorizations of the sublime. This is a topic I take up at great length in forthcoming work in *PhiloSophia*. On blackness and Kantian thought, see Ronald Judy (1991).

¹⁴ As the black mater(nal) cannot be comprehended as a unified object with definite identifiable endpoints, it invokes the infinite in size and power, appearing boundless on both registers, and, therefore, resists a mental *form* in the mind or imagination as well as understanding or conceptualization. Moreover, one could not “know” the serialized empirical content of the black mater(nal) in its all at-once-ness or as it presumably *exists* but only in its serialized conception, which due to processual capacities of thought and human finitude would always remain incomplete. A book that names and engages this challenge via the question of “the world” and the infinity of things is Markus Gabriel’s *Why the World Does Not Exist* (2015). This essay invokes the aesthetic

experiences of the beautiful and sublime as they are read in Kant's "Critique of Aesthetic Judgment" in the *Third Critique*. While I am neither strictly adhering here to Kant's philosophy nor the influential philosophical inquiries into the sublime offered by Edmund Burke and Jean-François Lyotard, the question of how the black female figure constitutes and disrupts these powerful analyses is taken up in forthcoming work in PhiloSophia.

¹⁵ The phrase "modern grammar of representation" represents my attempt to think with and alongside Hortense Spiller's (1987) "American grammar" and Denise Da Silva's (2007) "modern grammar" and "modern representation."

¹⁶ On the notion of performance/performativity, here I am thinking with Karen Barad (2003) who states the following: "[T]he representationalist belief in the power of words to mirror preexisting phenomena is a metaphysical substrate that supports social constructivist, as well as traditional realist, beliefs...A *performative* understanding of discursive practices challenges the representationalist belief in the power of words to represent preexisting things...The move toward performative alternatives to representationalism shifts the focus from questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality (e.g., do they mirror nature of culture?) to matters of practices/doings/actions" (p. 802).

¹⁷ See Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar's *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Fact* (2013) for a critique calling into question the presumed primacy of the scientific method in the *practice* of science. Latour and Woolgar find that representation is constituted alongside practice at every level and that experiments are not rigidly performed or regulated in accordance with "scientific method." On the contrary, experiments typically produce inconclusive results and much scientific fact is constructed during the subjective process of deciding which results to include and exclude.

¹⁸ See Robert Heinlein's (1977) definition of science fiction, for instance: "Realistic speculation about possible future events, based solidly on adequate knowledge of the real world, past and present, and on a thorough understanding of the nature and significance of the scientific method. To make this definition cover all science fiction (instead of 'almost all') it is necessary only to strike out the word 'future'" (p. 9).

¹⁹ My argument about "nonrepresentability" is in conversation with and indebted to a tradition of black feminist and queer theorizing on the problem of representation: Evelyn Hammonds's (1994) formulation of "black (w)holes," and Hortense Spillers's (1987) analysis of "body-flesh" and "mythic time." In a current book project, I am delineating how this argument builds on and relates to Hammonds's and Spillers's analyses, in particular. Similarly, black feminists and gender theorists such as Sylvia Wynter (1990) and Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) have also produced indispensable analysis of the modern injunction against the black mater(nal)'s representability as an enabling condition of the modern representational grammar. More recently, Kara Keeling (2007) and Rizvana Bradley (2015) have produced energizing new work on the relation between black femininity and capacity through a critical engagement with black women's filmic representations. Lacan (1993) uses the term *foreclosure* to investigate the possible psychological causes of psychosis. He locates the cause of psychosis in the absence of the (symbolic) father from the scene of Oedipal family, thereby limiting the family to the mother-child dyad. He concludes that the absence of the father or the Name-of-the-father is the central causal factor for psychosis, which is understood as a severed connection or disjuncture between the Symbolic, Imaginary, and the Real. I am not using the term *foreclosure* in this strict Lacanian sense. My use is more informed by the aforementioned black feminist investigations of the burdened sublimity of the black mater(nal).

²⁰ My thanks to Kyla Wazana Tompkins for this felicitous phrase. Michel Foucault is famous for his conceptualization of power's lability and

distributed agency. Here, I am interested in theorizing that which Michel Foucault (1982) would not, namely domination. Foucault famously equivocated before ultimately sidestepping the question of agency under conditions of domination. Prior to quickly shifting and remaining with the question of power's relational forms and dynamics, Foucault vacillates: he argues in one place that domination is the *calcification* of relation and, therefore, can neither be the proper site of an inquiry into the *dynamics* of power nor of relationality but rather their disablement (1982); but elsewhere he allows for some modicum of relational capacity and distributed agency to exist in domination (1997). My aim is not so much to settle the question of capacity and/or relationality; rather, what I am more interested in exploring concerns how movement at the ontic register of experience does or does not alter the nature of domination and its ontologized terms in *Brown Girl in the Ring*.

²¹ This article is an adapted excerpt from a chapter of my book-in-progress tentatively titled *The Blackness of Space Between Matter and Meaning*. The chapter-length engagement with the text closely reads additional scenes in the text and makes other claims about black female gender, biotechnology, and representation in the novel.

²² See Jasbir Puar (2009) on "debility."

²³ Giselle Liza Anatol (2004) has noted, "One of the great strides that Hopkinson makes in her narrative is not only subverting the idea of the innately maternal woman, but specifically debunking the contradictory European constructions of African-descended women as (a) hyper-maternal mammies and (b) genetically apathetic, cold-hearted, and emotionally distant mothers: stereotypes generated during the slave era and continuing into the present day in various forms" (p. 33).

²⁴ See Wynter's "Miranda" (1990) and "Ceremony" (1984) for an articulation of black matter's signification as chaos and irrationality in the discourses of Man.

²⁵ Black maternity and madness had become nearly synonymous for Ti-Jeanne. Ti-Jeanne even initially wonders about her own “waking dreams,” if they were brought on by “the stress of learning how to cope with a newborn baby” (p. 20).

²⁶ Kelli Moore (forthcoming) is also currently writing on proprioception in light of Spiller’s scholarship. Moore’s emphasis on the gap between voice and vision in black women’s testimony in domestic violence cases inspired me to at least begin to think about how said gap might function in Hopkinson’s text.

²⁷ While Ti-Jeanne’s development as a character pivots on this conflict, it is starkly conveyed in how Ti-Jeanne saw Mami’s “bush medicine” in comparison to western bioscientific medicine. While Mami used both as a healer and a formally trained nurse, “Ti-Jeanne didn’t place too much stock in Mami’s bush doctor remedies.” ...Ti-Jeanne would have preferred to rely on commercial drugs....Ti-Jeanne didn’t understand why Mami insisted on trying to teach her all that old-time nonsense” (pp. 36-37). But it was commercial Western medicine’s imbrication in commercial networks and state power that threatened to dissolve the already fragile familial relations she had. This is a topic, along with xenotransplantation and zoonosis, discussed at length in the chapter-length version of this paper. I thank Darius Bost and Alvin Henry for helping me develop this point and for being such great sounding boards for this work.

²⁸ For synthetic and critical engagement with this topic, see see Strother (1998) and Gikandi (2003).

²⁹ Wallace’s essay is productively riven with deep ambivalence and unsettled conclusions, but in addition to this view, she expresses a conviction that it is indeed possible (and even desirable) for these collections to be made available to black artists in the West, who may (and arguably already have) discover(ed) generative models in the ruins.

³⁰ See also Gikandi's (2003) discussion of the meeting of Guyanese painter Aubrey Williams and canonical artist Pablo Picasso. Upon being introduced to Williams, Picasso looked at him and remarked that he had "a fine African head" that he would like to use as a model. Gikandi notes the following about that encounter: "Williams was disappointed that he was appealing to Picasso merely as an object or subject of art, not as an artist, not as a body, not even as a human subject" (pp. 455-456).

³¹ See Hartman (2008).

³² In *After Finitude*, Quentin Meillassoux (2010) defines correlation as "the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other" (p. 5). I am thinking here not only of Kant's "On the Different Races of Man" (1997) and "On National Characteristics" (1997) but also of Hegel's "Geographical Basis of World History" (1997) and their elaborate and fallacious reasoning, whereby geography, reason, and time become the watchwords of an emergent, racially-teleological conception of "universality" and "world." See Eze (1997) for these essays.

³³ Eduardo Vivieros de Castro (2014) also contends that the terms through which Kant raises the question of "correlationism" must be de-transcendentalized because the self-other frame through which the question is cast is not universal but particular. With Vivieros de Castro, my argument is related. I agree that Kant's mode of questioning is neither universal nor should it be transcendentalized, but more than that, I seek to explore the manner in which his mode of inquiry is an effect of an imperial history and rationality. Moreover, Meillassoux, in a critique of correlationism, defines it as "the idea according to which we only have access to the correlation between thinking and being and never to either term considered apart from the other" (2010, p. 5). While not the aim of this essay, I hope one consequence of these pages is a disruption of the "thought vs. world" frame of the debate about correlationism. On noise,

see Serres (1983).

³⁴ Fred Moten's (2003) work is indispensable on the question of blackness and object-status.

³⁵ This paragraph is taken almost in its entirety from an article I wrote entitled "Outer Worlds" (2015).

³⁶ The phrase "hieroglyphics of the flesh" is taken from Hortense Spiller's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" (1987).

³⁷ See the following works that question 18th century Eurocentric aesthetic standards for "art" and that centralize the internal forces of change producing formal dynamism rather than attributing innovation to relations with the West (especially Strothers who cites other scholars working in a similar vein): Strother (1998), Achebe (2012), and Arnoldi (1988). See da Silva's *Towards a Global Idea of Race* (2007) for the insidiousness of the "culture" concept in the human sciences: "[T]he racial, the nation, and the cultural—fulfill the same signifying task of producing collectivities as particular kinds of modern subjects. Each, however, has very distinct effects of signification: (a) the racial produces modern subjects as an effect of exterior determination, which institutes an irreducible and unoblatable difference; (b) the nation produces modern subjects as an effect of historical (interior) determination, which assumes a difference that is resolved in an unfolding (temporal) transcendental essence; but (c) the cultural is more complex in its effects because it can signify either or both" (p. xxxvii).

³⁸ The phrase "out of the world" is taken from Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony* (2001).

³⁹ This quote is drawn from Wynter's (2001) reading of Fanon's reading of himself on the occasions when he had "to meet the white man's eyes" (Fanon, 2008, p. 110), as a prelude to the failure of intersubjectivity, at least one that would be occasioned by the black's ontological resistance.

Here, I altered gendered designations to accord with the focus of my analysis. Wynter also notes in the preceding page the gendered specificity of Fanon's narration of his experience of antiblackness, as well as what is shared across lines of gender: "While the black man must experience himself as the *defect* of the white man—as must the black woman vis a vis the white woman—neither the white man or woman can experience himself/herself *in relation to the* black man/black woman in any way but as that fullness and genericity of being human, yet a genericity that must be verified by the clear evidence of the latter's lack of this fullness, of *this* genericity. The qualitative aspects of the two group's mental states with respect to their respective experiences of the *sense of self* are not only opposed, but dialectically so; each quality of subjective experience, the one positive, the other negative, depends on the other" (p. 40). In these pages, I am interested in how the black mater(nal)'s nonrepresentability enables this entire field of antinomic dualisms.

⁴⁰ It is more interesting, and perhaps more relevant, to investigate the racial logic of Boas's empiricism here, given both the common assumption that the "science of culture" established a decisive break with scientific racism as well as the pride of place anthropological translation holds in the scholarship on Hopkinson's writing. However, this investigation could easily extend to the empiricism of David Hume, commonly described as the founder of empiricism, and perhaps does so by implication as Hume is well-known for the likening of a multilingual black man to a parrot. Michael Hanchard (1999) comments upon the infamous analogy in the following: "...Hume's cryptic commentary has dual significance, for it implies that the only civilizational possibilities for people of African descent were reactive and imitative. The act of mimicry itself, its subversive and infra-political implications notwithstanding, entails a temporal disjuncture. In historical and civilizational terms, Africans in the aggregate could—at best—aspire to caricature. They could only mimic the aggregate European" (p. 252).

⁴¹ A number of critics have noted that the depiction of the orisha in *Brown Girl* does not appear to re-present any practicing tradition but rather the

“blending,” “fusing,” and “dissolving of the boundaries in religious practices” as a “basis for a unique pan-Caribbean identity” [see Coleman (2009)]. Or as Wood (2005) has noted, “tracing specific religious references seems to become an academic enterprise” as the novel’s religious pantheon appears to perform in such a way as to undermine our “ability to ‘place’ or locate these deities and practices” (p. 319).

⁴² In contrast, please see Robert Farris Thompson’s *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (1984) for his highly-influential argument mapping cultural continuities and what are called “survivals” between West African religion, particularly Yoruba religion, and “New World” religious and cultural practice. This process of transcription is mapped in spatio-temporal terms—from a putative African past to a (presumably Western) modernity—such that when Africans, even “ancient” Africans, possess cultural properties ascribed to “modernity,” those properties are still framed in comparative terms that presume the “modern” is proper to the West. Furthermore, in framing its intervention in terms of a disruption of a commonly-held assumption that finds Africa lacking vis-a-vis signifiers of “modernity,” its corrective misses an opportunity to fundamentally call into question the mode of thought that seeks to distinguish and order a relational hierarchy between “primitive” and “modern” technologies and lifeworlds. In short, it recasts rather than forestalls a hierarchical binary between “modernity” and “tradition,” bestowing the “traditional” with a positively-inflected alternative value—that of transcendence. Moreover, in building an argument about the Yoruba’s “transcendence” over the violence of the Middle Passage and colonial violence, for instance, it fails to adequately account for the disruptive and creative power of history, thus obscuring the dynamics of change that accompany “Yoruba” practice. For a related set of critiques of anthropological claims to continuity, see David Scott, “An Obscure Miracle of Connection” (1999) and “That Event, This Memory: Notes on the Anthropology of African Diasporas in the New World” (1991). And, of course “invention” here alludes to V.Y. Mudimbe’s (1988) important book,

The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge.

⁴³ Here I am in agreement with Scott's (1999) contention, in a gloss of his first book, *Formations of Ritual*: "The argument (one, it seems to me, still not sufficiently recognized) was that anthropological objects are not simply given in advance of anthropological projects, but are constructed in conceptual and ideological domains that themselves have histories—very often *colonial* histories. My point, therefore, was that unless anthropology attends, in an ongoing and systematic way, to the problem of the conceptual-ideological *formation* of the objects that constitute its discourse, it will not be able to avoid the reproduction of colonialist discourse" (p. 13). See also Omi'seke Tinsley's "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic" (2008), which also calls into question the Middle Passage as "origin" (p. 192). The term "science of culture" is taken from the often-described founder of cultural anthropology, Edward Burnett Tylor. His highly influential *Primitive Culture* (1871) developed the thesis of "animism" and is known for being the first-systematic empirical study of the topic. Tylor describes the reformist mandate of anthropological science as follows: "[W]here barbaric hordes groped blindly, cultured men can often move onward with clear view. It is a harsher, and at times even painful office of ethnography to expose the remains of crude old cultures which have passed into harmful superstition, and to mark these out for destruction. Yet this work, if less genial, is not less urgently needful for the good of mankind. Thus, active at once in aiding progress and in removing hindrance, the science of culture is essentially a reformer's science" (p.453).

⁴⁴ Other critics in (feminist) science studies have raised different but related concerns about representationalism. Notable works include Barad (2003), Hacking (1983), and Rouse (1996). See also Holbraad (2008), who, like Barad, has rearticulated ontology in the terms of the performative and whose term "production" informs and shares aspects with the approach I develop in these pages.

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