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Knowledge of Freedom

FRED MOTEN

University of Southern California

AT THE BEGINNING OF *IN PRAISE OF NONSENSE: KANT AND BLUEBEARD*, Winfried Menninghaus (1999) comments on a passage from Kant's *Critique of Judgment*:

"All the richness of the imagination," Kant cautions in the *Critique of Judgment*, "in its lawless freedom produces nothing but nonsense." Nonsense, then, does not befall the imagination like a foreign pathogen; rather, it is the very law of imagination's own "lawlessness." Kant therefore prescribes a rigid antidote: even in the field of the aesthetic, understanding must "severely clip the wings" of imagination and "sacrifice . . . some" of it. (1)

If Kant prescribes what Menninghaus calls a "politics of curtailment" of the imagination, it must also be said that he acknowledges a resistance to that politics that occurs, as it were, before that politics (1). Menninghaus's work—as well as the work of some other recent readers of Kant like Diane Morgan (2002), Elaine Miller (2002), Robert Bernasconi (2001), and before them, Deleuze (1992) and Derrida (1980, 1981, 1987, 1989, 1992)—is structured by

the revelation of this ambivalence in Kant that can be said to disrupt and appose origin in general. I want to consider this necessarily irregular opening of the regulative and to think it in relation to Kant's deployment of race as the exemplary regulative and/or teleological principle. As Bernasconi's work shows, Kant uses race and the raced figure to ground the distinction between natural history—the production and discovery of purposive and singular, if internally hierarchized creation—and natural description's cataloging of a diverse set of observed natural facts potentially attributable to different origins. The regulative discourse on the aesthetic that animates Kant's critical philosophy is inseparable from the question of race as a mode of conceptualizing and regulating human diversity, grounding and justifying inequality and exploitation, as well as marking the limits of human knowledge through the codification of quasi-transcendental philosophical method, which is Kant's acknowledged aim in the critical philosophy. The critics I've mentioned illuminate the rich field of material figures that break Kant's erstwhile foundations: a floating bridge that moves and facilitates movement between eighteenth-century exclusionary fantasies of Africa and America, and the cultivated nature and organized fantasia of the English garden—between the domesticated and anthropomorphized beast (of burden) and the irreducible wildness of the cultured flower. I am concerned with the extent to which it could be said that the black radical tradition, on the one hand, reproduces the political and philosophical paradoxes of Kantian regulation, and on the other hand, constitutes a resistance that anticipates and makes possible Kantian regulation by way of the instrumentalization to which such resistance is submitted, and which it refuses. A further elaboration of certain material figures (especially by way of the work of Miller, Morgan, and on other equally important critical registers, Tera Hunter and Harryette Mullen) is demanded such that we understand that strife that ensues in the space between two fantasies—the black (woman) as regulative instrument and the black (woman) as natural agent of deregulation—as a turmoil foundational to the modern aesthetic, political, and philosophical fields. Thus my interest in the resistance to “[t]his politics of curtailment” that Kant prescribes. Such resistance, which might be called a radical politics of the imagination, moves in preparation for the question

concerning the law of lawless freedom; but it must be said immediately that this question, which is nothing other than the question of the free irruption of thought, is here and now inseparable from the racialization and sexualization—at once phantasmatic and experiential—of the imagination.

Such questioning requires that we note, along with Menninghaus, that

The “ideal” liaison between beauty and imagination . . . cannot be broken solely from the side of genius’s excessiveness and unreason. [For instance,] in the 1790s nonsense escapes—for a brief moment in the history of Romantic literature, extending from its beginnings in 1795 to its denouement in 1797—the Kantian imperative that it be “disciplined” and sets off in another direction. It finds refuge in the aesthetics of ornament, arabesque, and fairytale, and acquires the character of a hyperbolically artistic form rather than of a natural power prior to all culture. (1999, 1)

Another version of this hyperbolic aesthetic is the object now, a version that is also a more than natural power. This particular brand of ornamentation is and enacts a ruptural augmentation. This is ornamentation as serration, and it’s set to work at the broken edge where sexualization and racialization meet. Meanwhile, “According to Kant,” states Menninghaus,

imagination in its pure form—which by the same token is its *vitium*—produces “tumultuous derangements” that shatter the “coherence which is necessary for the very possibility of experience.” (*Anthropology*, 112) On the other hand, as the “faculty of intuitions” and of “presentation,” imagination is precisely the guarantor, indeed the producer of all reality: without intuitions and without signs all of our concepts would be empty and thus without “reality” (*Critique of Pure Reason*, Pluhar, 69). . . . On this basis, there are two avenues open to the Romantic poetics of nonsense. It can bring the imagination’s creative powers into opposition with imagination’s function of constituting reality. Inversely, this poetics can see in the displacement of meaningful contexts an “indication of reality”: reality “in itself,” which is otherwise unavailable, infiltrates the structures of the symbolic order, thus creating a phantom of the *Real*. (2)

The elucidation of the serration of the Romantic theory of nonsense that Menninghaus describes bears a challenge to the Kantian imperative for that regulation of imagination that is the necessary precursor to the coherence that makes experience possible. Menninghaus argues that such regulation took the form—around 1800, according to Friedrich A. Kittler—of a corrective calibration of

the cultural “discourse network” [which] was refitted and reoriented on a variety of registers toward “sense” as a power of meaning that permeates and orders all details of a discursive event into a totality. The distinction between the *material surface* of a discursive event and the *depth* of its meaning, accompanied by the preference for the intelligible pole of this opposition, became the characteristic framework for numerous social practices. These entailed a transformation in pedagogy and practices of promoting literacy as well as a reform in reading and study, in universities and in the bureaucracy. In academic teaching, the institutionalization of hermeneutics as the new vanguard science responded to this comprehensive revolution in the discursive network of writing and reading. This network’s new practices and its underlying assumptions surpassed the academic science of hermeneutics in its breadth, while at the same time undercutting its subtle problematizations. . . . The poetics of nonsense arises within the horizon of this discursive system, in the border area between late Enlightenment and earliest Romanticism. In Foucault’s sense, this poetics can be read as one of the diverse “points of resistance” that are “present everywhere in the power network,” as countermovements that do not simply exist outside the new sense-paradigm, and yet are not merely its parasitic “underside.” (2–3)

If “the distinction between the surface of a discursive event and the depth of its meaning” is constitutive for modern thought, then the reduction of (phonic) materiality is modern thought’s most fundamental protocol, an ordinance that protects the exclusionary universality of a totality that cannot stand, in its orderedness, in the face of the rough non-sense or extra-sense—the nonreduction of sense that is more than sense—of the surface in its ordinary serrations. It is no accident that irruptions on the

surface of the event, that irruption as (the surface of) the event, will have constituted the severest challenge to that Kantian notion of freedom that depends upon smooth containment. The Romanticism of the black radical tradition, if you will, is at issue here, and, as I hope to show, both are played out—in and as surface, in and as irruptive, uncontainable, fugitive, phonic materiality—on the plain of the ordinary. One way to think of that plain or field is as the domain of J. L. Austin (1975), whose work was devoted to the proposition that the proper object and methodological apparatus for philosophy was ordinary language—the material, as it were, of everyday discursive events or, in his parlance, speech acts. However, when Austin sets out on the path toward a general theory of language, he moves along lines determined by the paradigmatic opposition of material surface and semantic depth. Austin anticipates the enterprise of deconstruction in his compartment towards the critique of what he calls “false alternatives”; but, like Jacques Derrida after him and Ferdinand de Saussure before him, the desire for universality in language and in the theory of language requires the reduction of phonic substance (in Saussure’s terms) or the dismissal of the “merely phonetic” (in Austin’s). Still, Austin’s anticipation of deconstruction comes upon an effect that, perhaps efficaciously, is never fully crystallized as method. He submits his own work (his own logical direction, his own diegetic compartment) to that effect—a liberating cascade of breakdowns in which linguistic categories are cut by the everyday events of speech so that, within the plain of the ordinary, the distinctions between words and gestures and between words and sounds emerge and recede in order to let us know that the extraordinary is the always surprising path through the ordinary that is made by way of the montagic, transversal sequencing of events. That sequence is, in turn, structured by the logic of the surprising, multiple singularity of the event—that it is unprecedented, that it is infused with the plexed singularity of its fellows. The event in question is the criminal, repeating head of a step aside; the object at hand is the lawless choreophonography of stolen light, stolen life. Such movement in sound and light, such dispossessed and dispossessive fugitivity, in its very anticipation of the regulative and disciplinary powers to which it responds, reminds us, along with Foucault, that “It is not that life has been

totally integrated into techniques that govern and administer it; it constantly escapes them.” (Foucault 1978, 143)

In 1989, in the tradition of answering the question concerning Enlightenment, Jacques Derrida declares:

Of course I am ‘in favour’ of the Enlightenment; I think we shouldn’t simply leave it behind us, so I want to keep this tradition alive. But at the same time I know that there are certain historical forms of Enlightenment, certain things in this tradition that we need to criticize or deconstruct. So it is sometimes in the name of, let us say, a new Enlightenment that I deconstruct a given Enlightenment. And this requires some very complex strategies; requires that we should let many voices speak. . . . There is nothing monological, no monologue—that’s why the responsibility for deconstruction is never individual or a matter of the single, self-privileged authorial voice. It is always a multiplicity of voices, of gestures. . . . And you can take this as a rule: that each time Deconstruction speaks through a single voice, it’s wrong, it is not ‘Deconstruction’ anymore. So in [“Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy”] . . . not only do I let many voices speak at the same time, but the problem is precisely that multiplicity of voices, that variety of tones, within the same utterance or indeed the same word or syllable, and so on. So that’s the question. That’s one of the questions.

But of course today the political, ideological consequences of the Enlightenment are still very much with us—and very much in need of questioning. So a new Enlightenment, to be sure, which may mean deconstruction in its most active or intensive form, and not what we inherited in the name of *Aufklärung*. . . . (75)

The black radical tradition is in apposition to enlightenment. Appositional enlightenment is remixed, expanded, distilled, and radically faithful to the forces its encounters carry, break, and constitute. It’s (the effect of) critique or rationalization unopposed to the deep revelation instantiated by a rupturing event of dis/appropriation, or the rapturous advent of an implicit but unprecedented freedom. It’s the performance of something like a detour of Kant onto a Heideggerian path, a push toward a

critical rhythm in which *Aufklärung* and *Lichtung* animate one another, in which the improvisation through their opposition is enacted in (interruptions of) passage, tone, pulse, phrase, silence. But the dark matter that is and that animates this tradition *sounds*, and so sounds *another* light that for both Kant and Heidegger, in the one's advocacy and in the other's avoidance, would remain unheard.

Another way to put it would be this: there is an enduring politico-economic and philosophical moment with which the black radical tradition is engaged. That moment is called the Enlightenment. This tradition is concerned with the opening of a new Enlightenment, one made possible by the ongoing improvisation of a given Enlightenment—improvisation being nothing other than the emergence of “deconstruction in its most active or intensive form.” That emergence bears a generativity that shines and sounds through even that purely negational discourse which is prompted by the assumption that nothing good—experientially, culturally, aesthetically—can come from horror. The Afro-diasporic tradition is one that improvises through horror and through the philosophy of horror, and it does so in ways that don't limit the discursive or cultural trace of the horror to an inevitable descriptive approach toward some either immediately present or heretofore concealed truth. There is also a prescriptive component in this tradition, which is to say in its narrative and in its narratives, that transcends the mythic and/or objectifying structures and effects of narrative while, at the same time, always holding on to its impossible descriptive resources. A future politics is given there so powerfully that it's present as a trace even in certain reactions that, in the very force and determination of reaction, replicate horror's preconditions. Such replication is done, for instance, in the vexed ethics of encounter of which Olaudah Equiano tells—and which Frantz Fanon, among others, and Homi Bhabha, after Fanon, cite and recite, theorize and retheorize. I'm after another recitation of that improvisatory and liberatory trace.

All this brings to mind an interesting and important recent text. In his *(Dis)forming the American Canon*, Ronald A. T. Judy (1993) would deconstruct and abandon the Enlightenment, its subject and its oppressive sociopolitical manifestations, by way and in the interest of a valorized

unreadability, an errant and essentially unapproachable textuality that carries the trace of another being, another subjectivity, another literacy, another politics: the Afro-Arabic. In so doing, however, he renews the temporal and ontological constitution—namely, the systemic relation and opposition of totality and singularity—which grounds the “old” Enlightenment and its phantomic subject by his entrance into the nostalgic projection of an other, pre-oppositional (and thus deeply oppositional) origin.

Judy attempts to take an improvisational tradition, one weighted toward the impossible generativity of an apocalyptic event/institution, and expose it to a deconstruction; or, he would find within it a certain self-deconstructive germ in the form of a fragmentary eighteenth-century Afro-Arabic slave narrative called *Ben Ali's Diary*. He does so because he reads the canonical slave narratives (most especially those of Douglass, though I'd argue that his claim extends to those of Mary Prince as well as Equiano—about both of which, more later) as replications of certain deeply problematic metaphysical structures, the most important being a unitary formulation of the subject which has its origins in an intensely racialized—as well as an intensely gendered (sexed and sexualized)—understanding of “Man.” What I'll attempt to argue here is that both the canonical slave narratives of Prince and Equiano and the noncanonical and fragmentary narratives of Uncle Toliver and Ellen Butler resist placement within a polemic for or against the old Enlightenment subject. Rather they serve as *récits* and recitations (which is to say rationalizations or theorizations) of an improvisatory suspension of subjectivity, and of a certain desire for subjectivity, and of any prior understanding of subjectivity's differentiated ground.

These narratives are improvisational and generative in some deep ways, and the tradition they recombine, extend, and transform is marked precisely by an ongoing anarchic seizure, excess, and intensification of what it carries with it as deconstruction. The tradition does so precisely by its active embrace of improvisation in its relation to a material dissatisfaction with the opposition between singularity and totality and its political effects. That improvisation is present in European traditions as well, but with this difference: their general repression of improvisation, an embarrassed refusal enacted by precisely that irrationalism against which it would guard. One

could more judiciously call this irrationalism a wariness that manifests itself as a certain disabling decision neither to improvise nor to rationally encounter the revelatory *and* critical dis/appropriation that must ensue when one is confronted with the structures and effects of “other” traditions that generate and are generated by improvisatory practices. Not even Derrida is immune to this wariness (which, finally, we could call Eurocentrism), though what’s cool in his work is the trace of improvisation (of which he is wary, but to which, more often than not, he is attuned, especially in his writing, more complexly in his mediated and recorded speech) that emerges as if a certain elaborative moment in the generative history of philosophy-as-deconstruction always and all throughout the ensemble of tradition(s) carries along with it another level of intensity. What I’m after is a critique of the absence of that intensity in the heretofore almost always correspondent historico-philosophical phenomena of Enlightenment and Eurocentrism, and in certain critiques of that absence and that correspondence which lose that intensity themselves. Judy loses that intensity, that laughter out-from-outside of the house of being, even as he raises crucial questions regarding the development of that intensity in knowledge production and academic labor, allowing us to linger, for instance, at the intersection of the university and the plantation as places of work. What I’ll do here is focus on some other important questions he raises and prompts. Is writing (a more or less conventional and complete autobiographical narrative) always writing-into-being as it is manifest in the totalizing virtuality of the racialized, gendered, nationalized, “universal” Kantian Subject? This question is a central one, for it implies and opens a critique of being and its question, as well as an improvisation of that subject, its exclusionary categorization, and its conflation with being. It also raises another question: What are the effects of the personalized recounting of the horror of the African encounter with the European other, the middle passage, and slavery? Finally, in a question prompted by Judy’s work, what, asks Wahneema Lubiano in her introduction to Judy’s text, are the effects—if any, either good or bad—of the depersonalization of that recounting, or at least the valorization of a narrative that, rather than establishing authorial subjectivity, places the very idea of authorship/authority and the possibility of subjectivity on interminable hold? I employ the term “subjectivity” here,

placed within the frame of possibility, in order to begin opening access to what lingers in the cut between the subject and its deconstruction, the virtualities of (European) Man and their others. I'm interested in the objectivity of slave narrative and in the knowledge of language and freedom contained there, and within which, if we linger longer than Judy is willing, we might commit an action.

So, this is the introduction to an essay for some narratives, or more precisely, for some passages in some narratives. It's an essay for a kind of narrative and its recitation, the kind that would be adequate to slavery. The narrative that must be recited is of, among other things, deprivation: deprivation of, among other things, the apparatuses of narrative construction such that such recitation will seem only to have taken place by way of other apparatuses benevolently given—which is to say violently imposed—by the one who took you and your ability to tell, your ability to tell and your ability to know, your ability to tell and to know in the interest of that which you would know or would have known—namely, freedom—in a way that is other than simply negative. How to tell the story of a rupture that has broken the ability to tell, and how to have that telling be free and be in the interest of freedom? As William Andrews might put it, this essay is for the telling of a free story.

What I want to get at is that that telling must be situated at a frontier, on the border that is the condition of possibility of “the law of genre” (Derrida 1980, 52). Such a telling must simultaneously fulfill and exceed the generic responsibilities of narrative, must be both *récit* and recitation. It must move through and reorient the paradoxical space-time of “foreshadowing description,” thereby exhibiting that which, because of its material access to presents that are no longer or that have not yet been, might have been called “ecstatic temporality” (52). This telling must also occupy the space of a frontier between narrative and rationalization, between narrative and the theory of narrative, between narrative and the improvisation of its discourse and of its story, and above all, of its subjectivity and of what that subjectivity knows, and of what that subjectivity is both constituted and capable. This telling must also be situated on the frontier at which “Man” is improvised. I'm interested in how the free story that forms the paradoxically

anarchic ground of the black radical tradition will have rationalized that conception of “Man,” improvising through its exclusionary force and toward a notion of agency that allows a fundamental reconstitution of both the methods and the objects of ethics, epistemology, and ontology. With regard to this last formulation, one must see how this telling lies at the frontier of, or in the cut between, singularity and totality, between the unlocatable origin and as yet unlocalized end of their mutual philosophical and politico-economic systematization.

When I say that we must improvise notions of genre and of narrative; and that we must descend into the rhythmic break between “foreshadowing” and “description,” rather than treat their oxymoronic linkage as a fateful and convenient bridge that erases itself in its presencing of origination and destination; and that we must honor and extend—by way of improvisation—the black radical tradition’s ongoing improvisation of “Man,” knowing full well the danger of a kind of negative reification such a distancing romance holds; and that we must venture a continued movement out-from-outside of a range of conventional philosophical and historical understandings embedded in the oppositional relation of singularity and totality—I’m thinking of, and hopefully through, a certain pivotal moment in the tradition that marks the intersection of these tasks and their unfulfillment, the event of their dis/appropriation. In the epilogue to *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison writes: “Our fate is to become one and yet many—This is not prophecy, but description.” The impasse this impossible fate represents, and the unresolvable caesura this passage is and contains (and implicit here is an argument for the profoundly generative and regenerative force of this phrasing—which is less and more than a sentence, less and more than a proposition—its ability to spawn negations and affirmations of itself that hold prominence in the contemporary extension of that strain of the tradition in which social development is foregrounded), marks a need to know some things again, as if for the first time, about knowledge and (language and their relation to) freedom. So what I’m interested in, here, is freedom and the relationship of certain narratives of slavery to the question of freedom, not only in the historical context in which they were written, but in the no-less-desperate context of our fiercely urgent now. Mary Prince, Ellen Butler, Olaudah

Equiano, and Uncle Toliver know something—narratives and understandings of narrative and understandings of the relation between narrative and freedom—that we need to know. What I’m after, among other things, is the question of where that knowledge comes from, and the im/possibilities and theoretical and political problems regarding our access to its source.

Ellison’s meditation on the one and the many is one of a seemingly infinite set of such formulations within and across a great range of traditions, all of which, as members of that set (and as participants in the logic of Set), operate in or take the form of a mis/chance or im/possibility. That set, Set, “exists”—if we are allowed to speak of the existence of mathematico-metaphysical objects—at a threshold at which it is necessary, yet seems unfathomable, to imagine a phenomenology of totality and singularity that would reveal some opening of the possibility of political agency, of another mode of organization unopposed to freedom. That phenomenology would have to provide a sense—neither sensible nor intelligible (more than sensible, more than intelligible)—of a whole not bound by the interminable oscillation of systemic relation and nonrelation. Such a phenomenology would move beyond the endless and always asymmetrical tension between individual and society, or self and other; finally, it would move beyond any ontological formulation of, and in, difference that displaces the whole and leaves us at the site of a discursive contest of infinite curvature where our reality never escapes the forces power exerts over responsibility and in/determination exerts over improvisation.

That phenomenology and its object, whose interanimation I call *ensemble*—the improvisation of and through the opposition of totality and singularity in and as a descent into the generative cut between description and prescription—must, therefore, faithfully reclaim the honor of the whole, an honor which is real only within the complex, radical, and realist attention and devotion we pay to the world. It is, to sample a phrase often repeated by Derrida, both a scandal and a chance—a peculiarly vexed burden and responsibility, an enabling disability—that the performance of that devotion in the black radical tradition must move through the Enlightenment tradition and, importantly, through that tradition’s allegiance to the active misprision of singularity and totality: phenomena certain tendencies within

poststructuralism both critique and extend in the analysis and affirmation of the always already multiple essence of singularity that is embedded in the ontological and epistemological questioning of totality. Indeed, the theory of ensemble is enabled by the tradition of singularist and differentiated thinking of the whole it extends and improvises, most particularly as that tradition—at its heretofore highest level of intensity and internal tension—begins to be articulated through calls either for its dissolution or its continuance in the impossible language prompted by the incommensurable conjunction of community and difference. In short, the possibility of a nonexclusionary whole is opened by the most radical critiques—those of identitarian politico-aesthetic thought in addition to those of poststructuralism—of any prior holism.

The point, here, is that those critiques which pay descriptive and prescriptive attention to singularity and totality while responsibly confronting the horrific effects of singularist totalization must be acknowledged and assimilated. But the fact that they offer only choked and strained and silenced articulations of the whole—that which allows our aspirations for equality, justice, freedom—means they must be improvised. The various discourses that are informed by identity theories open the possibility for such improvisation in their directions toward other philosophical or anti-philosophical or ante-philosophical modes of thought and representation. But it is precisely in the thought of the other, the hope for another subjectivity and an other ontology, that the metaphysical foundations and antilibertarian implications of the politico-philosophical tradition to which identity theories attempt to respond are replicated and deepened. Improvisation—and thus the possibility of describing and activating an improvisational whole—is thereby foreclosed. I want to offer here another chorus of ensemble—by way of what/whom you'll come to know as *Uncle Toliver*—as something out-from-outside, other than the other or the same, something unbound by their relation or nonrelation, and situated at an opening onto the site of the intersection of the knowledge of language (as prayer, curse, narrative [*récit* or recitation]) and the knowledge of freedom (as both a negative function of the experience of oppression and the trace of an “innate endowment that serves to bridge the gap between experience and knowledge . . .”). (Chomsky 1986, xxv-xxvi)

A passage¹ from Leon Litwack's *Been in the Storm So Long*:

In Nansemond County, Virginia, a slave known as Uncle Toliver had been indiscreet enough to pray aloud for the Yankees. The master's two sons ordered him to kneel in the barnyard and pray for the Confederacy. But this stubborn old man prayed even louder for a Yankee triumph. With growing exasperation, perhaps even bewilderment, the two sons took turns in whipping him until finally the slave, still murmuring something about the Yankees, collapsed and died. (Litwak 1979, 30)

This passage improvises tradition/s. In *Been in the Storm So Long*—which is at once more than text, more than literary and/or historical—and in the singular icon of that work I'll continue to offer to you, an icon that inhabits and exhibits all the senses of the word “passage,” and whose content is precisely that of an improvisatory whole, there is that which the Enlightenment's differentiated, Euro-phallo-centric, ontologically determined and necessarily and narrowly literate rational subject and the critiques of that subject which work in the name of an other differentiation preface but never approach: the voicing and revoicing of ensemble. This text/passage/voicing is, if you will, an autobiography of ensemble, one that moves from thought through what Levinas calls an “ethical saying” to the possibility of ethical action that *we* must activate.² The essence of that ethics is mediation, the *ensemblic* mediation of improvisation, which is not arrested in or by the passage, (dis)appropriative event, or death of the individual body, and which, as such, is not held within the determination of any (impossible) exclusively singularized agency.

Mediation is material to this passage and opens a number of possibilities. There is a reading that would argue that the passage is dependent upon a name whose honor oscillates between decidability and undecidability, whose referent is lost to us—a voice given but dangerously supplemented by voicings and revoicings. There is another reading that would see Litwack's mediational stance as an extension of the material oppression and suppression of Uncle Toliver's originarily oppositional voicing, one that can only hope to reintegrate it with a tradition which is the locus and effect of a

historical decision *not* to hear Uncle Toliver's other subjectivity, to distort that subjectivity's self-expression and self-reflection. What I'd like to argue, however, is that one might also think of the problematic of our necessarily mediated access to the discourse of Uncle Toliver and begin to imagine the immense ethics of mediation and the move away from the illusory ideal of an immediate presentation of our history that that history demands. For it is within this ethics—which is, ultimately, the ethics of ensemble—that mediation is neither the silence of Uncle Toliver (the absence or differentiated iteration of a simple and ordinary singularist subjectivity or an iconically presented collective one) nor Uncle Toliver's silencing (the suppression of an other subjectivity, whether singular or collective): it is, rather, the improvisational voice of the ensemble that is *Uncle Toliver*.

Here we have a narrative that simply could be placed within a differentiated Afro-diasporic expressive cultural tradition that will have been predominantly marked as a tradition of the end, a "vicious modernism" always already at the limit of the disaster, a remarking of the worst as a particular suspended repetition or long continuance, the interminable discourse of the slave, the paradoxically open vernacular. It is a *literary* tradition in all the in/determinate sense of Derrida's sense of the word. That is to say it is, finally, something more than literary, more than philosophical, more even than its "least inadequate name"—autobiographical. Most importantly, it is a tradition of the something more that holds all the material force of Uncle Toliver's thinking. Hear where Derrida speaks and *Uncle Toliver* is written (1992, 34).

So there was a movement of nostalgic, mournful lyricism to reserve, perhaps encode, in short to render both accessible and inaccessible. And deep down this is still my most naïve desire. I don't dream of either a literary work or a philosophical work, but that everything that occurs, happens to me or fails to, should be as it were sealed (placed in reserve, hidden so as to be kept, and this in its very signature, really like a signature, in the very form of the seal, with all the paradoxes that traverse the structure of a seal). The discursive forms we have available to us, the resources in terms of objectivizing archivation, are so much poorer than what happens (or what fails to happen, whence the excesses of hyper-totalization). This desire for everything + n—

naturally I can analyze it, “deconstruct” it, criticize it, but it is an experience that I love, that I know and recognize. (Derrida 1992, 35)



. . . literature seemed to me, in a confused way, to be the institution which allows one to *say everything*, in *every way*. . . To say everything is no doubt to gather, by translating, all figures into one another, to totalize by formalizing, but to say everything is also to break out of [*franchir*] prohibitions. To *affranchise oneself* [*s'affranchir*]*—*in every field where law can lay down the law. The law of literature tends to deny or lift the law. It therefore allows one to think the essence of the law in the experience of this “everything to say.” It is an institution which tends to overflow the institution. (Derrida 1992, 36)

Everything can be said, though said otherwise, with a difference, and therefore nothing can be said, for everything *must* be said otherwise, with a difference: the vernacular, where literature and slavery—those institutions strange and peculiar—converge, is where everything and nothing can be said; the vernacular, where name is given to the worst and to the other, and what is given is renounced; the vernacular, where everything + n(othing) is named, where everything + n(othing) is said. The tradition of Uncle Toliver, the tradition of what is thought to be the intensest critical naiveté, is what Derrida desires. It is not the tradition of the vernacular, of an other name, an other subjectivity, a hypertotalization, nor is it to be figured in the convergence of singularities, the iterative set (though it's closer to what is instantiated by the law of genre, an invagination, the formation of what is larger than the whole) (Derrida 1980, 55). Uncle Toliver's tradition, the black radical tradition, our tradition, is the tradition of ensemble, a revolutionary Enlightenment tradition, something more than *Aufklärung* (and more than *Lichtung*, their opposition or their synthesis), where the n(othing) is uncoaled. If one reads within a thinking that keeps faith with the whole, one notes the rhythms of improvisation and the sound of ensemble—their revelation of the inadequacy of the in/determinate, the same, the other. This is the attention *Uncle Toliver* demands.

Such attention is required in part because of the place of Litwack in *Uncle Tolver*. Litwack's decision to enter the discourse that is of, and transcends, the vernacular expresses a commitment to nonexclusionary universality that is tantamount to a formulation of identity. That identity is given in its improvisational materiality by a more-than-deconstructive expansion of the understanding of universal humanity such that those who, like Uncle Tolver, have been excluded from prior understandings of humanity because of ontological and/or cultural and/or biological determinations that are also a part of the Enlightenment's legacy—and whose exclusions have been the iterative irruption of those determinations—participate in the formation of that understanding. Litwack's identity becomes—in the dissemination of *Uncle Tolver*—the identity of Uncle Tolver. That identity requires that thought of the whole that moves through differentiating notions of identity.

But this is a simple passage, one designed to provide some sense of the violent imposition of silence that marks slavery and will have marked every disaster, every violent assault on or ritual destruction of the whole. We might gather from this simple recounting, this simple “objectivizing archivation,” that slavery is that institution—violent and ritual dehumanization is that event—wherein nothing can be said, whereof nothing can be said, which arrives for us, even now, enveloped in the silence that accompanies the absence of specificity, the lack of an immediate resonance. But to speak here of simplicity—of a text, a passage, that tells, simply, the barest story and unearths, simply, the smallest remnant of a life that gives us, simply, an indication of the nature of a mode of being—is a matter that is, of course, not so simple. The passage, which can only be called “Uncle Tolver,” is more than a subject and more than a text; and its transmission of the whole of *Uncle Tolver* to us is far from simple. It arrives through various arrangements of the story of Uncle Tolver, the story of a man who could not tell his story as a matter of law, and as a matter of the materiality of his life and death. But the mediation that gives us that story does not obscure the position and situation spoken through his silence. It is spoken so profoundly that the entirety of the Enlightenment tradition and its critical other is invoked, reopened, revised, improvised. The mediated and reconstructed voicing of the slave speaks through the vernacular and for freedom. The mediated and

reconstructed voice of a man held as property arrives to us as a critique of Property. As the passage arrives once more, hear again its simplicity in a repetition that serves to further obliterate (obliterate) that simplicity: the subject, the text—that which is more than the person and more than the text—of *Uncle Toliver* haunts and infuses us.

In Nansemond County, Virginia, a slave known as Uncle Toliver had been indiscreet enough to pray aloud for the Yankees. The master's two sons ordered him to kneel in the barnyard and pray for the Confederacy. But this stubborn old man prayed even louder for a Yankee triumph. With growing exasperation, perhaps even bewilderment, the two sons took turns in whipping him until finally the slave, still murmuring something about the Yankees, collapsed and died.

How is this strange arrival possible? What is its significance for us today in the midst of an attempt to provide a desperately needed re/presentation of liberation within an argument for the necessity of something other than either a rejection of, or an indifference to, or a convergence with the (old or given) Enlightenment?

Ensemble, *figured in and improvised through the ethical mediation of the Enlightenment's critical opening of the whole*, is the improvisation of the singular identities of Litwack and Uncle Toliver, and the totality which is generated by lingering in the music that airily fills the space between them. They speak in ensemble and are written there in a moment at which we are given, through the mediation of improvisation, the whole of the history of the whole, and the whole of the history of singularist (and differentiated) totalizations of the whole. *Uncle Toliver* is, once more, the autobiography of ensemble and the history of an ensemble voicing and agency; it is not the recording of a differentiated, repressed, and oppressed ego by another ego in search of affirmation. *Uncle Toliver* is the reality which invocations of naive and idiomatic writing, or calls for a voicing-towards-agency, or overlordly assertions of the whole only imagine within the inevitable return to the best and worst of the Enlightenment that poststructuralism and identity politics must make. *Uncle Toliver* prepares the ground for the real formulation of a

more than discursive ethics; we are propelled toward that view of the world that allows our knowledge of the passage, a view that demands a particular way of being in the world. In other words, our attention to ensemble, as it exists in and as *Uncle Toliver*, activates and improvises—keeps faith with—ensemble. It is an attention that will have always *moved through* the interminable attention to differentiating singularity or homogenizing totality that has always foreclosed the possibility of a genuine agency. Agency is in the tradition of *Uncle Toliver*.

Uncle Toliver's narrative is part of a chain of recitation that moves from a never fully unveiled originary encounter to the specter of an impossible encounter to come, the encounter in the future that would mark the impossible justice of a strange, oppositional resolution. But the oppositional resolution that the bridge or passage would mark falls before its own form. Descent, not oscillation; descent, not the asymmetrical tensions and reemergent subjectivities of a gaze; descent, as in the future resonances of variations of an unknown tongue.

We'll get to that, come back to that, recite that, by way of Equiano, the one whose ambiguous relationship or durative encounter with European Man is embedded in the more refined naiveté of a narrative whose intensity must survive the transgressions of a more genuinely predatory mediation. In that ambiguity lies the shadow of the master that produces and obscures a certain paradox concerning the knowledge of freedom, knowledge that seems to be embedded in the interrelation of certain determinations of literacy and subjectivity that stem from—and are thus never *fully* to be activated against—the master. Equiano's literacy, and the subjectivity to which it is tied, is causally linked both to his freedom and his enslavement, connected as it is both to his resistance toward, and the "benevolence" of, some of those who owned him.³ How are these paradoxes or ambiguities to be written? Indeed, is the text not the manifestation and, as Judy might argue, the captive of these ambiguities, which are the function of a too uncritical adherence to the Enlightenment? To enter into this language is precisely to transgress a boundary that the language marks, on the border and at sea, where the ethics of mediation is played out at a different locus and in a different register. Every word, every sentence, every anecdote—the narrative

itself—constitute a representation of the durative encounter that prompts, enforces, and allows that representation in the first place. Here are four variations on the theme of (that) encounter.

I

Two passages:

The first object that saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slave ship, which was then riding at anchor, and waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment, that was soon converted into terror, which I am yet at a loss to describe, and much more the then feelings of my mind when I was carried on board. I was immediately handled and tossed up to see if I was sound, by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had got into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me. Their complexion too, differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language they spoke, which was very different from any I had ever heard, united to confirm me in this belief. Indeed such were the horrors of my views and fears at the moment, that if ten thousand worlds had been my own, I would freely have parted with them all to have exchanged my condition with the meanest slave in my own country. When I looked round the ship too, and saw a large furnace or copper boiling and a multitude of black people, of every description, chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted of my fate; and, quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck, and fainted. When I recovered a little, I found some black people about me, who I believed were some of those who brought me on board, and had been receiving their pay: they talked to me in order to cheer me, but all in vain. I asked them if we were not to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces, and long hair. They told me I was not: and one of the crew brought me a small portion of spiritous liquor in a wine glass; but, being afraid of him, I would not take it out of his hand. One of the blacks therefore took it from him and gave it to me, and I took a little down my palate, which, instead of reviving me, as they thought it would, threw me into the greatest consternation at the

strange feeling it produced, having never tasted any such liquor before.
(Equiano 1987, 32–33)



I was soon put down under the decks, and there received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life: so that, with the loathesomeness of the stench, and with my crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste anything. I now wished for the last friend, death, to relieve me; but soon, to my grief, two of the white men offered me eatables; and, on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands, and laid me across, I think, the windlass, and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely. I had never experienced anything of this kind before, and although, not being used to the water, I naturally feared that element the first time I saw it, yet nevertheless, could I have got over the nettings, I would have jumped over the side . . . (33–34)

The ship is the emblem of the encounter, the originary site of abjection, of the production or evocation of a shuddering affect that is quickly conceptualized in/as the mark of the aural and visual differences encoded in language and complexion.⁴ This initial encounter remains. It is durative, domesticated or inhabited in representation. It remains in every passage of the text, in the text's representation of the act of passage. Part of what the encounter generates in Equiano is a fear of being eaten, terror which is shaped by prior experience in the culture of his origin in which food is given a double status—sustenance and (possibly) poison—and is thus to be regarded warily.⁵ The young Equiano is scared of being consumed, and though he is not eaten by the white men, certainly he is consumed by the ship, situated within its bowels, swallowed by and radically drawn into the economy the ship symbolizes and instantiates, and incorporated into the dialectic of recognition that is initiated by the encounter and its originary abjectification. But this description of abjection foreshadows an emergent resistance. In that emergence, Equiano embodies a reversal of the *pharmakon*, opening and marking the possibility of a contamination of what consumes him—a re-sounding

and re-vision of the aural-visual assumptions and structure of European Man and his self-image. The abject, force-fed child takes poison for medicine while being taken, as poison, for sustenance.

I I

Two passages:

It was now between two and three years since I first came to England, a great part of which I had spent at sea; so that I became mured to that service, and began to consider myself as happily situated; for my master treated me always extremely well; and my attachment and gratitude to him were great. From the various scenes I had beheld on ship-board, I soon grew a stranger to terror of every kind, and was, in that respect at least, almost an Englishman. I have often reflected with surprise that I never felt half the alarm, at any of the numerous dangers in which I have been, that I was filled with at the first sight of the Europeans, and at every act of theirs, even the most trifling, when I first came among them, and for sometimes afterwards. That fear, however, the effect of my ignorance, wore away as I began to know them.

I could now speak English tolerably well, and perfectly understood every thing that was said. I not only felt myself quite easy with these new countrymen, but relished their society and manners. I no longer looked upon them as spirits, but as men superior to us; and therefore I had the stronger desire to resemble them, to imbibe their spirit, and imitate their manners. I therefore embraced every occasion of improvement; and every new thing that I observed I treasured up in my memory. I had long wished to be able to read and write; and for this purpose I took every opportunity to gain instruction, but had made as but very little progress. However, when I went to London with my master, I had soon an opportunity of improving myself, which I gladly embraced. Shortly after my arrival, he sent me to wait upon the Miss Guerins, who had treated me with so much kindness when I was there before, and they sent me to school. (51-52)

There was also one Daniel Queen, about forty years of age, a man very well educated, who messed with me on board this ship, and he likewise dressed and attended the captain. Fortunately this man soon became very much attached to me, and took great pains to instruct me in many things. He taught me to shave, and dress hair a little, and also to read in the Bible, explaining many passages to me, which I did not comprehend. I was wonderfully surprised to see the laws and rules of my own country written almost exactly here; a circumstance which, I believe, tended to impress our manners and customs more deeply on my memory. I used to tell him of this resemblance; and many a time we have set up the whole night together at this employment. In short, he was like a father to me; and some used even to call me after his name; they also styled me “the black Christian.” Indeed I almost loved him with the affection of a son. Many things I have denied myself, that he might have them; and when I used to play at marbles or any other game, and won a few halfpence, or got some money for shaving any one, I used to buy him a little sugar or tobacco, as far as my stock of money would go. He used to say that he and I never should part, and that when ship was paid off, as I was as free as himself or any other man on board, he would instruct me in his business, by which I might gain a livelihood. This gave me new life and spirits; and my heart burned within me, while I thought the time long till I obtained my freedom. For though my master had not promised it to me, yet, besides the assurances I had often received that he had no right to detain me, he always treated me with the greatest kindness, and reposed in me an unbounded confidence. He even paid attention to my morals; and would never suffer me to deceive him, or tell lies, of which he used to tell me the consequences; and that if I did do, God would not love me. So that from all this tenderness I had never once supposed, in all my dreams of freedom, that he would think of detaining me any longer than I wished. (63–64)

The encounter remains in the memory of abjection and terror, an ineradicable and inconsumable trace even and especially in the context of the desire to resemble the one who’d once been feared. The paradox of freedom resurfaces in the fact of the abjectifying desire for and impossibility of resemblance. There is the illusion of resemblance—between the laws and

rules of Equiano's country of origin and those written in the Bible (a paradoxically divergent coalescence about which more later)—but that illusion is disappeared by the split between the theory and practice of Christianity; and in the absence of either an aural resemblance (a sound that is an absolute sounding-like; the absence of accent) or a visual resemblance (effect of some magical phenotypical transfiguration), resemblance must be reformulated and relocated by and in Equiano's relation to language—to tone, grammar, and the *written* mark. Resemblance is to be made manifest in literacy, that which would become the mark of the same, the “universal,” the “human.”

Equiano's overcoming of terror corresponds, then, with a desire for resemblance that is enacted in his virtual acquisition of English(ness). The ability to speak, read, and write English “tolerably well” is connected to an ability no longer to look on white men as spirits; instead, he looks on them as superior men and wishes to resemble them, to “imbibe their spirits and imitate their manners.” (This opens, of course, the possibility of a kind of intoxication, and reintroduces the motif of consumption and the notion of *pharmakon* that goes along with it; this notion of intoxication is bound up with the possibility of transportation or ecstasy, and this imbibing of the spirit returns, along with the motif of consumption, during Equiano's conversion [again, about which more later], prompted by his attendance at a “soul-feast” at which nothing material was eaten or drunk, and at which the entire complex of metaphors regarding consumption approaches resolution.)⁶ Equiano “therefore embraced every occasion of improvement,” many of which were afforded him by the Misses Guerin who taught him to read and also were responsible for his baptism, thereby foreshadowing the resolution of a dialectical motion from the white man as inhabiting the interstitial identity between God and Man, to the white man as superior man or lord to the Lord. Nevertheless, there is a certain reconstruction of language, a certain refusal to understand, that is embedded in the desire, *manifest in the re-citation*, to move from the abject to the same. It is a desire for “self-improvement” through the knowledge of language that is, again, wholly within the frame of the encounter. Equiano must be given this opportunity

by the one by whom he is taken. He depends upon random kindnesses and gifts: enter the Misses Guerin, who offer Equiano the gift of (their) language; his profit, of course, is the ability to curse. Again, one might reconfigure this ability: as a mode of resistance, disabling the language, making it halt or limp or move unreliably for—which is to say against—its framers; as an infiltration or improvisation of the language, a contamination or an improvement, if you will, of that with which one would have been improved. The problem, though, is that even this reversal of improvement is doubled by another kind of fall: one learns to curse when before, in Africa, one had had neither the need nor the tools “to pollute the name of the object of our adoration. . . .” (20)

Nevertheless, this reversal, the improvisation of improvement, is what must occur in the absence of any absolute mimesis. The accent remains—like the trace of the encounter—as the sound-alike is re-sounded. The written shifts uncontrollably; the letter moves. That movement is not the authentic difference of (the) African/Experience, a difference constitutive of the maintenance of the dialectic of recognition in the discourse of abolition, and manifest in prefaces which, in an attempt to figuratively confirm an imagined and already written/canonized otherness, speak of “round, unvarnished tale[s],” thereby betraying the inability to read Equiano except through the image of Othello, the phantasmatically stylized other whose self-deprecation conceals an intoxicating and sexually transgressive and predatory linguistic power, or in reviews that would vouch for the narratives’ authenticity in spite of the artful mediation of some European editor which, finally, *must* have been there.⁷ And, of course, one must remember that racial codes and biologically determined boundaries would always have served to mark the absolute boundary between the races, even as the consumptive sexual appetites of the European (man) takes to itself that impurity against which it so zealously guards.⁸ Note, then, the echoes of Shakespeare’s construction of the colonized, enslaved, or racialized other with which Equiano is determined, and which he is determined to resemble: paradigmatic oppositional attitudes toward and within the white man and his language (and his daughter).

I I I

Three passages:

In pursuance of our orders we sailed from Portsmouth for the Thames, and arrived at Deptford the 10th of December, where we cast our anchor just as it was high water. The ship was up about half an hour, when my master ordered the barge to be manned; and, all in an instant, without having before given me the least reason to suspect any thing of the matter, he forced me into the barge, saying, I was going to leave him, but he would take care that I did not. I was so struck with the unexpectedness of this proceeding, that for some time I did not make a reply; only I made an offer to go for my books and clothes, but he swore I should not move out of his sight; and if I did, he would cut my throat, at the same time taking out his hanger. I began, however, to collect myself; and, plucking up courage, I told him that I was free, and he could not by law serve me so. But this only enraged him the more; and he continued to swear, and said he would soon let me know whether he would or not and at that instant sprung himself into the barge, from the ship, to the astonishment and sorrow of all on board. (64–65)



But, just as we had got a little below Gravesend, we came alongside of a ship going away the next tide for the West-Indies; her name was the Charming Sally, Captain James Doran. My master went on board and agreed with him for me; and in little time I was sent for into the cabin. When I came there Captain Doran asked me if I knew him; I answered I did not; ‘Then,’ said he, you are now my slave.’ I told him my master could not sell me to him nor to anyone else. ‘Why,’ said he, ‘did not your master buy you?’ I confessed he did. ‘But I have served him,’ said I, ‘many years, and he has taken all my wages and prize-money, for I only got one sixpence during the war. Besides this I have been baptized; and, by the laws of the land, no man has a right to sell me.’ And I added, that I had heard a lawyer, and others, at different times tell my master so. They both then said, that those people who told me so, were not my friends; but I replied—it was very extraordinary that other

people did not know the law as well as they. Upon this, Captain Doran said I talked too much English, and if I did not behave myself well and be quiet, he had a method on board to make me. I was too well convinced of his power over me to doubt what he said; and my former sufferings in the slave-ship presenting themselves to my mind, the recollection of them made me shudder. However, before I retired I told them, that as I could not get any right among men here, I hoped I should hereafter in Heaven, and I immediately left the cabin, filled with resentment and sorrow. (65)



Thus, at the moment I expected all my toils to end, was I plunged into, as I supposed, a new slavery; in comparison of which all my service hitherto had been perfect freedom; and whose horrors, always present to my mind, now rushed on it with tenfold aggravation. I wept bitterly for some time; and began to think that I must have done something to displease the Lord, that he punished me so severely. This filled me with painful reflections on my past conduct. I recollected that, on the morning of our arrival at Deptford, I had very rashly sworn that as soon as we reached London, I would spend the day in rambling and sport. My conscience smote me for this unguarded expression: I felt that the Lord was able to disappoint me in all things, and immediately considered my present situation as a judgment of Heaven, on account of my presumption in swearing. (66)

Equiano tells of a lessening of the original terror of the encounter, and that telling can be construed as the mark of the submergence of any possible resistance, and a capitulation to an oppressive Eurocentric model of self-measure and self-fashioning. The absence of terror is connected to Equiano's relation to the ship, which is the locus of his sense of himself as (virtual) Englishman, the site of a delicate shift from the phantasm of consumption to the fantasy of assimilation. But, as we see, his status on board the ship must have a double implication, and a resistant, improvisatory, asyntagmatic use of language occurs at the very moment that the virtuality of his Englishness is again unconcealed, namely in the reemergent encounter with

the other—the redoubled image of another consuming ship—that corresponds to his sale; this is the moment at which it becomes clear that the absence of terror was a finite deferral, and not an erasure. The other side of that implication is also indexed to his virtuality as an Englishman, a virtuality that leads to the first of his many ineffectual appeals to the law. These appeals signify not only the juridical difference between himself and the English, but the impotence of the law with respect to freedom, on the one hand, and salvation on the other. Finally, the law pales in comparison to a certain kind of knowledge (more precisely, faith, though we'll see that neither faith nor law work in opposition to the other) that is bound up with the improvisation of a future state, one indexed to both freedom and salvation. Part of what Equiano's text demands that we confront are the questions of the relation between the knowledge of freedom and the knowledge of salvation, and of what these have to do with the knowledge of language and the knowledge of the Lord.

So, the double of Equiano's narrative of his original encounter with his other is the story of his first being sold. This sale comes just as Equiano has begun to believe he will finally obtain his freedom. Equiano's sale is seen by him as the result of the unguarded expression of emotion. Still, though unguarded expression—namely, cursing—produces negative effects, those effects can be warded off by another form of unguarded expression: a pouring out of the soul, with unfeigned repentance and contrition of heart. Earnest prayer relieves Equiano: “In a little time my grief, spent with its own violence, began to subside; and after the first confusion of my thoughts was over, I reflected with more calmness on my present condition” (67). It's as if the opposing profuse strains of unpremeditated expression cancel one another out and are replaced by reasoned reflection and the possibility of a kind of redemption.⁹

Mediating between curse and prayer is the moment of an improvisatory contamination of the oppressor's language, the encounter in which Equiano “talked too much English.” That impasse between imitative and resistant uses of the language is itself marked by an interruptive logical displacement such that, at the very moment at which it would seem we have a resistant encounter to valorize, we must also see that that encounter is the emergence

of an interruption of the encounter as such, an interruption made possible by Equiano's knowledge of freedom. When Captain Doran asks Equiano if he knew him, he seems to imply that Equiano ought to have some prior knowledge, a certain ante-metaphysical bondsman's understanding or competence, that would allow him to recognize Doran. The self-recognition that would emerge in Doran by way of Equiano's affirmative answer is interrupted, however, and in that deferral Doran must bestow upon Equiano a moment of self-recognition, a moment that would let Equiano know who and what he is so that Doran's identity can be confirmed. "You are now my slave," says Doran; but here, recognition is missed again. Though Doran's utterance would be performative, as if in the face of Equiano's failure (or refusal) to recognize his new master, Doran hopes to instantiate, by speaking, their relative statuses: you are now, in the deferring absence of your immediate recognition of this fact and of what it implies about our identities, my slave *because I say so*. Still, in the interruptive absence of the immediate knowledge of his condition and of his identity vis-à-vis Captain Doran, another knowledge is implied: precisely that knowledge which animates Equiano's resistant speech. The "too much English" that Equiano talks is a function of the too little English he talks at the moment in which his response is supposed to establish the identities of lord and bondsman. When Equiano responds, answering that he did not know Captain Doran, that he did not recognize the master or his mastery, that he did not know himself to be this master's slave, he lays claim to that knowledge in his expression of it. Not to know what Captain Doran would have him know is not to know nothing.

Of course, this moment of misrecognition—at which the condition of possibility of a renaissance of resistance is revealed—is shadowed by another recognition. One lord is denied, but another Lord is affirmed as the author of Equiano's misfortunes. Here, swearing and resistant response, a stated intention to carouse, and an oppositional legal assertion of independence are connected precisely in the fact that that legalistic assertion of independence is, more precisely, a declaration of in/dependence contingent upon the mediating effects of an already extant ownership. Lordship and lordship return in and as one another's figures, and at moments of resistant or unguarded expression, moments which both constitute a kind of devolution of their

originary animus, like the “I answered I didn’t know” that marks the negative assertion of the trace of the knowledge of freedom. The question, of course, of the origin of that trace is vexed and, perhaps, impossible. Embedded in that question, however, is a possible improvisation of the very idea of the lord in its relation/opposition to the bondsman. That improvisation, emerging at the site of another question concerning the language of improvisatory resistance’s origin, in which the knowledge of freedom is expressed, is one to which we’ll return by way of the theorization of Ellen Butler, a theorization which anticipates the improvisation of another consciousness, moving out-from-the-outside, that the oppositions of lord and bondsman, Lord and bondsman, curse and prayer allow us only to imagine.

I V

One thinks again and often, in an inevitable return, of the image/figure of the ship in the narrative: the proliferation of the gaze to and from the ship in Equiano, all determined to a certain extent by his first encounter with it. The ship is never not the figure of consumption and containment, and is never to be thought outside of an original determination as the embodiment of the white man. Note, then, Freeman Equiano, impatient with the ship he was on at the time for taking on too much water, again expressing himself unguardedly: “Damn the vessel’s bottom out!” Of course, his “conscience instantly smote [him] for the expression” (108); but we are led to believe repentance was ineffectual, for the ship—described as transfixed, fascinated, abject, and productive of abjection—soon founders on the rocks. The fear and horror that transfixion or encounter produces reconstitutes and reconfigures the terror Equiano felt as a child, and to which he claims to have grown a stranger; the terror that the ship once held, and which had shifted to a terror of being transferred from one ship (and its correspondent comfort and identification with one’s “original” captor) to another, becomes a terror in being torn away from the ship as such. “All my sins stared me in the face [another abject encounter or transfixion]; and especially I thought that God had hurled his direful vengeance on my guilty head, for cursing the vessel on which my life depended” (109). We must think what it means to

curse the ship, to curse what is figured and embodied by the ship, to curse that upon which one's life depends. Here, again, lie the problematics of the curse and the ship, and all in the midst of a development towards reflection, reason, "good English." The vessel or ship must somehow be maintained, and yet that ship's maintenance is to be figured within the thinking of a kind of contained sabotage, reworking, contamination, poisoning. The ship is that in which one must be contained, and yet what the ship contains must always itself contain the possibility of contamination, reversed encounter, returned gaze. Freeman Equiano returns to England and confronts his benevolent/master Captain Pascal: ". . . he appeared a good deal surprised, and asked me how I came back. I answered, 'In a ship.'" (122)

In the end, it is important to return to the most familiar theorization of the form of encounters such as those of Equiano. Again, the most familiar theorization of the form of this encounter is that which Frantz Fanon structures around his own answer to the question he asks in the midst of his long improvisation of Freud. Fanon asks: "What does the black man want?" He answers: "I had to meet the white man's eyes." According to Bhabha (1990), Fanon's answer signifies a desire for "the objectifying encounter with otherness." Is this paradoxically oppositional resolution what Equiano wants? This question is bound up with the subtle interplay between resistance and improvement, sentiment and thought, which comes to signify an oppositional development that is, itself, quite problematic. What is the relationship between the objectifying encounter that ruptures all identity and the knowledge of freedom certain narratives and their interruptions allow? The answer to this question might move us out from the outside that hybridity or double-consciousness represent.

What I'm after is a kind of knowledge that moves from somewhere on the other side of either reason or experience, intelligibility or sensibility, and that is not reducible to any originary state of nature but for that improvisation of the human which is neither the encoding of or embeddedness in responsibility, nor a given ethical tendency, but a predisposition to ensemble that moves through the originary distinctions between ethics, epistemology, and ontology. Ensemble can here be thought of as a rationalization of the social that is also a rationalization of rationalization itself. In addition

to joining Equiano and Uncle Toliver in a kind of displaced and displacing resistance at the intersection of knowledge, language (curse and prayer), and freedom, Mary Prince and Ellen Butler theorize or rationalize, or, we might even say, decolonize that resistance precisely in the way they propose a slide away from the proposition of encounter, a movement out of the normal exigencies of emergent and contained subjectivity as it is theorized in Fanon and extended in Bhabha. Mary Prince and Ellen Butler offer the theorization, writing, sounding, re-sounding, recitation, performance, rationalization, and improvisation of resistant practices, and of the social and of the human and of the out-from-the-outside subjectivity or agency which produces and which is those practices: ensemble.

Perhaps, in the light of the ensemble, the market, the open sea, the unstable zone of power and the resistance that calls it into being, the crucial links between baptism, liberation, and salvation, which are themselves linked to the questions of knowledge, freedom, salvation, and the identity or subjectivity they demand and allow, can be read. Recall that Equiano's encounter with Captain Doran is structured around a moment of misrecognition which forces him to remind Equiano of who he is, so that Equiano can play his part in a dialogic moment whose object is the establishment of Doran's own identity. Equiano refuses the terms of that confrontation in the complex moment of what I termed a declaration of in/dependence. The dependence at that declaration's heart is, in a sense deferred. What I'd like briefly to examine is its return. I'd like to think that return in terms of a certain transcendence, one in which Equiano moves from the refusal of an encounter with the lord to the acceptance of an encounter with the Lord. That return takes place during the time of Equiano's religious despair: a time at which he has come to know a certain separation of liberation from salvation; a time at which, it might be said, the strictures of a certain kind of subjectivity born in abjection and objection reemerge, overwhelming the subjectivity born in resistant apposition into which Equiano had never fully emerged. The moment at which Equiano both prompts and refuses the *lord's* determination of who he was is overtaken—in the midst of a desperate search for that certain knowledge of salvation which is somehow tied to the loss of that intensity which generates and regenerates the knowledge of freedom—by the active search

for the *Lord's* determination of who he was. (This search was urged upon him by a certain Mr. L—d, a clerk of the chapel wherein Equiano attends his first “soul-feast”—the site which replaces the ship as the locus of consumption and assimilation—in the following manner: “He then entreated me to beg of God *to shew me what I was and the true state of my soul*” [140; his emphasis].) This development carries with it the echo of that illusory absence of terror we came across earlier, one bound up with the slippage, in the traumatized mind of a child, from freedom to heaven (“While I was attending those ladies [the Miss Guerins], their servants told me I could not go to heaven, unless I was baptized. This made me very uneasy; for I had now some faint idea of a future state” [52]), a slippage enabled by a disabling and rupturous instruction (“[The Miss Guerins] often used to teach me to read and took great pains to instruct me in the principles of religion and the knowledge of God” [53]), and by the illusion of a virtual assimilation that leads to an inordinate faith in the law which, when proven to be unfounded, turns to a rigid differentiation of faith from law. Yet, at precisely the moment at which one would seem to be sliding inexorably towards the need for a rigorous critique and repudiation of the colonizing force of Western religion’s formulation of the subject’s provenance-in-abjection, one deferred by the refusal of the lord, but fulfilled in the acceptance of the Lord, the paradoxically anarchic principle of improvisational apposition returns—in the voices of Mary Prince and Ellen Butler—to raise again a fundamental question: What’s the relation between the knowledge of God (so deeply bound to heaven, the faint idea of a future state) and the knowledge of freedom (another, and one would hope more material, future state)? This question is also prompted by a certain intuition that the teaching of the Misses Guerin joined but did not erase or supersede the knowledge Equiano already had, and which Ellen Butler theorizes. That knowledge was always with him and activated, again, an improvisation of that with which he would have been improved.

For Equiano, the determination of the Lord and the securing of his future state are equivalent. They are bound to an adherence to a kind of fundamentalism which returns again and again in abolitionist writing as an appeal to Christians to live up to the principles of their religion as those principles

are written. There is, then, a pretty profound textualism embedded in Equiano's search that is manifest in his obsessive reading of the Bible; but I'd like to argue that that textualism is never disconnected from an impulse to confirm the knowledge that comes from a certain innate endowment—before the ethical, the epistemological, and the ontological—tempered and sharpened by the experience of profound deprivation. At this point, we might say that Equiano is given a revelation of a certain already extant knowledge—of freedom or of salvation (one given as the human, the other given by the Lord; one given in birth, the other given in rebirth)—though for him, liberation and salvation remain problematically differentiated. Therefore, for Equiano, “The word of God was sweet to my taste, yea sweeter than honey and the honeycomb” (143). We are still left in need of another rationalization of sweetness, and of the subject that generates and is generated by it.

Two passages:

After this, I fell ill again with the rheumatism, and was sick a long time; but whether sick or well, I had my work to do. About this time I asked my master and mistress to let me buy my own freedom. With the help of Mr. Burchell, I could have found the means to pay Mr. Wood; for it was agreed that I should afterwards serve Mr. Burchell a while, for the cash he was to advance for me. I was earnest in the request to my owners; but their hearts were hard—too hard to consent. Mrs. Wood was very angry—she grew quite outrageous—she called me a black devil, and asked me who had put freedom into my head. “*To be free is very sweet,*” I said [my emphasis]; but she took good care to keep me a slave. I saw her change colour, and I left the room. (Prince 1987, 208)



Marster neber 'low he slaves to go to chu'ch. Dey hab big holes out in de fiel's dey git down in and pray. Dey done dat way 'cause de white folks didn' want 'em to pray. Dey uster pray for freedom. I dunno how dey larn to pray, 'cause dey warn't no preachers come roun' to teach 'em. I reckon de Lawd jis' mek 'em know how to pray. (Mellon 1988, 190)

“To be free is very sweet.” Mary Prince says it twice; it is written for her twice, once in response to the question of how she—illiterate black devil—might possibly have known of freedom, and in interruption of her mistress’s reverse echo of the logic of the encounter between lord and bondsman that Captain Doran illustrates and Hegel theorizes, the other time as a part of the rhetorical (hear the echo of a certain *persuasion/sweetness*) climax she reaches in telling us that slaves were not happy (214).¹¹ Telling *us*, yes, because though we might be with her, we also wish to know, and cannot understand, how she could have known freedom in the absence of what we would recognize as the experience of freedom (if we suspend a kind of thinking that moves through what is imagined as a radical questioning of the very idea of experience). And our curiosity is, of course, anomalous given the knowledge we have of freedom that transcends any experience we will have had of it so far: any experience of “personal liberty,” any Lee Greenwood crescendo, any illusion of opportunity, any phantasm of accumulation, any etiolation of some either liberal or communitarian ethos.

The question is of the place of experience, of the projection or improvisation of experience: Is knowledge of freedom always knowledge of the experience of freedom, even when that knowledge precedes experience? If it is, something other than a phenomenology is required in order to know it, something other than a science of immediate experience, since this knowledge is highly mediated by deprivation and by mediation itself, and by a vast range of other actions directed toward the eradication of deprivation. Perhaps that knowledge is embedded in action toward that which is at once (and never fully) withdrawn and experienced. What this knowledge of freedom requires is an improvisation through the sensible and the intelligible, a working through the idiomatic differences between the modes of analysis which would valorize either over the other.

Indeed, Mary Prince requires something other than a reading, and the trace she bears is precisely that non-unitary trait that improvises through race and origin as the condition of the possibility of experience and knowledge, performance and competence, of freedom. This is just as the knowledge she has is something apposed but not opposed to the textual, and to the kind of subjectivity the textual allows without determining. This something other

than reading, this something other than the application of an unrationalized understanding of reason, this agency, is precisely what is exercised through Equiano in his quest for the knowledge of freedom and of God. And whence comes Uncle Toliver's prayer? Ellen Butler tells us, but her telling, her rationalizing, theorizing, improvising re-citation, is only in that it is mediated. Indeed, the rationalization of the resistance is in the disseminative effects of mediation. If so, Equiano's prayers and curses cannot be merely the products of the medicine/poison, bestowal/imposition of the narrative apparatuses of a violent other. And who or what is "de Lawd" to whom/which Ellen Butler refers, and what, if anything does "de Lawd" have to do with the Lord? Mary Prince addresses this question by way of the transcendental clue embedded in the displacing effects of a reply to her mistress that is *not* a reply to one who is *not* her mistress, to one who will have and will have never been, who could never be the mistress of another in and for whom the trace of an anarch(ron)ic freedom *of which that other has knowledge* awaits, resonates, augments, radiates.

The point is that in their *work*, Ellen Butler, Uncle Toliver, and Mary Prince evade the opposition we might figure around the imaginary poles of the readable Equiano and the unintelligible and illegible Ben Ali. They valorize neither literate, rational identity nor its destruction; neither curse nor simplistic prayer; neither material experience nor imaginative intellection; rather, they valorize ensemble, transmitted in the trace of whatever it is that one carries as human: a generative grammar and affect, a knowledge of language and freedom given by and as de Law/d, by and as the improvisational presence of justice.

Noam Chomsky and others have begun to frame the fundamental questions concerning knowledge of language as an innate endowment activated in the cut (between speech and writing, between inner and outer speech, between silence and sound, between competence and performance, in the interstice that is and engenders rhythm, generated anew and improvised throughout from the strange combination of experience and n[othing]). Knowledge of freedom is also in that cut or hiatus; it's where Mary Prince is—as if given by the mediating and improvisational force of de Law/d when that force is enacted in the improvised nonexclusionary expansion of

humanity. Ellen Butler's insight into our knowledge of prayer as a particular linguistic mode is also insight into our knowledge of freedom.

And Uncle Toliver's prayer—uttered in an unknown tongue, given aloud and transmitted through narrative mediation and through a citation and recitation in the rhythmic interstice where ensemble fell—is a citation (one given under the collective name of the Workers of the Writers' Program of the Works Project Administration in the State of Virginia) which Litwack names, reigns, showing the mark of that unnamed flowing in his *récit*, his recitation. But, again, Litwack's is not some predatory erasure, but the echo of that already extant loss inherent in intelligibility, translation, and transcription, whose presence is and allows the mediational "ethics" of ensemble. (Think of what is lost in the translation from Ellen Butler's "dialect" to "standard English": the constitutive cut that separates the Lord and de Law/d and is transformed but retained in the chain of re-citation that marks the writing of oral history.) *Uncle Toliver* is the gain and loss in this recording at the end of the chain of recitations which is history, and which here is extended at the end of a chain of narratives, of the kind of narrative wherein knowledge of freedom is given to us and for us. The constellation of these recitations and narratives is where Orwell's problem (how we know so little given so much evidence) and Plato's problem (how we know so much given so little evidence) intersect.¹² It's where the questions concerning the law of genre, the strange institution called literature (where the law is lifted, where everything can be said), and the peculiar institution called slavery (where nothing could be said as a matter of a law broken, and reconstituted in the breaking and reconstitution of the law of genre, and the law of the law of genre, and their intersection) converge.

One story told in Nansemond County concerns Uncle Toliver, who had the indiscretion to pray aloud. When rumor reached the great house that he had been praying for the Yankees, Tom and Henry, sons of the master, told the aged slave to kneel in the barnyard and pray for the Confederates. Uncle Toliver prayed as loud as he could for a Yankee victory. All day long they kept him there, taking turns in lashing him, but he would not give in. At last he collapsed, still praying, his voice a mumbled jargon. The only word that could

be distinguished was Yankee. Sometime that night, while they were still lashing him, Uncle Toliver died (*Negro in Virginia* 1994, 209).

So you pause at the recitation of lost names and the mumbled jargon where the rest of Uncle Toliver's utterance remains unheard. In the space that jargon opens (a space off to the side or out-from-the-outside; an appositional spacing or displacement of the encounter in the interest of a subjectivity whose presence remains to be activated; a space not determined by the zero encounter that ruptures the subject or the nostalgic return to an other subject before the encounter; a space where Uncle Toliver speaks through Tom and Henry—the sons of the master—and through the Workers of the Writers' Project of the Works Project Administration of the State of Virginia, and through Leon Litwak to us: piercing and possessing, disabling and enabling mediation and meditation) the rest is what is left for us to say, the rest is what is left for us to do, in the broad and various echoes of that utterance, our attunement to which assures us that we are “in the tradition.”



N O T E S

1. Passage: the emergent lingering (in descent, not suspension) of a rupture, *syncope*, rhythmic break or cut; a *middle* passage to another action, to another subjectivity, to the improvisation of ensemble.
2. It is, in this sense, an echoic but full articulation of what Jameson problematically points toward with the phrase “national allegory.” One can trace here without too much stretching the ways in which this tale works like that: the congruence of description and prescription, individual and society, a highly localized yet broadly focused grasp of social totality and, most importantly, a mode of resistance—a kind of resonance before resistance—that operates at the site of an improvisation through the opposition of interpretation and change. There's more to be said here, at the point where the question of enlightenment slips into the question of modernity. One thinks of Jameson's reading of Mallarmé, of what is read by him and others as the emergence of a certain written modernity in which the kind of intuitive holism that is implied by the constellation of terms like allegorical, mnemonic, iconic is rendered unavailable by the assertion of a notion of Literature which, in a paraphrase of Barbara Johnson's paraphrase of

Barthes, is constructed at the very moment its death is announced. Jameson's idea of national allegory betrays both nostalgia and hope for a Literature which allows some grasp of the whole—a Literature in which, as Fritz W. Kramer says about Stendahl and Balzac (who might be seen as substitutes for the one who Johnson implies is Mallarmé's mirror image, namely, Flaubert), in a kind of complementary apposition to *The Political Unconscious*, “. . . the whole of society, with all its varying milieux, could be shown through one individual fate.” This Jamesonian nostalgia and hope is complemented by a rigorous critique of that universal flattening of difference which exists as a function of late capitalism and its cultural logic, postmodernism. Unfortunately, the constellation of nostalgia, hope, and critique must always leave open the possibility of a certain Third World messianism, a waiting on the event/advent of the other, which is, in itself, perhaps a constitutive feature of postmodernist and postcolonialist critical discourse. I, too, hope to make a case for the possibility of prescriptive and descriptive attitudes toward social totality; I would do so by way of a certain iconographic—if not iconoclastic—reading practice; however, I also would do so by way of a critique of any formulation that subjects that possibility to a restrictive location. That possibility, and the further possibilities it engenders, exists always and everywhere. See Jameson (1986, 1981), Kramer (1993), and Johnson (1995).

3. I do not mean to deny, here, Judy's well-formed assertion of the existence of other than Western literacies, though any such assertion would have to take into account the intensity with which the production of literacies weighs against any notion of literate authenticity. I do mean to suggest that Equiano's ambiguous encounter with Western literacy is a generative one, both of our history and of the possible improvisation of that history. In any case, it contains possibilities that an oppositional or other literacy (or its subject) could never open, possibilities which far exceed some simple entry into already fully composed notions of literacy and its subject.
4. Abjection is a break or arrest or suspension of the dialectic of recognition which occurs as a function of the rupturing of ego; a fascination that exists as a function not of the gaze-in-return of the other, but of the radical absence of that gaze; the absence of a certain dialectical resonance in the object. Abjection occurs, then, as a certain derailment or cessation of the interplay between self and other, the injection of a negative third term, a slippage from the other-object to the other as object.

Abjection is often formulated as if it were always articulated in some special and specific way in “the Jew.” Think of Job, and think the way in which abjection is internalized as a kind of accepted humiliation, and also in that it is internalized or redeemed to the extent that the affect of the Same-subject is rearticulated dialectically in the interiority of the object. This is, for instance, Sartre's formulation, and Fanon appropriates it in order to articulate a difference internal to abjection between blacks and Jews. For if Jews internalize abjection, blacks' abjection is always externally generated and maintained. It will have always been outside, given the paradoxical recognizability of the

black, the immediate fact of the affect that is untransformable no matter what or who black does or is. What we have, then, is a kind of absolute abjection that is absolute precisely because it is a function of a kind of recognition; but it is a recognition that is not one, given that it is a recognition of an entirely featureless, faceless, deindividuated blackness.

What I'm interested in, as you shall see, is thinking the rhythm of this absolute abjection and what it is that Fanon thinks that it opens. What happens or occurs in the rhythmic break that is abjection? Finally, it seems to me, nothing other than the oscillation within the always already prior connection between self and other (be that other object or abject), an oscillation driven by the trace of an insistently originative sense of continuity, a syntagmatic phantasm that is the eternal return, rather than the deconstruction, of the sententious. It is a break that maintains the rhythm that it breaks by virtue of its maintenance of the duplicative unity embedded in the form of difference, of self/other, of, finally, singularity. The radical break of the other from the self is, then, never not contained by the continuity that it would sever, and there is, indeed, no possibility of the formation of a wholly internally generated identity that would somehow come as a function of such a break. There is no identity of the black man in the separation of the black man, and this is the meaning that is iconically given in this famously misread (most importantly and fruitfully by Homi Bhabha) aphorism of Fanon: *The black man is not. Any more than the white man.* No authentic upheaval is born in this phrase, or in the radically differentiating encounter as which this phrase is often read (even by Fanon to the extent that he claims the black man wants such a radically differentiating encounter). Rather, authentic upheaval is born in the improvisation through succession and continuity, caesura and sentence. This is the generative cut that is embedded in the sense of the whole that, finally, is that which infuses Fanon's phrasing, his double and redoubled negation—of blackness, whiteness, man—in the name of ensemble. The thing to be enacted—the upheaval—is the *æ*ffect of the generative cut that moves in the anarch(ron)ic, improvisational encounter with/as ensemble, the cut and rhythmic energy held within the sense of the whole. See Fanon (1970) and Bhabha (1992).

5. "The natives are extremely cautious about poison. When they buy any eatable, the seller kisses it all around before the buyer, to shew him it is not poisoned; and the same is done when meat and drink are presented, particularly to a stranger" (22).
6. See Derrida (1981).
7. See Equiano (1987, 5).
8. Equiano is both witness of and participant in this spectacle: "I used frequently to have different cargoes of new negroes in my care for sale; and it was almost a constant practice with our clerks, and other whites, to commit violent depredations on the chastity of the female slaves; and to these atrocities I was, though with reluctance, obliged to submit at all times, being unable to help them" (74). This conflation of his identity and

forced submission with that of the female slaves, this conflation of seeing and being, foreshadows the famous entry into the “blood stained gate of slavery” of Frederick Douglass, and reveals the constitutive interinanimation of commerce and sexuality which shadows that of knowledge, language, and freedom with which this book is primarily concerned. Part of what I’m interested in is the emergence of a voice from the depredation of chastity, which turns all of what is located at the intersection of lord and bonds(wo)man on its head.

9. This interinanimation of negative and positive forms of unmediated emotional expression remains to be thought and worked through, but its importance is superseded by another interarticulation, that between a general notion of expression and reflection. This synthesis was a feature of a certain moment in English literature (the eighteenth century) which was situated around the synthesis of the figure of the “man of feeling” (this very expression is used by Equiano to describe his third master, Mr. King—see Equiano 1837, 72) and the figure of the “man of reason.” Part of what I want to suggest here is that many of the early slave narratives were also situated within this dialectic, and in this sense they, too, were part of the transition from Enlightenment to Romanticism, prefiguring the reflection on feeling which is the hallmark, for instance, of Wordsworth. The move, then, is toward a literature of reflection, a literature of mediated experience and emotion. One begins to think again, unavoidably, of editing, prefacing, introduction—the figure of the “round, unvarnished tale,” or that of “the learned curse.”
10. I thank my friend and collaborator Dr. Alan Jackson for calling my attention to this passage.
11. And thanks to John Nelson for calling my attention to this nuance in Prince’s rhetoric of sweetness.
12. See Chomsky (1986, xxv).

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