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The Violence of Presence

Metaphysics in a Blackened World

PATRICE DOUGLASS AND
FRANK WILDERSON

Over the past fifteen to twenty years, black philosophy has enhanced its explanatory power by way of a deliberate engagement with critical theory. One of the most notable examples of this turn is found in Lewis Gordon's extended readings of Frantz Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre—the dialogues Gordon has staged between Fanon's blackened psychoanalysis and Sartre's Marxist existentialism.¹ We contend that black philosophy should continue to pursue this kind of juxtaposition: an irreverent clash between ensembles of questions dedicated to the status of the subject as a relational being and ensembles of questions dedicated to what are more often thought of as general and fundamental problems, such as those connected with reality, existence, reason, and mind; in the form, specifically, of a clash between questions concerning the always already deracination of blackness and questions, for example, of metaphysics—rather than pursue a line of inquiry that assumes a stable and coherent philosophical vantage point from which a black metaphysics can be imagined. This is because, as we argue below, for blacks no such vantage point exists. Such a project could stand the assumptive logic of philosophy on its metaphysical and ethical head; just as a similarly blackened project has turned the assumptive logic of critical theory (specifically, its start-

ing point, which assumes subjectivity) on its relational head.²

A focus on violence should be at the center of this project because violence not only makes thought possible, but it makes black metaphysical being and black relationality impossible, while simultaneously giving rise to the philosophical contemplation of metaphysics and the thick description of human relations. Without violence, critical theory and pure philosophy would be impossible. Marx and others have intimated as much. But what is often left unexamined is that this violence is peculiar in that, whereas some groups of people might be the recipients of violence, after they have been constituted as *people*, violence is a structural necessity to the constitution of blacks. Ideally, philosophers (studying metaphysics) and critical theorists (studying the relational status of the subject) should not be able to labor without contemplating the violence that

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enables black (non)being; but, in fact, the evasion of blackness-qua-violence is what gives these disciplines their presumed coherence. This *unthought* dynamic is a best-case scenario, as will be seen below with a critique of Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*.³ A worst-case scenario ensues when the critical theorist deploys anti-black violence in her/his critique—and restricting of subjectivities and genres, as will be seen with a critique of Jasbir K. Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*.⁴

Jasbir Puar frames *Terrorist Assemblages* by taking further the underwriting assumptive logics of critical theory and cultural criticisms, the fields the text both draws on and contributes to. The text foregrounds theories of subject resistance in relation to violence by atomizing the logic of analysis down to the level of genre distinctions.⁵ This framework posits a critical interrogation of how subject categories are incorporated by the state. The terrorist assemblage is a theoretic that resists subsumption into the war machine of the homonationalist nation-state formation, by contesting, refusing, morphing, and acting against classifications in a manner that suggests an incomprehensibility rather than legibility. This increases the possibility to apprehend the ontological and affective possibilities that resonate in queer futurity.

By situating two genres of subjectivity, race and sexuality, in tension with one another, *Terrorist Assemblages* maneuvers to mark an investment in upholding the underlying structures upon which these terms are constituted. Puar argues,

It is precisely within the interstices of life and death that we find the differences between queer subjects who are being folded (back) into life and the racialized queerness that emerges through the naming of populations, thus fueling the oscillation between the disciplining of subjects and the control of populations. . . . We can complicate, for instance, the centrality of biopolitical reproductive biologism by expanding the terrain of who reproduces and what is reproduced . . . rather than being predominately understood as implicitly or explicitly targeted for death.⁶

While this argument unhinges many protocols for thinking subjectivity in the humanities, it does not contest the grounds upon which genres, as subcategories of the subject, are produced and enacted. That is to say, the gesture to think outside of the constrictors and binds of race and sexuality as distinctive orientations by assessing the mergers, overlaps, and divergences of their competing and coalescing concerns, does not interrogate the parameters that suture race and sexuality as categories, and life and death as legible modes of existing and suffering within those categories. Instead it demands a more suitable relationship to genre and while the forms of relationality may at times be unnamable for Puar, this assessment still maintains that existing in the world is in fact a possibility.

Also what is apparent in the formation of the terrorist assemblage as an inhabitation of resistance is the assumption of the state as the predominating force of violence and it furthermore asserts that all violence has the

potential to be definitively recognized as such, violence. Metaphysics, in this context, is wholly unattended to, yet present in its absent consideration. Violence is assumed as the constitution of a singular, refracted, and namable predominating force, the state and its extension, and is blind to considerations of violence located at the constitution of being itself and present prior to the arrival of the state.

In *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Saidiya Hartman provides a critical collapsing of the analysis put forth by Puar by placing the legibility of resistance in question when explicitly considering the status of the female slave. What is brought to bear in Hartman's analysis of the case, *Missouri v. Celia* (the slave), and countless other legal (non)accounts of sexual violence involving both female and male gendered slaves, is a mediation on metaphysical violence that asks first under what conditions of existence can injury become legible.⁷

In the case of slave women, the law's circumscribed recognition of consent and will occurred only in order to intensify and secure the subordination of the enslaved, repress the crime, and deny injury, for it asserted that the captive female was both will-less and always willing. Moreover, the utter negation of the captive's will required to secure absolute submission was identified as willful submission to the master in the topsy-turvy scenario of onerous passions. Within this scenario, the constraints of sentiments were no less severe than those of violence.⁸

Critical theory's questions are silenced in the face of the evidence presented by Hartman. While Puar places concern on the formation of the terrorist assemblage as "a queer praxis of assemblage [which] allows for a scrambling of sides that is illegible to state practices of surveillance, control, banishment, and extermination,"⁹ Hartman places in peril the assumption that such a choice alignment of being is in fact a sustaining resistance to violence for all.

The anxious intent to sidestep blackness, which is wholly apparent in *Terrorist Assemblages*, cannot underwrite the reality of an existence for which space and time do not shift. Through an intentional mediation on black existence, *Scenes of Subjection* brings to bear a witnessing that cannot be witnessed in the precarious existence of a being that is simultaneously injured and injurious, harmed and harmful, resistant and complicit, willful and unwilling, at the level of its constitution. That is to say, blackness is not deformed by slavery but quite the contrary. Slavery as an ancient political system finds itself disfigured by blackness, as its structural components proliferate the constraints and definitive power of the master's gaze beyond the reach of actual physical property status and proximity. Black philosophical inquiries push introspections to shift concerns beyond thinking direct relations of violence as a tractable force by instead engaging the infinite refractions of violence at the level of being and existence within the world. What Hartman uncovers in her world-shifting theoretical engagement with slavery is the question of exactly whose agency and suffering is revealed through an engagement

with a blackened existence. Is it the suffering of the black, or is the status of something else altogether revealed?

In her groundbreaking book, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Elaine Scarry made a series of interventions that advanced critical theory's conceptual framework regarding the status of the subject. The ground zero of her assumptive logic assumes the universality of metaphysical presence in all victims of torture; and it is this metaphysical presence that torture seeks to undo.¹⁰ Scarry offered new pronouncements that were arrived at in ways that scholars in the humanities were often unaccustomed. Her arguments were not built on, for example, the positive protocols of hybridity (though she did not set out to interrogate those protocols, as Puar would do a generation later); nor on what would later be called the politics of difference; nor were they arrived at through psychoanalytic protocols grounded in semiotics and language.¹¹ Instead of cathedralizing the subject's potential, Scarry worked at the site of deracination: the injured body, the tortured body, the body in pain, pain beyond words—pain as that phenomenon for which there are no words. For Scarry, the violence deployed in acts of mutilation and the infliction of pain not only attempt to annihilate metaphysical presence, but it also attempts to disguise its purpose in “fictions” that evade the central issue: that torture involves attempts to undo *being* at the subject's core. The torturer's goal, she asserted,

is to make . . . the body . . . emphatically and crushingly present by destroying it. It is in part this combination that makes torture, like any experience of great physical pain,

mimetic of death for in death the body is emphatically present while that more elusive part represented by the voice is so alarmingly absent that heavens are created to explain its whereabouts. . . . Through his ability to project words and sounds out into his environment, a human being inhabits, humanizes, and makes his own a space much larger than that occupied by his body alone. This space, always contracted under repressive regimes, is in torture almost wholly eliminated. The “it” in “Get it out of him” refers not just to a piece of information but to the capacity for speech itself¹² (italics added).

Torture's assault on metaphysical presence is compounded by its assault on ethics, its inevitable bad faith in which (a) the victim must, necessarily, produce a “fiction” to fill the void of her world as it is unmade and (b) the torturer is empowered to produce a “fiction,” which ratchets down the scale of abstraction by asserting that the purpose of torture is to extract information; when, in point of fact, Scarry argues, the purpose is to extract “existence, objects and their properties, space and time, cause and effect, and possibility”¹³—torture is an assault on the victim's metaphysical capacity.

Scarry argues, correctly, that the violence of torture destroys (provisionally if not altogether) the torture victim's capacity to know herself as a relational being; but she assumes, *incorrectly*, that all sentient beings who are tortured are relational beings; and that all victims of torture enter the chamber with the capacity for psychic integration.

By way of contrast, John Murillo describes the psychic life of black people as *no life at*

all.¹⁴ In other words, for Murillo, neither torture nor the havoc wreaked by war qualifies as an event that affects the metaphysical plenitude of black life because blackness is constituted by an injunction against metaphysics, against, that is, black people's attempts to clarify the fundamental notions by which people understand the world, for example, existence, objects and their properties, space and time, cause and effect, and above all possibility.

At a glance, the black psyche is homologous with the "unmade" (Scarry) world of the torture victim. Institutional violence (the slave trade and its subsequent iterations, i.e., Jim Crow and lynching) enables the performative moment of "Dirty Nigger," just as institutional violence (a repressive political regime) precedes and anticipates the performative moment of torture. The torture victim, in the event of being tortured, has no recourse, cannot reciprocate as long as s/he is bound to the chair; and black fantasies of lynching white people (or, "Look, a honky!") have no "objective value" because the law is white.¹⁵ Both victims have been dissected; both (it seems) must be made whole again; and until that piecing together again happens, they both will exist as "fragments . . . split from and yet internal to" (Murillo) themselves. But this is a ruse, there is no homology.

To draw out the ruse, Murillo reflects on Fanon's "Look, a Negro!" and "Dirty Nigger!" recollections. He argues that Fanon, the author who recollects the incidents, does not have (in the process of recalling), nor did he have (prior to the episodes) an un-niggarrized vantage point from which to see the world or be *seen* by the world.¹⁶ There

can be no temporal or spatial coordinates that mark metaphysical plenitude; no space and time of memory; no life to remember. Fanon's "recollection," Murillo writes, "will be told and dissected as a piecing together of fragments, performed by another Fanon, one that is split and yet internal to Fanon."¹⁷

Murillo argues that the fragmenting process the black psyche undergoes is beyond "the event horizon," unlike Scarry's subject whose event horizon is the episode(s) of torture. For Murillo, the event horizon is not a narrative moment, or a moment that can be narrated, but *being* itself.

Being black, or . . . black(ened) being . . . submits my being to the perpetuity of political ontological breaking with and by inescapable gravity and absolute darkness, such that, on orders of time and space both macro and micro—being, life, existence, knowledge, ethics, as they are framed by the permanence promised by capital "D" Death (social death) and the temporariness inherent in lower-case "d" death (corporeal death)—I, we, break. Blackness breaches, is breach impervious to breaching.¹⁸

In other words, the black arrives at the torture chamber in a psychic state too de-racinated to be credited to a prior torture.

Scarry's torture victim has the luxury of a narrative progression from equilibrium to disequilibrium. And the first of two stages in the narrative progression holds forth the promise of a third stage: equilibrium restored; a closure stage—healing, or what we might call metaphysical renewal: the re-instantiation of objects and their properties, space and time, cause and effect.

But where the black is concerned, we cannot think in terms of stages, much less in terms of narrative. The metaphysics of being (objects and their properties, space and time, cause and effect) cannot be *recalled* by the black psyche without simultaneously recalling what is, for the victim of torture, *merely the second stage of a three-stage progression*.

If, at each version or reemergence of “Dirty Nigger!” in encounters with Human or subaltern subjects, or anti-Human objects (Blacks, *pace* Wilderson) with media, with and within the state, its institutions and its agents, and in memory, the psychic space breaks again and again, does not the rupture of black psychic space approach infinity?¹⁹

The world-unmaking catalyst that Scarry posits as a force that moves in a coherent progression from external violence imposition to psychic internalization is not the same for Fanon, Marriott, and Murillo. Torture cannot be blamed for instantiating disequilibrium when disequilibrium constitutes being. In other words, the black arrives at the torture chamber as a victim of metaphysical violence, a state too deracinated to be credited even to prior and coherent violent events. Blackness is constituted by violence with no event horizons.

We need to imagine metaphysical violence rather than a metaphysics that violence destroys. We need to think metaphysically through social death and the figure of the slave. There is no a priori connection between sentience and relation; no natural link between *feeling* and *world*.

Notes

1. See Lewis Gordon's *Bad Faith and Anti-Black Racism* (New York: Humanity Books, 1995).
2. See Hortense Spillers, *White, Black & In Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); David Marriott, “‘I’m Gonna Borrer me a Kodak’: Photography & Lynching,” in *On Black Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and Critique of Multiracialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
3. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
4. See Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
5. In the interview “*ProudFlesh Inter/Views: Sylvia Wynter*,” Wynter argues that “genre” represents multiple modes of being human, which is the designation of “kind.” Race and gender are spoken to directly in the invocation of genre as a mode of analysis by Wynter and through the contours of the article it is apparent that sexuality and class among other subject distinctions are also fitting to this analysis. Wynter has elaborated upon and engaged the concept of genre in many of her other works as well. See Greg Thomas, “*ProudFlesh Inter/Views: Sylvia Wynter*,” *ProudFlesh: New Afrikan Journal of Culture, Politics, and Consciousness*, ISSN: 1543-0855 (online).
6. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, p. 36.
7. The phrase “metaphysical violence” was coined by Patrice Douglass in her master’s paper “The Claim of Right to Property: Social Violence

and Political Right," submitted to the program in Culture and Theory at the University of California, Irvine, on June 20, 2013.

8. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, pp. 81–82.

9. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, p. 221.

10. This, in part, is why her work has had such an effect on debates within critical theory as well as on philosophical reflection on metaphysics and ethics. In 1999 Edward Said declared, "There is no one even remotely like Elaine Scarry for the depth and originality of her thinking in the humanities today." See Geoffrey Galt Harpham, "Elaine Scarry and the Dream of Pain," *Salmagundi* 130/131 (Spring–Summer 2001): 202–234, quote on p. 202.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 203–206.

12. Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, p. 49.

13. "Metaphysics," Wikipedia, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metaphysics, accessed April 23, 2013. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary definition and Peter van Inwagen's entry in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* enhance and complicate the Wikipedia entry; plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/metaphysics. Webster defines metaphysics as "a (1): a division of philosophy that is concerned with the fundamental nature of reality and being and that includes ontology, cosmology, and often epistemology." While van Inwagen attends to the contrariness of any definition at all, "It is not easy to say what metaphysics is. Ancient and Medieval philosophers might have said that metaphysics was, like chemistry

or astrology, to be defined by its subject matter: metaphysics was the 'science' that studied 'being as such' or 'the first causes of things' or 'things that do not change.' It is no longer possible to define metaphysics that way, and for two reasons. First, a philosopher who denied the existence of those things that had once been seen as constituting the subject-matter of metaphysics—first causes or unchanging things—would now be considered to be making thereby a metaphysical assertion. Secondly, there are many philosophical problems that are now considered to be metaphysical problems (or at least partly metaphysical problems) that are in no way related to first causes or unchanging things; the problem of free will, for example, or the problem of the mental and the physical."

14. John Murrillo is a graduate student in the department of English, Brown University, and is an emerging Afro-pessimist scholar. Murrillo's current work merges the realms of creativity and intellectualism, drawing from poetry, quantum mechanics, and psychoanalysis to meditate on the political ontology of blackness. See John Murrillo, "Smiles Undun, *Django Unchained*," unpublished manuscript.

15. Marriott, "I'm Gonna Borrer Me a Kodak."

16. Lewis Gordon makes a similar point in *Bad Faith and Anti-Black Racism*.

17. See Murrillo.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*