MUTINOUS MUTENESS:

RADICALIZING ILLEGIBILITY IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Ingrid Giorgia Diran

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MUTINOUS MUTENESS: RADICALIZING ILLEGIBILITY IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

Ingrid Giorgia Diran, Ph.D.

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Mutinous Muteness revisits W.E.B. Du Bois's idea of double-consciousness for its implications both as a theory of divided racialized experience and as a mostly unacknowledged critique of the presumed unity of its white counterpart. My project sets out to defamiliarize Du Bois and two of his more canonical heirs, Jean Toomer and Ralph Ellison, by offering a dialectical reading of their work in which representations of blackness can be seen to embed a fundamental critique of the "souls of white folk." Specifically, I contend that each of these writers differently displaces the central tenets of white supremacy—its invisibility as a norm, its presumed universality, and its exclusive place at the seat of aesthetic and philosophical judgment—through a use of their own techniques of illegibility. Demonstrating how these canonical literary figures play upon (and with) fundamental structures of Western thought, I suggest that their work not only elucidates techniques of racialization, but also reveals whiteness for the dark art that it is.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Ingrid Diran was born in California in 1983. She received a B.A. in English from Williams College in 2005 and an M.Phil in Modern Languages (French) from the University of Oxford in 2008 before beginning the Ph.D. program in English at Cornell University. She currently lives in Portland, Oregon, where she teaches literature, writing, and critical theory at Pacific Northwest College of Art (PNCA).

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In the foreword to his collection of “Simple Stories,” Langston Hughes admits: “I cannot truthfully state, as some novelists do at the beginnings of their books, that these stories are about ‘nobody living or dead.’ The facts are that these tales are about a great many people—although they are stories about no specific persons as such.” Let's transpose this into the key of gratitude: these pages have been made possible by a great many people, by the *combination* of these people, by the combinations of *companionship* that have woven into a combination without lock the forethoughts, thoughts, and afterthoughts found here.

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INTRODUCTION: MUTINOUS MUTENESS

Four years after the commercial failure of *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville published a novella, fated to comparable neglect, in *Putnam's Monthly.* "Benito Cereno" was based on the memoirs of a Massachusetts captain named Amasa Delano. The eighteenth chapter of *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres* (1817) had especially caught Melville's eye: it recounts a curious episode in which Delano, thinking he was coming to the aid of a ship in distress off the Southern coast of Chile, interrupts a slave mutiny. Remarkably, the American reports having done so altogether unwittingly: in anticipation of his arrival, the blacks had reclaimed their guise as slaves, and, upon threat of death, demanded that their captain also assume his old role. The masquerade works: Delano never suspects that what he sees is theater and, through a peculiar irony, saves both his and the Spanish captain's life by virtue of his unbroken ignorance. The American is apprised of the truth only after the fact, when Don Bonito Sereno, having suddenly leapt into Delano's departing longboat and out of reach of the blacks, divulges his sordid tale (albeit in words that remain unintelligible to all but a Portuguese sailor who finally bids them listen).

"Benito Cereno" repeats this episode with a new protagonist: not the eponymous character,[1] but one who is (to use a formula of Fred Moten's) "not but nothing other than" the old protagonist: Captain Delano.[2] The difference is that now, the story concerns not just what the Yankee captain thinks, says, and does (the basis of his memoirs), but all that he does not mean to think, say, or do. In other words, Melville's protagonist is the American's *ignorance*, a shadow

[1] Melville's change of Bonito Sereno to Benito Cereno has been remarked by critics to have a double significance. First, "Benito" evokes "Benedict" and "Benedictines"; Melville, throughout, assimilates the Spanish captain's character to Charles V, who abdicates the Holy Roman Empire and, like Benito, dies in a monastery. Secondly, Melville's character is anything but "serene," despite sounding as if he could be. For more on parallels to Charles V, see especially H. Bruce Franklin, "'Apparent Symbol of Despotic Command': Melville's Benito Cereno" (*The New England Quarterly* 34. 4 [Dec., 1961]), 462-477.
[2] Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness" (*Criticism* 50.2 [Spring 2008]), 185. Hereafter cited in the text.

cast by his consciousness which saves his life by never crossing his mind. And so Melville has Delano board a ship to whose name he is deaf: *San Dominick*; likewise 1799, the year to which Melville shifts (from 1805) the events and which also betokens the Haitian rebellion, is, for Delano, just a date in the log book. In place of the *Narrative*'s hindsight is Melville's glimpse into what the American cannot see as he looks around the mystery ship. Everything takes place in the form, rhythm, and guise of his singular inability to witness it.

(What, you ask, casts such a shadow upon the American's mind? The same as casts a shadow—not of ignorance but death—upon his European counterpart: "the Negro.")[3]

For the mutiny, and not just Delano's benighted mind, is black. At stake in "Benito Cereno" is this mutinous blackness or, insofar as blackness speaks itself only inaudibly, this *mutinous muteness*. Such mutinous muteness asserts itself, like the unheard difference between the two words, as an impalpable but irreducible trace of power; specifically, it is the specter of black power that haunts the infrastructures of white supremacy. As such, it not only awaits Delano upon the decks of the San Dominick but takes place *as and because* he boards the distressed ship and interacts with its strange, infirm Spanish captain; *as and because* he entertains certain suspicions of Don Benito's competency and motives; *as and because* he admires the comforting semblances of paternalism and all signs of black subordination or primitivism; *as and because* he fails to imagine that *ignorance of his own ignorance* is the true plot orchestrated by the slaves and masterminded by Babo, the dedicated manservant of Benito Cereno whose panoptic surveillance of Delano's every move works *as and because* it passes for the peskiness of a loyal pet.

[3] "'You are saved,' cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained; 'you are saved; what has cast such a shadow upon you?' 'The negro.'" These lines (minus Benito's response) also form an epigraph to Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Herman Melville, "Benito Cereno," *Melville's Short Novels,* ed. Dan McCall (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), 101.

An awkward and knotty syntagm, *as and because* describes the uncanny grammar of the captives' mutinous muteness—the grammar, that is, of a blackness that everywhere coincides with, but nowhere enters, the consciousness, intent, and deeds of a (white, liberal, rational) consciousness. *As and because* is the index, too, of the chronological (*as*) and logical (*because*) correlation between the reality of revolution and the invisibility of its blackness. Melville's adherence to the grammar of the *as and because* strictly aligns—or better, entangles—the plot of his story with the plot of the slaves. The resultant text is more than double the length of the original and fictionalizes only what was already fictional in the original: the slaves' masquerade of servility. Restaging what already was theater, and thereby assuming the role of Babo's lieutenant himself, Melville mutely encrypts within his text the mutiny whose story exists *as and because* it is untold. Black power aboard the San Dominick is precisely *unsaid* in the words that constitute Delano's impressions of the ship and its atmosphere. In every cycle of the American's doubt—syncopating it, perhaps—is mute testimony to the *unthought* and perhaps *unthinkable* political reality in which Africans are neither compliant nor unruly, but firmly in command. Just as the *manifestation* of servility does not negate this new order but places it beyond all doubt, Delano's typologies of African docility do not contradict black power but perfectly bear out its designs. Thus the difference between the white and black stories aboard the San Dominick, or the difference between what the American captain sees and all he cannot, is no difference at all: the former exists purely *as and because* of the latter. Like Babo, who dumbly stares up at Don Benito like a "shepherd's dog" (39) and Babo, whose mind can only be described as a "hive of subtlety" (102), the two are one and the same. Only a different mode of reading may distinguish them. Only a reading that symmetrically inverts the shadow of Delano's mind—that sees the unseen *as* it is overlooked and glimpses the reason *because of which* it remains unseen—can

affirm the illegibility of "Benito Cereno"'s b(l)ack story. But what sort of reading traces the fugitivity of blackness in the letters of another text? And what sort of reading pursues this blackness not in order to disentangle it from another text, but on the contrary, to enable it to fully pass into it; to do as a Spanish sailor advises Delano with regard to the imbroglio in which they find themselves, and "undo it, cut it, quick" (63)?

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"Benito Cereno" is an allegory of a form of black power whose guise is necessarily disguise, and whose mutinous designs function only in and as a muteness. The following dissertation argues that Melville is far from alone in discerning such a form of revolutionary consciousness or practice. On the contrary, it argues that the paradigm of mutinous muteness is a signal feature of three of the most canonical of twentieth-century African American writers: W.E.B. Du Bois, Jean Toomer, and Ralph Ellison. While prized and celebrated as luminaries of black culture, these writers, I suggest, use light to cast—and keep—an aspect of their radicalism (call it fugitive or potential) in shadow. The chapters that follow intend to show how each of these writers implements and modifies the techniques of *illegibility*, and how illegibility itself harbors a power mutinous to the aims of white supremacy within the guise of lucid or lyrical compliance to its rules of representation.

In a sense, then, the following project works to limn—without defining or even fully identifying—a tradition of black radicalism whose means are precisely dis-articulated in discourse and therefore persist as such, without end. Disputing the isomorphism of emancipation and its representability, what follows seeks to understand those forms of racialized potentiality that, like the captives who practice subservience as a way to remain free (or at least fugitive), exist purely *as and because* of their illegibility. What, I ask, is a mode of black power that hides

in plain sight, and hides precisely by means of those historical overdeterminations Saidiya Hartman calls the "hypervisibility" of American blackness?[4] How does this power unspeak and unwrite itself? How does it confound those who would wish to learn fully how to capture or read it? And how do its twentieth-century proponents elaborate the paradigm of mutinous muteness, with its grammar of *as and because*, which constitutes Melville's most significant and surprising bequeathal to racial politics?

Call what we are after an esoteric black radicalism. But esoteric here refers not to a secret but to the absence of one, that is, to the plainly hidden reality of a revolutionary power and the hidden plainness of this power as such. "Benito Cereno" can in this way be considered an ur-text of the esoteric black radical tradition for the way it constructs a thoroughly dialectical phenomenology of white consciousness. In confining the narrative to Delano's vantage, Melville delineates the shape of a latent bigotry, a benign racism associated not just with nineteenth-century Yankee captains but also with their more contemporary heirs to white liberalism and capital. As C.L.R. James puts it nearly a hundred years after "Benito Cereno"'s publication: "Captain Delano is one of those white men who not only understands but who loves Negroes."[5] Melville's most radical gesture, then, is to show how Delano's presumption of understanding and paternal fondness itself constitutes an *active* power of ignorance, a *prot-agon-istic* shadow that ironically protects him from the slaves in the same measure that they use it against him (and thereby resume their mutiny). Thus the very "Negroes" whom Delano "loves," in conforming to his expectations of them, make Delano conform—again, entirely unconsciously—to their wishes. It is this dialectical turn or reversal of white ignorance that makes the power involved black,

[4] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1997), 36 & 161. Hereafter cited in the text.
[5] C.L.R. James, *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways: The story of Herman Melville and the world we live in* (New York, 1953), 132. Hereafter cited in the text.

radical, and esoteric all at once. For this inversion of what we might call second-order stupidity (since it concerns the ignorance *of* ignorance) into a power of mutinous muteness entails not a correction of errors, nor a revelation of truth, but the tactical use of unconscious powers as such. Esoteric black radicalism is therefore the precise inverse of unconscious white ignorance (or unconscious white privilege).[6] Every turn of its plot is coordinated to, and determined by, the active incapacities of a mind in power.

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In this way, too, the esoteric black radical tradition may prove both more capacious, and more mutable (more mutinous), than we might assume (or hope). Indeed "tradition" may be a misnomer for what is, in truth, a description of the piratical historical potentiality of literary works. The difference between white and black power corresponds, in this sense, less to the race of a work's author than to the dialectical reversibility of that work's meaning over time. Here, Walter Benjamin's distinction between a literature's "material content" (its historical specificity, what is "striking and curious" about it) and its "truth content" (its esotericism and still live "enigma") has lost none of its power.[7] In his essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, Benjamin describes how "the material content and the truth content, united at the beginning of a work's history, set themselves apart from each other in the course of its duration, because the truth content always remains to the same extent hidden as the material content comes to the fore"

[6] Consider the recent interruption of a Bernie Sanders campaign event in Seattle by two spokeswomen from Black Lives Matter, which has been criticized for both impolitely and foolishly working against black interests. This criticism, whatever its veracity, overlooks lingering schisms between white liberal agendas and the black constituencies they claim to represent. See:
http://rhrealitycheck.org/ablc/2015/08/11/blacklivesmatter-hurt-feelings-white-progressives/
http://gawker.com/lessons-in-etiquette-protest-and-the-politics-of-civil-1723217591

[7] Walter Benjamin, "Goethe's Elective Affinities," *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings Volume 1: 1913-1926,* eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge & London: The Belknap Press of Harvard U P, 2004), 297. Hereafter cited in the text.

(297). Having established this inverse correlation between truth and material content, he compares the critic

> to a paleographer in front of a parchment whose faded text is covered by the lineaments of a more powerful script which refers to that text. As the paleographer would have to begin by reading the latter script, an invaluable criterion of judgment springs out for him; only now can he raise the basic critical question of whether the semblance/luster [*Schein*] of the truth content is due to the material content, or the life of the material content to the truth content. For as they set themselves apart from each other in the work, they decide its immortality. In this sense the history of works prepares for their critique, and thus historical distance increases their power. If, to use a simile, one views the growing work as a burning funeral pyre, then the commentator stands before it like a chemist, the critic like an alchemist. Whereas, for the former, wood and ash remain the sole objects of his analysis, for the latter only the flame itself preserves an enigma: that of what is alive. Thus, the critique inquires into the truth, whose living flame continues to burn over the heavy logs of what is past and the light ashes of what has been experienced. (298)

In Benjamin's opening image of the paleographer (who must begin by reading the "more powerful script" because he knows that there is a "faded text" beneath it) we recognize the palimpsest of a plot that constitutes "Benito Cereno." Indeed, if the "more powerful script" of Melville's novella corresponds to the "lineaments" of Delano's consciousness, the true, "faded text" it conceals is the story of the slave mutiny which is not simply hidden, but also *reiterated in its illegibility* by Delano's covering over it. Thus only a "paleographic" re-reading of the story, a function of "historical distance"—such as Melville bore to Delano's memoirs, and such as we now bear to Melville's rewriting—permits the "faded text" of esoteric black radicalism to appear as and because of the story's "material content." Only this "historical distance" secures an "invaluable criterion of judgment" and prepares the work for its critique. (Melville's text is especially notable in this regard because the paleographic posture we assume in relation to its "faded text" is itself only a repetition of the paleographic—i.e., critical—posture that Melville himself assumed toward Delano's 1817 *Narrative*. Another consideration here is that the

historical Delano's recounting of the events is underwritten by what the Africans "faded" or muted about their own mutiny.) And so just as, for Benjamin, the paleographer must read the "more powerful script" as and because he seeks the "faded text" beneath it, for the critic of Melville's novella, it is imperative to begin with the *script of power*—that is, with Delano's perspective—and judge, on the basis of the magnitude of this power, how another power persists within, and determines it (indeed, the "more powerful script," while easily legible, matters only because it "refers to that text" that is illegible beneath it). The desideratum of critique, like that of paleography, is to witness what was never seen and to read what was never written. In the case of "Benito Cereno" and the other texts of esoteric black radicalism I will be discussing, this means witnessing a version of the impossible: a liquidation of white supremacy that takes place in the uncanny form of its repetition.

Here Benjamin's second "simile" comes into play. In aligning the textual commentator with the "chemist" (who sees only one text, only material content that is but "wood and ash") and the critic with the "alchemist" (who with gaze fixed on both material and truth content, inquires into "living flame"), Benjamin indicates the manner in which "truth content" comes forth. Far from an essence one might distill and separate from a work, truth content is what remains "alive" in its material content—that is, what survives of this material *in* the present, and which appears *to* the present as an "enigma." A more apt description for the true story of the slaves in "Benito Cereno" could hardly be found. And Melville himself specifies, with the final words of the text, that Babo—who, more than anyone, knows the "truth"—outlives himself and his "voiceless end." "The body was burned to ashes," Melville writes,

> but for many days, the head, that hive of subtlety, fixed on a pole in the Plaza, met, unabashed, the gaze of the whites; and across the Plaza looked towards St. Bartholomew's church, in whose vaults slept then, as now, the recovered bones of Aranda; and across the Rimac bridge looked towards the monastery, on Mount

> Agonia without; where, three months after being dismissed by the court, Benito Cereno, borne on the bier, did, indeed, follow his leader. (102)

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The criterion for a text of esoteric black radicalism is an ability to remain "faded," mute, and illegible within the "more powerful script" corresponding to the schemes of white power, privilege, and representation. It is an ability to parody compliance to this scheme—to not *not* be a slave—in a way that decisively interrupts the naturalism of black oppression. Analogously, a critical gaze regarding such texts involves an ability to repeat and parody historical oppression as Melville did the historical Delano—that is, to not *not* see like a Yankee captain. This redoubled posture suspends and delimits the material content of white power and privilege, and ignites in this material a flame of truth about race. At stake in esoteric black radicalism is thus a politics of deactivation, such the slaves aboard the San Dominick and Melville himself adapt. A politics of deactivation because the primary tactic consists not just in exploding the old order but in placing its surviving, inoperative scheme back in the hands of the oppressed. If black power emerges in "Benito Cereno" as the alchemical *fulfillment* of black oppression—a performance of modern minority so perfect that it makes of historical oppression a toy in the game of liberation—it is our task, as readers of this esoteric tradition, to keep this game, and its "living flame," going.

And minority, of course, is the preeminent object of the sense of mind that W.E.B. Du Bois, fifty years after "Benito Cereno," called the Negro's "double-consciousness"—that is, a tactic of self-stylizing and dissimulation assumed by the racialized oppressed that is never far from mutinous muteness. Stylizing one's own historical fate, Du Bois suggested, not only constructed a refuge from oppression where there was none, but also emptied the truth-claims of history by replicating and parodying its fictions. The following dissertation heeds the parodic impulse of double-consciousness and repeats its wager. For it attends to the modalities of literary

self-styling—inasmuch as "styling" here corresponds to an active opacity, a radical esotericism or mute mutiny—by elaborating readings whose focus is never far from the politics of deactivation. What follows, then, is a first attempt to formulate a doubly-conscious analytic that is up to the task of looking, as an alchemist upon a funeral pyre, past the ashes and into the flames of black power. For the fire is *this time*.

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Throughout the following pages, I have found it useful to stage a dialogue between certain texts of black literature and what might be called the "more powerful script" of Western philosophy with which they are often only implicitly in conversation. In this way, I repeat in the form of readings what is already taking place as a subtext in the literature itself: a confrontation with the strain of Western and specifically Enlightenment philosophy that is characterized by the will to know, capture, and represent. The political corollary to this quintessentially modern episteme has been identified in recent decades in the regime of biopower. And in this dissertation, I read the schemes of representation and knowledge that are found in Hegel, Heidegger, and (to a lesser extent) Freud and Derrida within this larger framework of biopolitical modernity. However, such an engagement with biopolitical thought is motivated by more than a desire to produce an argument with relevance to contemporary political theory; it is also informed by the fact that, long before convulsing into twentieth-century totalitarianisms, biopolitics' founding experiment was the institution of African slavery. The political overdetermination of any "scientific" representation of race confirms this fact beyond a doubt. The afterlife of the "peculiar institution," then, can be examined inasmuch as it constitutes a conceptual infrastructure for one of biopower's most powerful and lasting apparatuses: race.

The discourse of race, especially as it is portrayed in the following pages, is characterized by the asymmetry—significant in the same measure that it goes unmarked—between the status of the seer and the seen, the representer and the represented. The racialized subject is consigned to the latter position, that of the visible, the marked, or otherwise "colored." What Du Bois called the color line is, in this sense, no line at all but a lens: to be on the far side of the color bar is to be made the object of vision, never its subject. Subjectivity only ever steals across the color line and consequently never accedes to "true self-consciousness," but only "double-consciousness," a state in which one sees oneself in the alienated guise of the seen. This positionality challenges and complicates the status of representation; it disrupts any uniformity between the function of representation—literary or political—and the aims of power or community. For to be represented in the context of race is—despite or because of "gains" in legitimacy—also to be made vulnerable, exposed. As Benjamin once wrote of nature which laments its naming by man, it is to "feel[oneself] thoroughly known by the unknowable."[8] What I have been calling mutinous muteness can be understood as the radical retort of the racialized "known," a use of the "unknowable" privileges of whiteness (primary among which, of course, is the ability to remain ignorant of privilege) against it. The possibilities of liberation are consequently never isomorphic with, but rather in constant and mobile tension with, their representability. And because of this rupture of isomorphism, the problem of emancipation has to be conceived differently.

In the shadows of representation are forms of unrepresented power. Two eminent critiques of biopolitics and its schemes of representation center upon these shadowy powers, and attempt to get to the bottom of them. These can be found in the work of Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, two Western philosophers whose work I align with, and refract through, the

[8] Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings Volume 1: 1913-1926,* eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge & London: The Belknap Press of Harvard U P, 2004), 73. Hereafter cited in the text.

paradigms of black illegibility that are my main topic of discussion. Foucault's significance to this project consists in his rethinking of modes of subjectivation as a power specific to being-subjected, which corresponds to the potencies of one's susceptibility to power. Agamben elaborates this strain of Foucault's thought in both its ethical and political dimensions with his paradigm of impotentiality, which is the most rigorous philosophical attempt to date of the ontology of contingency and the unrealized. Never far from these two thinkers' discourses are counterhistories and counterdiscourses of the oppressed. Thus the theoretical apparatus I employ in the dissertation limns certain "elective affinities" between their critiques of biopolitics and the logic of esoteric black radicalism that I am trying to elaborate here.

Chapter 1 outlines the theoretical genealogy of the term "double-consciousness" as it derives from the use of two related terms, "double consciousness" in Emerson's essays, and *Selbstbewußtsein* (self-consciousness) in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. My claim is that Du Bois's intervention takes place not only at the level of argument but also of punctuation. In the mute hyphen that turns Emerson's "double consciousness" into a riven form of Hegelian self-consciousness, the diacritical signature of Du Boisian "double-consciousness" repeats the concept's explicit critique of the institution of slavery as an impasse to human history and the achievement of real democracy. Just as slavery blocks mankind both from achieving what Hegel calls "true self-consciousness" and from leaving behind the ahistorical "natural" consciousness that nineteenth-century idealism associates with Africanity, so too is double-consciousness in the "darker races of mankind" a living remnant of the West's failing of its own ideals. Thus the "dark" subject bears witness to the static *Aufhebung* of Spirit while uncannily animating the very position of "thing" to which this doctrine of Spirit has continually reduced it. Haunting Western rationality with the color line that is its condition for possibility, blackness is, like a hyphen in

the middle of a word, what remains at the center of the Western gaze but invisible to its understanding.

Chapter 2 sounds a mute pun in Ralph Ellison's concept of "invisibility." It shows that a potential not to be seen corresponds not only to the concept of Being at the foundations of Western metaphysics, but also to the historically marginalized beings that this metaphysics seeks to eradicate by erasure. Reading Ellison both with and against Martin Heidegger's definitions of Dasein in *Being and Time*, I suggest that the potency of Ellisonian invisibility consists in its mute inscription of the racial margin within Western philosophy, one crystallized in the famous opening line of *Invisible Man*: "I am an invisible man." This formulation dramatizes the manner in which black invisibility is, paradoxically, visible only to itself. In this way, Ellison's novel not only recapitulates Heidegger's distinction between the existence and essence of Dasein, but also and at the same time, inverts the ontological paradigm by elaborating an ethos of invisibility in which the possibilities of black being are determined only in and through ways of being black.

Chapter 3 draws upon the critical controversy concerning not only Toomer's race, but also his inability to produce another literary work on par with his 1923 masterpiece, *Cane*. The chapter argues that *Cane*, far from harmonizing race and modernist aesthetics, activates a disjuncture—comparable to poetic enjambment—in which race, as the text's semantic focus, enters into tension with its semiotic mode, modernist form. I suggest that this enjambment of race and aesthetics does not simply end with *Cane*, but rather persists within the documents Toomer composed in the name of his spiritual master, George Gurdjieff. Indeed, like Father John in the "Kabnis" episode at the conclusion of *Cane*, who breaks a long silence only to resume and thereby fulfill it, the tension between modernist sound and racial sense irrupts in *Cane* only to complete itself in the muteness that follows. This muteness characterizes Toomer's

transformation into a kind of spiritual scrivener who does not sign his name, but only transcribes and affixes himself to Gurdjieff in a way that renders mastery and servility, assertion and surrender, action and passion, radically indistinguishable. Like Babo's inversion by repetition of his previous state as a slave, Toomer repeats Gurdjieff's asceticism in a way that turns his prior commitment to "racial composition" (in the sense both of racial identity and literary work) into a parody of its appropriability. The chapter's conclusion identifies the persistence of comparable constructions of illegibility—and evacuations of racial propriety—in works of black letters from Alain Locke to Henry Louis Gates. It concludes by noting that the radicality of racial illegibility does not always prove isomorphic to the recognized tradition of black radicalism.

The following, then, is a study of literature, not philosophy. And while many of its claims are indebted to works of theory, fiction is its privileged object in almost by default, since fiction requires, as a matter of course, that the world be remade in the image of its potentiality. The criterion for what I call fiction, in turn, is that it deactivates the real in a way that exhibits its potentialities, and that it situates these potentialities in a dimension wherein roles are reversible, power polyvalent, and where it is just as often a servant, not an executioner, who holds a blade to the throat of power.

CHAPTER 1: OF STASIS AND STRIVING: W.E.B. DU BOIS AND PHILOSOPHY'S MIDDLE PASSAGE

> The Understanding, which is our object, finds itself in just this position, that the inner world has come into being for it, to begin with, only as the universal, still unfilled, *in-itself*. The play of Forces has merely this negative significance of being *in itself* nothing, and its only positive significance that of being the *mediating agency*, but outside of the Understanding.
> –G.W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*[9]

> Long they stood together, peering over the gray unresting water.
>
> "John," she said, "does it make every one—unhappy when they study and learn lots of things?"
>
> He paused and smiled. "I am afraid it does," he said.
>
> "And, John, are you glad you studied?"
>
> "Yes," came the answer, slowly but positively.
>
> She watched the flickering lights upon the sea, and said thoughtfully, "I wish I was unhappy,—and—and," putting both arms about his neck, "I think I am, a little, John."
> —Du Bois, "Of The Coming of John"[10]

> Perhaps the body of the anthropophorous animal (the body of the slave) is the unresolved remnant that idealism leaves as an inheritance to thought, and the aporias of philosophy of our time coincide with the aporias of this body that is irreducibly drawn and divided between animality and humanity.
> —Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*

In the century since W.E.B. Du Bois published *The Souls of Black Folk*, disparate African American writers and commentators have popularized the concept of double-consciousness as a signature of the peculiar ambivalence of black experience. Richard Wright calls double-consciousness a "dreadful objectivity" with which African Americans have been made to grow accustomed in viewing themselves; James Baldwin aligns it with a plight of named

[9] G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1977), 89.
[10] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, *Writings* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1986). Hereafter cited in the text as *Souls.*

namelessness, and Ralph Ellison with "a complex double vision, a fluid ambivalent response to men and events which represents, at its finest, a profoundly civilized adjustment to the cost of being human in this modern world."[11] More recently, Cornel West has cited double-consciousness as the perennial sense that "black people will not succeed in American society if they are fully and freely themselves," while Paul Gilroy has highlighted its bifurcated, itinerant structure as "the tension between a politics of fulfillment and a politics of transfiguration."[12] This sampling of a few of the more authoritative voices in the African American literary and critical tradition indicates the undiminished significance of Du Bois's concept to the way racial difference is understood. Indeed, in each case, "double-consciousness" names an operative principle by which the African American experience takes shape as both a theory and a practice within the larger social sphere.

Given the centrality of double-consciousness to the critical discourse of race, it is nevertheless worth asking, as the following chapter will, how this concept both enables and remains irreducible to its own appropriation as a paradigm of racial thought. Doing so poses a certain difficulty: first because invoking Du Bois is often done with the purpose of calling on his authority; second, because even when authority is not at stake, we as critics invoke the conditions behind Du Bois's thinking of race while inevitably leaving these conditions unformulated in the mute form of citation. Yet precisely insofar as it is easier to call on insights than to heed the way in which they come to light, it is also possible to locate difficulty and move in its direction—that is, to develop a counter-movement or corrective strategy which resists the

[11] Richard Wright, *The Outsider* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953), 129; James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Dial Press, 1961); Ralph Ellison, "The World and the Jug," *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 132.
[12] Cornel West, "Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization," *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic *Civitas* Books, 1999), 105; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge & London: Harvard U P, 1995), 112.

legibility of citation by re-examining the parameters, and powers, of citation itself. In reference to the "double-consciousness" that is the focus of the current chapter, this means not limiting the discussion to the famous opening chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk* where the term first appears, and, yet, beginning exactly there, showing how Du Bois transforms a philosophical concept (one that appears in both Emerson and Hegel's work in different contexts) by citing it in a particular manner. Double-consciousness itself demonstrates the strategy at stake here: not only does it constitute a form of philosophical citation; *as* a citation, it also works as a technical term that, while left largely undefined in Du Bois's discourse, is indispensable to that discourse's coherence. Thus we can return to the philosophical context of the term "double-consciousness" in the same spirit that Du Bois returned to Hegel and Emerson: to show how the act of citation can modifies the meaning of the term in question.

In what follows, we will begin with a conceptual genealogy of double-consciousness that demonstrates its syncretic make-up and shows it to be as much an intimate stranger to the Western philosophical tradition as the "American Negro" itself. And once the term is glimpsed, as Ralph Ellison's invisible man puts it, as "*a part of them* as well as apart from them,"[13] the philosophical and political stakes of double-consciousness also enter a new legibility. Yet the conventional reading of double-consciousness proves, even in this context, far from false. This reading holds that Du Bois uses "double-consciousness" in *Souls* as a means of calling out the epistemic habits informing how he would be read as a minoritized writer/thinker. Ever in anticipation of the contempt and pity competing in the mind of his white audience, he makes a point of rendering this anticipation, and his insight into it, explicit. Yet once "double-consciousness" is itself revisited, or after-thought, as a gesture of philosophical discernment—as something of a conceptual incision made between Hegel and Emerson—the conventional notion

[13] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 433. Hereafter cited in the text as IM.

of split or dual awareness is transfigured and its scope significantly enlarged. For in the perspective of a philosophical genealogy, double-consciousness can be seen to inform nothing less than a critique of global modernity in both its philosophical and economic dimensions. Outlining a task of writing across and against the color line, double-consciousness models an alternative form of dialectical thought. As I will suggest, this is a form of thought up to the task of rethinking capital as well as color. To work out the terms of this critique, and the role of double-consciousness in it, is the aim of what follows.

What is the philosophical genealogy (and itinerary) of double-consciousness? Du Bois's intervention, as I propose in part I, mutely announces itself at the level of punctuation, for "double-consciousness" differs from an Emersonian term, "double consciousness," by only a hyphen. The significance of this hyphen has not only been overlooked by Du Bois's readers (consistently leading to misquotations even in works proposing to offer background for Du Bois's use of this term);[14] the hyphen has also been ignored as a dialectical mark in its own right, one that links Du Bois's thought as much to Hegel's dialectic of "self-consciousness" as to Emerson, and triangulates the three philosophers in a way that this chapter seeks to bring fully to light.[15] Upon closer scrutiny of this transatlantic lineage, which we will explore below, the

[14] Ironically, one of the most substantive genealogies of the term includes such a misquotation: see Dickson D. Bruce Jr., "W.E.B Du Bois and the Idea of Double Consciousness" *American Literature*, 64 (June 1992), 229-309.

[15] In an insight to which this chapter will return more than once, Agamben calls the hyphen "the most dialectical of punctuation marks" (222). Agamben is deeply interested in what he calls the "philosophy of punctuation," instances of which include Deleuze's meditations on the role of "and" as well as Heidegger's hyphenated terms. My suggestion above is that just as hyphens hold/space a term like "being-in-the-world," they can also operate intertextually, so that Du Bois's retention of the hyphen in "double-consciousness" at once dialecticizes the term, and superimposes Hegel's problematic onto an Emersonian term. If, as Agamben writes, hyphens introduce a "dialectic of unity and separation" between otherwise unrelated terms, in Du Bois's case, a hyphen also installs this dialectic between otherwise disparate thinkers and texts (222). See "Absolute Immanence" in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy,* trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford U P, 1999) 223-242.

hyphen proves to be the critical element in Du Bois's construction of a term for racialized self-consciousness. For it implies not a redoubling of consciousness so much as the fracture and stalling of reflexive self-consciousness itself. Furthermore, the division/duplication at stake in "double-consciousness," unlike those famously staged in the dialectic of lord and bondsman, prefigures no moment of supersession—no *Aufhebung*—other than the exposition of its own dialectical stasis. Suspended historically between the positions of independent and dependent consciousness, "master" and "slave," double-consciousness redefines the terms of the dialectic at stake.

In part II, we turn from terminological concerns about the transatlantic genealogy (or rather, etymology) of "double-consciousness" to some of its practical applications in Du Bois's sociological thought. We will ask, then, how the theoretical modifications inscribed in the punctuation of double-consciousness re-emerge at the level of social-scientific epistemology. I will argue that just as the formation of double-consciousness attests to the expiration of Hegel's dialectical machine and its corresponding teleology, Du Bois's epistemology of social life suspends logical induction of natural laws in order to discern, through historical retrospection, the limits of ignorance in human life. This discernment involves an unwavering attention to the phenomenality of chance, since chance is a phenomenon whose inherence within rational human action is only legible at a historical remove, in its rigorous "after-thought." I argue that such a positive weighting of the unintended and unknowable, as well as Du Bois's insistence upon the structural belatedness informing any insight into the truth of history, contributes to what, decades later, appears as the original, if avowedly Marxian, conception of historicity at work in *Black Reconstruction*. I will claim that there are in fact two reconstructions at work in this magnum opus: first, the phenomenon known as "Reconstruction" of the Southern states whose story Du

Bois is retelling by telling its *black* story for the first time; second, the methodological reconstruction of source materials, now removed form their intended function, that make the past legible under the sign, precisely, of its contingency.[16]

I. Philosophy's Middle Passage

Anaphora

A reader of *The Souls of Black Folk* who knows something of this book's reception will perhaps be struck by the casual manner in which Du Bois brings up the term "double-consciousness." It is mentioned almost in passing, and with the ostensive aim of situating "the Negro" in a line of great historical races. The Negro, Du Bois explains, is "a sort of seventh son," coming "after the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian." Unlike the other members of this racial anthropology, the modern Negro's gifts are the bounties not of location but dislocation. This origin in uprootedness, according to Du Bois, situates him at the interstice of two distinct anthropological legacies, American and Negro, neither of which he can directly claim. In this way, he is

> born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (*Souls* 365).

[16] A form of double-consciousness has been thought to organize Du Bois's manner of citing source material in *Black Reconstruction* by marking the limits of foresight, and by limning the historical perception that emerges in the after-thought of the past in the present. For a reading of Du Bois's method of citation in *Black Reconstruction* —including the way the strategy of after-thought transforms racist source-material into the basis for an argument about revolutionary blackness—see Thomas C. Holt, " 'A Story of Ordinary Human Beings': The Sources of Du Bois's Historical Imagination" (*South Atlantic Quarterly* 112.3 [Summer 2013]), 419-436. Hereafter cited in the text.

These lines have been cited so often that it is all too easy to overlook their manner of enunciation. A second look, or a sort of double reading, nevertheless shows Du Bois adapting a specific rhetorical strategy for describing the "veil" with which the American Negro is born: anaphora. Anaphora repeats a word or phrase in successive clauses (here: "*It* is a peculiar sensation, *this* double-consciousness, *this* sense *of*…, *of* measuring…"; "*two*-ness…*two* thoughts, *two* unreconciled strivings; *two* warring ideals…"). This anaphoric return lends a swift sense of movement to the passage, while at the same time indicating the role, within this movement, played by the unusual term, "double-consciousness." Du Bois places it in a syntactic position from which it both substitutes for preceding clauses and is modified by others in turn,[17] as if to imply that what is said cannot be said just once, nor in just one way; rather, it must develop (in an almost photographic sense) through "a method of 'after-thoughts'"—that is, in a dialectical play of before and after, of point and counterpoint, until a structure of thought emerges as a pattern or constellation, not an edifice.[18] Similarly, the double nature of the thing defined (the "second sight" of the Negro, his "two-ness," his "double-consciousness"), labors to come to speech, and thus proves itself to be in excess of any one name.

In this semantic restlessness, "double-consciousness" cannot be assimilated to a unitary state of "true self-consciousness," even while it calls up and revises this idea, adding a new link to its metonymic chain ("no true self-consciousness…[but] double-consciousness"). Indeed,

[17] The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists both these functions—repetition and substitution—in its definition of anaphora, while also noting the liturgical derivation of the term as "that part of the Eucharistic service which includes the consecration, oblation, and communion." It is possible to see Du Bois's use of anaphora here as drawing upon this function of transsubstantiation.

[18] David Levering Lewis, in his "Introduction" to *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), explains that Du Bois described his method of writing as a "method of 'after-thoughts'" to his "politely distressed" publisher as proofs for the book delayed and deadlines passed (xi). It is interesting to consider the concept of after-thought, as Du Bois perhaps inspires us to do with his turn of phrase, as a way of addressing the importance of retrospective anticipation, a kind of inverse of the future anterior in which the decisive factor is not what will have been the case, but what the case was going to be.

double-consciousness only really acquires meaning anaphorically, as a counter to "true self-consciousness" and an iteration of "sense," "sensation" and feel[ing]." And, just as anaphora draws attention to the words "this" and "two" by repeating and precisely *not* defining them (the indicative deictic "this" precludes definition just as "two" denotes only a power of duplication, rather than a given quantity), so too does "double-consciousness" suspend the construal of a unitary meaning for itself. Instead, each of Du Bois's nouns above—"sensation," "double-consciousness," "sense"—emphasizes the interval between experience and its naming. As the passage unfolds, each term depends upon "second sight" for its intelligibility, upon a subsequent iteration to attest to the provisionality of what it is called. "Double-consciousness" is part of this rhythm, marking a measure of thought neither as master noun, nor as subordinate clause, but as a pause that marks how description—and the tug towards and back from meaning—resumes. The absence of a clear definition for double-consciousness is thus less an omission on Du Bois's part than an indication of the peculiar temporality that makes its experience describable. By noting this rhythmic push-and-pull in Du Bois's language, I would like to suggest that anaphora grants him the discretion to precisely *not* find a name for African American subjectivity, and yet to propose, in that name's place, an inner dialectic—a sort of lived anaphora—by which "the Negro" is formed and de-formed, by which his soul finds language and also leaves it.

Hyphen

This anaphoric oscillation informs the manner in which "double-consciousness" functions as a philosophical citation. For the term is not exactly Du Bois's coinage; rather, as Ernest Allen Jr. has recently noted, it appears in Ralph Waldo Emerson and William James as "double consciousness"; echoes Johann Gottlieb Herder's notions of cultural "gift"; reworks the

lament of Goethe's Faust who exclaims, "Two souls, alas! Reside within my breast, and each is eager for a separation!"; and invokes the Hegelian dialectic of self-consciousness.[19] Allen suggests that Hegel's influence is perhaps most pronounced: "Du Bois's frame of reference can be traced ultimately to Hegel's phenomenology, where true-self-consciousness—supposedly lacking in the Negro—was dependent upon the mutual recognition of human beings by one another" (52). And yet, this "trac[ing]" back to Hegel does not terminate the play among Du Bois's clutch of philosophical ancestors so much as intensify it.[20] For as we will see, the assertion of double-consciousness as a dialectical model is not just implicit, but decisive for how it is understood, beginning with what Giorgio Agamben has called "the most dialectical of punctuation marks, since it unites only to the degree that it distinguishes and distinguishes only to the degree that it unites"—namely, the hyphen.[21]

Du Bois's hyphen distinguishes his "double-consciousness" from Emerson's at the very moment it firmly unites them. For the latter term, "double consciousness," appears as early as an

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[19] Quoted in Ernest Allen, Jr., "Rethinking Du Boisian 'Double-Consciousness'" in *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, ed. Lewis R. Gordon (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 52.

[20] Perhaps the most rigorous excavation to date of Du Bois's philosophical influences and ancestors, Shamoon Zamir's *Dark Voices: W.E.B. Du Bois and American Thought, 1888-1903* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995) notes that "There is not an identity of meaning between Hegel and Du Bois's critical reading of Hegel. Du Bois does not *adopt* Hegel but *adapts* him to his own ends" (114). In an important corollary to this assertion, Zamir circumscribes Du Bois's engagement with Hegel: "By focusing on the middle chapters of the *Phenomenology*, Du Bois cuts away the Hegelian concern with the development of consciousness toward the first stages of self-consciousness and also with the all-synthesizing idealistic monism of Absolute Spirit at the end of the *Phenomenology*. Du Bois's emphasis is not on the singular *Geist* but on souls….Therefore, in using Hegel as a resource Du Bois neither psychologizes history nor reproduces a progressive and optimistic teleology of enlightenment. He moves instead toward a complex historicization of psychology" (115). While I am mostly in agreement with Zamir's point, my argument above roughs the clean edges of what Zamir says Du Bois "cuts away" from Hegel, since the historicization of psychology at stake in double-consciousness involves nothing less than a *counter-phenomenology of unhappy spirit*, that is, a historical phenomenology of unsublated "souls." For this reason, Du Bois cannot be said to bracket Absolute *Geist* so much as show that the dialectical progression towards it has itself reached an impasse. For another thorough genealogy of the term "double-consciousness" that clearly maps out its dual inheritance of both German idealism and American pragmatism, see the aforementioned "W.E.B. Du Bois and the Idea of Double Consciousness."

[21] See note 6 above.

1842 lecture that Emerson gave entitled "The Transcendentalist," and again in the late essay from 1860, "Fate," in each case without a hyphen. Thus we can ask: why does Du Bois insert the mark? Following Allen's and others' suggestion, we may turn to Hegel for a response. In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, the prize of the life-and-death struggle which defines lord and bondsman receives a technical name: *Selbstbewußtsein*, translated as "self-consciousness." A hyphen therefore attempts to preserve in English the compound form of the original German. At the same time, however, this translation-via-hyphenation also installs within Hegel's term that interval of self-difference characteristic of the dialectic itself. For what the hyphen of "self-consciousness" retains and reveals is precisely the element of struggle constitutive of *Selbstbewußtsein*. Du Bois's hyphen, similarly, elicits this element of constitutive and integral striving, but redoubles it, so that it passes not only between self and consciousness of self but also, inasmuch as the term draws simultaneously upon Hegel and Emerson, between "double consciousness" and "self-consciousness." In this way, Du Bois's hyphen is not dyadic but *triadic* in orientation. Situated somewhere between two landmark nineteenth-century philosophies—Hegel's idealism and Emerson's transcendentalism—the hyphen of double-consciousness locates Du Bois's thought between the Old and New Worlds, at the heart of the black Atlantic, whence, like so many African American narratives of the self both before and since, it completes the middle passage of a transatlantic triangle.[22]

[22] The motif of the Middle Passage is not only foundational to black literature but also to its theorization, serving as a consistent mythopoietic principle for each. In the critical record, we can perhaps consult three landmark texts of African American criticism for formulations of the principal axes along which this theorization has taken place: Robert Stepto's *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (Urbana & Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1979) imagines the middle passage as an observable narrative trope of impossible returns; conversely, Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1988) draws upon the middle passage precisely to arrive at the origins of African America; finally, Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993) sees in the middle passage a "counterculture of modernity" which confirms the West's history of creolization, mutual contamination, and métissage. The triangular dynamic between these positions can be described as

This triangulation is worth emphasizing inasmuch as double-consciousness has most consistently been theorized as a dualism. No less an authority than Paul Gilroy, for instance, misquotes Du Bois in his subtitle to *The Black Atlantic*: "Modernity and Double Consciousness." The opening salvo of Gilroy's book, furthermore, indicates that this misquotation is a kind of efficacious oversight, for it serves as a hermeneutic strategy for the coming argument:

> Striving to be both European and black requires some specific forms of double consciousness [sic]. By saying this I do not mean to suggest that taking on either or both of these unfinished identities necessarily exhausts the subjective resources of any particular individual. However, where racist, nationalist, or ethnically absolutist discourses orchestrate political relationships so that these identities appear to be mutually exclusive, occupying the space between them or trying to demonstrate their continuity has been viewed as a provocative and even oppositional act of political insubordination.
>
> The contemporary black English, like the Anglo-Africans of earlier generations and perhaps, like all blacks in the West, stand between (at least) two great cultural assemblages, both of which have mutated through the course of the modern world that formed them and assumed new configurations. At present they remain locked symbiotically in an antagonistic relationship marked out by the symbolism of colours which adds to the conspicuous cultural power of their central Manichean dynamic….(1)

Gilroy frames his intervention here as a corrective to "racist, nationalist, or ethnically absolutist discourses" whose reductive understanding of Western modernity is "Manichean"— that is, spelled out in black and white and built upon the color line. Such discourses, he explains,

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follows: Stepto's problematic of original displacement is symmetrically countered by Gates's doctrine of displaced (but traceable) origins, while the symmetry between these two arguments is itself conceptualized by Gilroy as the basis of their mutual implication and inextricability. Edited volumes such as *The Black Columbiad: Defining Moments in African American Literature and Culture,* eds. Werner Sollors and Marina Diedrich (Cambridge and London: Harvard U P, 1994) and *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage,* eds. Marina Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Carl Pedersen (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1999) have moved along edges of this critical triangle, contributing ever newer material to the perhaps interminable labor of thinking an event that is at the origin but that is no origin itself, that founds historical memory but is itself only trauma. The irreducible metalepsis at stake in the middle passage has made its creative and critical reconstructions both unavoidable and, ironically, a "rite of passage" for many black writers and critics. As Charles Johnson and Robert Hayden (whose most famous works are each entitled "Middle Passage") knew all too well, an imaginative return to this primal scene of black history must always be begun anew. My argument above seeks to position Du Boisian double-consciousness within this legacy of *reconstructing* the middle passage; Du Bois's contribution to this reconstruction has been overlooked, I suggest, because double-consciousness is thought to be dyadic, rather than triadic, in form.

overlook the troubled double inheritance of Europe and Africa by "the contemporary black English" and the "require]d]" and "specific forms of double consciousness" that this inheritance entails. Gilroy's importation of Du Bois's term is, in this sense, a rhetorical strategy for redressing fallacies of historical separation. "Double consciousness" indexes the ways in which the histories of Africa and Europe are not only intertwined, but linked precisely by virtue of their antagonism. This makes the term both a metonym for the fractured identity of diasporic Africans everywhere ("all blacks in the West"), and the cipher of countermodernity.

But while Gilroy's "double consciousness" effectively complicates the easy dualisms of nationalist and racist discourse, it also re-establishes this dualism in turn. For what Gilroy's unhyphenated variant of Du Bois's term leaves out (perhaps given the British locus of his investigation) is the *tertium quid* that logically and historically emerges from out of European-African antagonism itself. This third term is, in truth, nothing other than an expression of modernity's structural antagonism. However, as such, this third is a concept of *oppositional relation*, a force that triangulates the diametrical opposition of Europe and Africa into a properly dialectical transatlanticism.

What, then, is this third term? What else but the New World, a continent founded upon, but also definitive of, the asymmetrical relations of Europe and Africa as colonizer and colonized. It is also America that forms the *tertium quid* included within Du Bois's hyphenated "double-consciousness," for it is America that reveals and requires Europe and Africa to be strange (and violently non-consensual) bedfellows. As Christopher Mulvey has noted in his discussion of William Wells Brown, the New World is an emblem of fecund, hemispheric contradiction and therefore dialectical through and through. Brown's 1853 novel *Clotel* reimagines America as the very child of contradiction: "Behold the Mayflower anchored at

Plymouth Rock, the slave-ship in James River. Each a parent."[23] Just as Brown's heroine, Clotel, is born of Thomas Jefferson's illegitimate union with one of his slaves, so too is black America, in Brown's metaphor, the disfavored offspring of Europe and Africa. It is to this originary disfavor—to what we might call the countermodern inception of blackness—that Du Bois's hyphenated "double-consciousness" corresponds. For double-consciousness, in its dialectical construction, names the "spiritual strivings" of those whose existence is fundamentally consigned to the dark and disavowed side of New World promise. In omitting Du Bois's mark, Gilroy not only elides America's role as the third corner (and economic partner) of the colonial slave-trade; more importantly, he obscures the triangular shape of the diasporic problematic itself. Du Bois, by contrast, conceives "double-consciousness" not in this dualistic manner, but as a dialectic of modernity, one which indicates both the condition of possibility and the condition of legibility for European-African antagonism as such.

We can begin to guess the kind of philosophical and political gesture contained within Du Bois's hyphen, then, as a muted mark refuting fallacies of separation between Africa and Europe on the one hand, and Hegel's Europe and Emerson's America on the other. In the form of queries about punctuation, then, let us gauge the terms of the transatlantic problematic sketched above: how does Du Bois's "double-consciousness" differs from its unhyphenated precursor? And how "double-consciousness" modifies the translation of Hegelian "self-consciousness"? These questions cannot be considered apart, even while they are different and require separate treatment. Indeed, in a properly trigonometric sense, they invite us to take philosophical measure

[23] Quoted in Christopher Mulvey, "The Fugitive Self and the New World of the North: William Wells Brown's Discovery of America" in *The Black Columbiad*, 99-111.

of Du Boisian "double-consciousness" in the angle of con/di-vergence between American and German idealism.[24]

If "self-consciousness" and "double consciousness" sit side by side, what is indicated by the presence or absence of a hyphen in each case? A glance at a grammar book suffices to remind us that hyphens in English are often used to disambiguate the meaning of words known as "modifying compounds." To use an example from the New York Library *Writer's Guide*, an "old-furniture salesman" sells old furniture, while an "old furniture salesman" may be elderly himself. In the case that concerns us here, it is worth considering how "self-consciousness" and "double consciousness" themselves operate adjectivally—that is, as functions of modification. The hyphen in "self-consciousness" indicates "self-" as a prefix to "consciousness" so that, somewhat like "old-" and "furniture," the two terms indicate an integral entity: self-consciousness. Emerson's unhyphenated "double consciousness," on the other hand, can be read as denoting two consciousnesses that are at play at the same time, forming something short of an integral whole. And so where the "self-" of Hegelian self-consciousness describes a properly dialectical singularity, the "double" of Emersonian "double consciousness" reworks the wholeness of this figure into two halves' ambiguous or imperfect fit. Emerson's "double consciousness" (in the form repeated by Gilroy) bears none of the drama of unity and separation that characterizes the dialectic.

[24] Anita Patterson has written persuasively and at length upon Du Bois's inheritance of the term "double consciousness" from Emerson in *From Emerson to King: Democracy, Race, and the Politics of Protest* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1997). However, Patterson makes the opposite mistake from Gilroy, as she ignores the importance of Du Bois's hyphen by consistently misquoting Emerson as having hyphenated "double consciousness" himself. This misquotation is possible, and perhaps excusable, in Patterson's case because her book is not concerned with the transatlantic triangle I am suggesting above. However, once the German idealist tradition is introduced into the critical equation, it is no longer possible to ignore the hyphen's diacritical difference without also ignoring the dialectical difference it makes.

Du Bois's syncretic "double-consciousness" differs from both these positions by simultaneously recapitulating Emerson's idea of a fractured whole, while nevertheless insisting upon a kind of dialectical integrity in precisely this figure. What doubles in Du Bois's term, therefore, is not "consciousness," as in Emerson, but "self-consciousness," as described by Hegel. The hyphen makes "double-consciousness" legible as a palimpsest of double-self-consciousness in which the "self-," understood as a unit of identity, has been reduced or crossed out: double-~~self-~~consciousness. In order to assess the significance of what might be called Du Bois's egological reduction, it is important to see how the constitutive terms of "double-consciousness" appear in their respective sources.

Double Consciousness

"Double consciousness" is a technical term in Emerson's thought, forming the central preoccupation of "The Transcendentalist," one of a series of talks Emerson delivered on the topic of "The Times" in 1842, and later published in the *Dial* in 1843. While "The Transcendentalist" is usually considered to be something of a signature statement of Emerson's early philosophy, it is also an exemplary discourse on the phenomenology of experience. In the essay Emerson describes a figure or character-type he calls "the transcendentalist," whose mind rests in irremediable tension with its own powers of abstraction. The speaking position, or "I" of the transcendentalist, conditions what he says or thinks, but stubbornly remains hidden from view, unable to emerge as an object of awareness. Emerson describes the problem through the following metaphor: "I—this thought which is called I,—is the mould into which the world is poured like melted wax. The mould is invisible, but the world betrays the shape of the mould."[25]

[25] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Transcendentalist," *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson,* ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 83-84. Hereafter cited in the text.

Theo Davis has recently argued that the experience at stake here is neither subjective, nor objective, but universal: "Emerson's writing," she says, "aims to produce universal experience—experience which does not depend upon the physical senses or even upon the human subject"; "not just the essays but all the world exists, in Emerson's account, in order to make the universal experience that is moving awareness possible…."[26] The invisible "mould" of world, then, is universally available, and must be read in the "shape" of the world that "betrays" it. And yet there is an ironic implication to this, which Davis herself is quick to note: if universal experience "moves" awareness but is irreducible to it, then the content of experience—not the shape of the world but what's *in* it—remains at once indispensable and insignificant. How experiential content takes on significance is marked by contingency; the value of an experience, much like an emblem or word, is determined by virtue of the invisible differences that mold and shape it as such. It is precisely this arbitrary aspect of phenomenal "signifiers" that Emerson defines through his concept of "double consciousness" when he writes:

> two states of thought diverge every moment, and stand in wild contrast. To him who looks at his life from these moments of illumination, it will seem that he skulks and plays a mean, shiftless and subaltern part in the world[…] Much of our reading, much of our labor, seems mere waiting; it was not that we were born for. So little skill enters into these works, so little do they mix with the divine life, that it really signifies little what we do, whether we turn a grindstone, or ride, or run,

[26] Theo Davis, *Formalism, Experience, and the Making of American Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge U P, 2007), 109. Davis's chapter on Emerson, " 'Life is an ecstasy': Ralph Waldo Emerson and A. Bronson Alcott" is especially interesting in the context of the current discussion because Davis there describes how Emerson's writing seeks to produce universal experience—"a life without characteristics, an experience apart form the conditions of subject and object" (110)— through "an abiding concern with emblem-making and prose analysis" (110). In the terms of the above, we can say she details Emerson's redefinition of Hegelian *Geist* (as the universal experience par excellence). Like Hawthorne and John Neal, Emerson imagines the relation of experience to subjects "in a manner analogous to but not identical with the way that meaning passes through signs" (110). According to this logic, the *expressibility* of a figure corresponds to the conditions of its universal experience, rather than to a representation, argument, or "linguistic embodiment" of it (111). How, I am asking above, does Emerson's "Transcendentalist," in taking such universalist aim, produce an unexpected contradiction between the speaker and subject of his discourse? That is to say, if the transcendentalist is a figure upon whose anti-sociality the essay insists, to what extent is this figure also thereby barred from an awareness of the universality of his experience?

> or make fortunes, or govern the state. The worst feature of this double consciousness is, that the two lives, of the understanding and of the soul, which we lead, really show very little relation to each other; never meet and measure each other: one prevails now, all buzz and din; and the other prevails then, all infinitude and paradise; and, with the progress of life, the two discover no greater disposition to reconcile themselves. (92-93)

Here, the "two states of thought," dividing "understanding" from "soul," diverge by a certain necessity. Should "reading" or "labor," as objects of understanding, become of more than "little" significance to the soul, they would cloud glimpses of the "divine life" with which the soul already mixes but "little." Thus the "worst feature of this double consciousness"—its irreparable hiatus between these two spheres of experience—cannot be thought aside from what enables "moments of illumination" to occur. Transcendental illumination is only ever traced back from the dull shadow of works in which the understanding of the "I" is cast. It retains a sense of the contingency of experience without devaluing it on this account. Emerson's "double consciousness" is thus the indisposition of the mind to diminish a sense of the polarity by which it is structured. It checks or delimits the significance of experiences only to the extent that it indicates a mind's sobriety towards the manner in which significance itself comes about.

Self-sundering

The problem of a mind divided from the particularities of what it undergoes also preoccupies Hegel in the *Phenomenology of Spirit.* In an early chapter detailing the dialectic of self-certainty,[27] Hegel describes consciousness as itself torn or "sundered" between the colorful "Appearance" [*Ersheinung*] of the phenomenal world, and the pure, unitary "I" for which, as he

[27] For Hegel, self-certainty [*Gewißheit seiner selbst*] contains the elements which only self-consciousness will realize. The difference between the two terms, in other words, is the implicitness of consciousness to the first, as compared to the explicitness of consciousness to the latter. While self-certainty names the structure of consciousness, self-consciousness is its effect, or "*what consciousness knows in knowing itself*" (103).

puts it, "differences…are none" (100). Like Emerson's rift between understanding and soul, this conflicted state results in consciousness's "self-diremption" or "self-sundering [*Entzweiung],"* which Hegel describes in the following terms:

> This self-identical essence is therefore related only to itself; 'to itself' implies relationship to an "other," and the *relation-to-self* is rather a *self-sundering*; or, in other words, that very self-identicalness is an inner difference. These *sundered moments* are thus *in and for themselves* each an opposite—*of an other*; thus in each moment the "other" is at the same time expressed; or each is not the opposite of an "other" but only a *pure opposite*; and so each is therefore in its own self the opposite itself. In other words, it is not an opposite at all, but is purely for itself, a pure, self-identical essence that has no difference in it. (100, original emphasis) [28]

While Hegel begins on the note of consciousness's "self-identical essence," what he accounts for here is how the movement of self-identity (and what he calls "relation-to-self") can feel so fractured, while in fact attesting to a greater unity or integrity. "Self-sundering" is constitutive of a self-same "I" because self-identity is always a "relationship to an 'other.'" Thus the "self-sundering" of consciousness cleaves into two moments (of "inner difference") which, in their very opposition, "express" one another. In the paragraph immediately following the one above (§163), Hegel refines this dialectic as the interplay of "Force" [*Kraft*] and "explanation" [*Erklären*: literally, "clarification"]: when consciousness "explains" that of which it is conscious, it allows the forces by which it is structured to "first freely stand[] forth" (101). Like the world that, for Emerson, betrays the invisible mould by which it is shaped, explanation for Hegel serves

[28] Hegel's description of self-estrangement later also has a notably dual structure: "The world of this Sprit breaks up into two. The first is the world of reality or of its self-alienation; but the other is that which Spirit, rising above the first, constructs for itself in the Aether of pure consciousness. This second world, standing in antithesis to that alienation, is for that very reason not free from it; on the contrary, it is really only the other form of that alienation which consists precisely in being conscious of two different worlds, and which embraces both (§487, 296). While space does not permit here, it is worth noting how Hegel's description of a first world of self-alienation and a second, conscious one capable of embracing alienation as such is closely mirrored Du Bois's descriptions in *Souls* and elsewhere of the relation between the white, "other world" (from which the American Negro is alienated and into which he has "second sight") and the "colored world." The two go up to make what, in *Dusk of Dawn*, Du Bois calls "the Negro's double environment" (*Writings*, 681).

to clear a space in which consciousness may relate to its own power, even and especially when this power appears to it as "other."

Self-consciousness

In both Emerson and Hegel, then, the powers of abstraction and the contents of experience form a dialectical pair whose interdependence is not immediately evident to the consciousness in which they are operative. Furthermore, in both philosophers the dialectic remains hidden because its moments correspond to two distinct forms of awareness: for Emerson's transcendentalist, these are his unsatisfying worldly entanglements on the one hand, and the universal mindedness that invisibly determines them on the other; for Hegel, they are the "pure self-movement" (101) of consciousness and its apparent opposite, the alterity of objects perceived moment-to-moment.

And yet at this point a real difference also emerges between the two philosophers: whereas Emerson insists that lives of the "understanding" and the "soul" "show very little relation to each other; never meet and measure each other," and therefore breaks off his investigation at this point, Hegel decides to stage precisely the meeting of antitheses that Emerson deems impossible, or rather, too minor or transient—too "little"—to be meaningful. In the *Phenomenology*'s fourth chapter on the dialectic of self-consciousness, which is also known as the dialectic of lord and bondsman, he does so by asking: What would be required to set off, and thus show, "self-sundering" in its unity? How might one bridge the "wild contrast" between consciousness and its objects by bringing their very distance—and thus their interrelation—before the mind? In a manner no doubt resonant for the purposes of our discussion, Hegel's answer is to *double* consciousness: when the consciousness in which "self-sundering" originally

takes place is duplicated, this allows *two* self-sundered consciousnesses to come upon their sundered essences. In this way, argues Hegel, each consciousness has the opportunity to glimpse in the "other" those divisions that are already immanent to itself and so become a true, actualized *self-consciousness*.

One may notice a pattern here, as the dialectic of self-consciousness follows the same steps as self-certainty: just as self-*certainty* involved the diremption of consciousness into the form of "inner difference" whose antithetical moments are explanation and Force, so self-*consciousness*, by doubling, sunders into an "independent" and "dependent" consciousness that Hegel aligns with master and slave, respectively. The two, with a violence characteristic of diremption, engage in a life-and-death struggle. Mirroring the inner division of consciousness in which certainty of itself is achieved in the "freely stand[ing] forth" of Force in explanation, self-consciousness can be achieved only once the pure negativity of the "independent consciousness" recognizes its own limitation in the objects of the "dependent" consciousness's labor, and the "dependent" consciousness supersedes itself in existing for its "independent" counterpart. At stake, then, is a process Hegel calls the "duplicating of self-consciousness in its oneness" (112).

This insistence upon the necessity of "duplicating" is at the heart of the *Phenomenology*'s fourth chapter, when it turns explicitly to the figures of lord and bondsman. Here, doubling exteriorizes the internal division of consciousness so that this split can be recognized in a visible or phenomenal antagonism. Resuming the movement described above, *two* consciousnesses come upon one another, each initially wishing simply to overcome the other as "an independent being" and also to overcome the alienation of seeing its own self, outside itself (§180). These conflicting wishes operate simultaneously on both sides, leading the two figures to enter into a life-and-death struggle. In the course of this struggle, of course, the conflict occurring *outside* of

both self-consciousnesses—or, more precisely, *between* them—is recognized as what already has been taking place *within* each. It is thus in the "double movement of the two self-consciousnesses" that "each sees the other do the same as it does; each does itself what it demands of the other…." (112). Hegel rightly places a great deal of emphasis upon this "see[ing]," as well as upon the scene of the "double movement" in general, since one's own exposure in and *as* a double of the other is what enables "the unity of [self-consciousness] in its otherness [to] become *explicit* for it" (110, original emphasis).[29] In short, mutual exhibition always precedes mutual recognition.

But does the moment of exhibition always lead to recognition? Certainly, it leads to the dialectical *condition* for recognition—that is, to a form of recognizability easily identified by the philosopher—though this condition may or may not be fulfilled by the figures involved. For Hegel, showing how recognition emerges as a possibility, how it exists as a real potentiality, is sufficient for the coherence of his argument. And yet it also risks making the life-and-death struggle itself more of a spectacle of dialectical logic than a way to immediately enlighten the drama's protagonists (who are mere "shapes," after all). Indeed, we as readers are regaled with the balletic intricacy of their conflict while the possibility of a profound misapprehension emerges in the figures themselves. Rather than being guided, as we are, to the truth, they are consigned, in an ironic twist, to remain equally vulnerable to the fate Hegel reserves for the lord alone: that of *not* recognizing the other as the truth of the self. Put a little differently, Hegel's

[29] As Robert Pippin notes, pivotal §177 of the *Phenomenology* lays out the stakes of realizing self-consciousness by indicating its impersonal or common dimension. Several times in this important paragraph, Hegel refers to "*ein Selbstbewußtsein*," *a* self-consciousness, as when he writes: "A self-consciousness exists *for a self-consciousness*," and "A self-consciousness, in being an object, is as much 'I' as 'object'." (110). The generic quality of self-consciousness implies the necessity of *another* self-consciousness in which the first is reflected, and becomes an objective "Notion" for itself. See "On Hegel's Claim that Self-Consciousness is 'Desire Itself' [*Begierde überhaupt*]," in *Hegel and Self-Consciousness: Desire and Death in the Phenomenology of Spirit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2011), 6-53, and esp. 48-49.

symmetrical shapes are just as *unlikely* to realize their own roles as they are sure to be superseded by the imperative of Hegel's own narrative progression.

What are the implications of this subtle fracture between the story Hegel tells of his shapes of consciousness and the fate of those shapes as such? It can be summarized in this way: while we, alongside Hegel, are privy to a stage, a mere scene, in the historicity of Spirit, the experience of historicity itself can easily be lost upon those who act the part. They, instead, may languish in their roles, may see their fate under the very species of eternity. Hegel can claim, then, that a "master" exists in the pure negativity of having forsaken life because a "slave," clinging to life, has forsaken negativity; that, conversely, a slave's "dependent consciousness" only supersedes itself through labor for, and in recognition of, his double, a master. Yet the manner in which these figures themselves know—or *desire* to know—that "action by one side only would be useless because what is to happen can only be brought about by both" (112), is left entirely in shadow.

The scene following the drama of lord and bondsman, it is worth mentioning, involves something of a soliloquy by the lord. Here, Hegel describes "Unhappy consciousness" [*das unglückliche Bewußtsein*] whose "form" [*Gestalt*] is precisely the ignorant dividedness of a self-consciousness in its as-yet unsublated or unreconciled state. And yet where we might wish for a more complete phenomenology of *Aufhebung* interrupted, Hegel concedes only a momentary digression in the form of two historical philosophies: Stoicism and Skepticism. The logical forms of these two systems, Hegel states, are antitheses whose symmetrical limitations can be duly rounded out into full dialectical clarity. Thus the renunciatory form of Stoicism grants consciousness a pure negativity, or "simple freedom of itself," that Skepticism in turn sublates as the reality of doubt. This, for Hegel, prepares Spirit for grasping that the "duplication which

formerly was divided between two individuals, the lord and the bondsman, is now lodged in one" [126 §206]). Liberation of true self-consciousness can now occur when these two polarities of mind are recognized in their unity—that is, in a "thinking where consciousness as a particular individuality is reconciled with pure thought itself" (§216).[30] Again, it is the *condition* for dialectical reconciliation that is defined, not the mode of its achievement.

Drawing up the *image* of the duplicating of self-consciousness in its oneness continually takes indisputable precedence in the *Phenomenology* over expounding the experiential ground of self-consciousness, and precedence, too, over the ethical relations at stake therein. It is as if at the very moment Hegel claims to fulfill his promise of arriving at a reconciled self-consciousness, his own narrative bifurcates into two irreconcilable planes of analysis—that of the philosopher and that of the subject he describes—ironically reproducing a version of that "double consciousness" that he attributes to the Unhappy consciousness under Skepticism.[31] For Hegel, *doppelte Bewußtsein*, or "double consciousness," is a phase of consciousness in which it is at once "self-liberating, unchangeable, and self-identical," and "self-bewildering and self-perverting" (126)—but, significantly, does not yet know itself to be *both*. From the idealist's perch—that is, the perspective of Absolute Spirit to which Hegel masterfully invites his reader in the *Phenomenology*'s "Introduction"—it is the "self-liberating, unchangeable, and self-identical" perspective that emerges, rendering the scene of subjugation sublimely legible as a moment in

[30] In his lectures of 1938-9 on the theme of "Philosophy and Wisdom," Alexandre Kojève eloquently describes the *second* dialectic which characterizes Hegel's narrative method—namely, one between the philosopher and his protagonists (consciousness, self-consciousness, Spirit). The Philosopher remains in a position of exteriority to which the protagonists only gradually accede: "People generally forget," writes Kojève, "that…every Hegelian conception, has a double aspect: an *ideal* or, if you will, abstract aspect; and a *real* or, if you will, concrete or 'existential' aspect. And it is only the entirety of both aspects that constitutes what Hegel calls the *Begriff* (the concrete concept)" (Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on Phenomenology of Spirit,* ed. Allan Bloom [Ithaca: Cornell U P, 1980], 94).

[31] "In Stoicism, self-consciousness is the simple freedom of itself. In Skepticism, this freedom becomes a reality, negates the other side of determinate existence, but really duplicates *itself*, and now knows itself to be duality." (126, §206, original emphasis, translation modified).

the history of Spirit. The shapes within this scene, meanwhile, are consigned to the "self-bewildering and self-perverting" side of subjectivity, whence "double consciousness" reveals not its unity but, on the contrary and as in Emerson, only an abiding sense of non-dialectical opposition. What becomes, then, of the unhappy souls of master and man?

Unhappy

One realm in which Hegel's "double consciousness"—as the narrative split between philosophy and experience—makes itself felt is terminology. For all the *Phenomenology*'s emphasis on dialectical progression towards Absolute Spirit, that is to say, the text offers no technical term for the historical *persistence* of unsublated experience, or what we might call an institutional form of *das Unglück*, or "Unhappiness" as such. Rather, by virtue of the dialectic's irrepressible movement, strictly momentary weight is given to the imperfect and aporetic forms of self-consciousness that are always on their way towards being superseded.[32] Hegel's faith in teleology, in what the *Phenomenology*'s "Preface" calls the "purposive activity" of Spirit (12),[33] cannot but disincline him from considering the numerous modalities in which dialectical unhappiness perpetuates, entrenches itself, and even metastasizes.[34] Little wonder, then, that

[32] Jean Hyppolite, for instance, claims that "Unhappy consciousness is the theme of the Phenomenology of Spirit" (190). And yet in its centrality it is less protagonist than antagonist, since Hegel's movement *supersedes* unhappiness, at once negating and maintaining division so that it may be glimpsed as a feature of the unity of the concrete universal of Spirit. See *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's* Phenomenology of Spirit, trans. Stanley Cherniak (Chicago: Northwestern U P, 1997).

[33] Hegel models this "purposive activity" on Aristotle's concept of entelechy which, as he writes, characterizes the completeness of nature as "what is immediate and *at rest*, the unmoved which is also *self-moving*, and as such is Subject. Its power to move, taken abstractly, is *being-for-self* or pure negativity. The result is the same as the beginning, only because the *beginning* is the *purpose*; in other words, the actual is the same as its Notion only because the immediate, as purpose, contains the self or pure actuality within itself" (12). Just as entelechy actualizes potentiality (*dunamis*) without putting it to work (*energeia*), "purpose" renders what is immediate and illegible, mediate and true (negated but retained, *aufgehoben*) in its Notion.

[34] This position is critiqued by Marx, whose 1844 manuscript dubs Hegelian teleology an "abstract, formal process." Giorgio Agamben offers a summary account of the problem at hand when, commenting

Hegel fails to develop a parallel "phenomenological" vocabulary for the forms of long-standing colonial subjugation he had occasion to witness in his own contemporaries: for instance, actual "lords" in the Southern United States and their African "bondsmen." For while the *Phenomenology* correlates phases in the development of (unhappy) self-consciousness with historical stages from Stoicism to Skepticism to Judaism and, finally, to the Christian dialectic of the Incarnation, such a philosophical historiography compels silence before the specific unhappiness(es) of Hegel's contemporary "moment," one which had witnessed the centuries-long degradation of millions of Africans beyond European shores.[35]

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upon the moment in the *Phenomenology*'s preface when Hegel introduces the question of the "Absolute," he compares mediation, which correlates all moments to the absolute, to a kind of tax collector, "demanding its percentage": "This percentage takes the form of renouncing the concrete grasp of each single event and each present instant of praxis in favour of deferral to the final instance of the total social process. Since the absolute is 'consequence', and 'only in the end is there truth', each single concrete moment of the process is real only as 'pure negativity' which the magic wand of dialectical mediation will transform—in the end—into the positive. There is but a short step from this to declaring that every moment in history is merely a means to an end, and the progressive historicism which dominates nineteenth-century ideology does it in a leap" (*Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience,* trans. Liz Heron [New York: Verso, 2007], 130. Hereafter cited in the text as IH).

[35] Space does not permit what would be a worthwhile comparative reading of Du Bois's double-consciousness as dialectical unhappiness and George Bataille's "negativity without use" which crystallizes in the figure of sovereignty. Like Du Bois, Bataille's emphasis falls upon forms of negativity that explode the teleology of Hegel's dialectic, and with it, the homogeneous temporal continuum. Unlike Bataille, however, Du Bois does not favor the figure of lord, but that of bondsman. Bataille's exchanges with Kojève on the point of post-historical man—that is, man after the dialectical machine, which makes of negativity a "resource" (as Hegel calls it), expires—are illuminating on this point. Bataille disagrees with Kojève's assertion that post-historical man must, in the absence of resourceful negativity, reconcile with his animal nature, and that "his arts, his loves, and his play must also become purely 'natural' again" (quoted in Agamben, *The Open*, trans. Kevin Attell [Stanford, CA: Stanford U P, 2004] 9). Bataille's rejoinder is that negativity could indeed *survive* the dialectic's "restricted economy," and that post-historical man would therefore become not animal, but *sovereign*. Derrida, in an otherwise sympathetic reading of Bataille, makes the point, as Kevin Attell has noted, that "all the attributes ascribed to sovereignty are borrowed from the (Hegelian) logic of 'lordship'" (quoted in *Giorgio Agamben: Beyond the Threshold of Deconstruction* [New York: Fordham U P, 2015], 222). In this way, Bataille's "negativity without use" is itself a logic of sovereignty without history. Agamben rejects Bataille's thought on this basis, and in *The Open* turns instead to "the anthropophorous animal (the body of the slave) [that] is the unresolved remnant that idealism leaves as an inheritance to thought…"(12). Agamben adds, in an elliptical hypothesis (that this project seeks at its heart to elaborate) that "the aporias of the philosophy of our time coincide with the aporias of this body that is irreducibly drawn and divided between animality and humanity" (12). In other words, the aporias of contemporary philosophy, and the beleaguered legacy of idealism, coincide in the racialized body, in the body of the doubly-conscious. See

This is not to say that Hegel was unaware or indifferent to the realities of colonialism and modern slavery. Indeed, as Susan Buck-Morss has convincingly argued in *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, "beyond a doubt Hegel knew about real slaves and their revolutionary struggles" and, "[i]n perhaps the most political expression of his career, he used the sensational events of Haiti as the linchpin in his argument in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. The actual and successful revolution of Caribbean slaves against their masters is the moment when the dialectical logic of recognition becomes visible as the thematics of world history, the story of the universal realization of freedom."[36] And yet, if this means, as Buck-Morss contends, that the dialectic of master and slave bears marks of that originality "by which philosophy burst out of the confines of academic theory and became a commentary on the history of the world" (60), it must also be noted that Hegel, however cognizant of slave economies, still heeds the teleological demand of his philosophical system: not to *dwell* on them, and hence, not to develop a vocabulary for the kind of "dwelling" the problem of modern slavery philosophically, and terminologically, demands.

His silence remains all the more conspicuous given the year of the *Phenomenology*'s publication, 1807, which itself bore witness to a peculiar double reality. It was the year of the passage of the Wilberforce Treaty, which abolished the transatlantic slave-trade to Britain and throughout most of Europe, reinforcing a growing abolitionist sentiment on both sides of the Atlantic.[37] Yet 1807 was also part of a decades-long period in which Europe, as Buck-Morss details, remained haunted by the specter of Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Haitian Revolution,

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Jacques Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve," *Writing and Difference,* trans. Alan Bass [London: Routledge, 2001], 317-350)

[36] Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2009), 59-60. Hereafter cited in the text.

[37] In America, specifically, the example of San Domingo especially emboldened and grew the size of abolition societies among the Pennsylvania Quakers and in other contingents across states with little financial stake in the trade such as New York, Delaware, and New Jersey.

which had begun in 1791. Just as much as the British abolition of the trade could be celebrated as evidence of the triumph of universalist principles, then, it remained grounded in a real and growing concern over the likelihood of slave insurrection on the scale suffered by France. As Buck-Morss puts it, "the self-liberation of the African slaves of Saint-Domingue gained for them, by force, the recognition of European and American whites—if only in the form of fear" (39).

It is the nature of this fear that is worth considering more closely, for although the situation in Haiti won slaves a certain "recognition" in the white world, the latter entailed less an anticipation of the *Aufhebung* of previous relations between masters and men than an urgency, acutely sensed among powerful whites, to re-negotiate the pragmatics of subjugation. This, indeed, is Du Bois's reading of the period, a case he persuasively makes as early as his first work, *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States, 1638-1870* (to which we will turn in more depth below). For Du Bois, Britain's sudden resolution to end the international trade and Napoleon's quick, cheap sale of the Louisiana territories ("for a song", he says) can each be seen as examples of a double-edged response, aiming at once to disavow the validity of Toussaint's revolution (by severing economic ties), and to give new weight to the dangers of governing distant colonies (74). The same goes for the Southern slave-holding states in America, who, as Du Bois explains, felt compelled to pass legislation between 1795-1804 limiting slave traffic on account of their proximity to the West Indies (this, while the slave-trading states of New England continued unceremoniously violating these measures until the South eventually rescinded them).[38] On both sides of the Atlantic, desire among whites, especially those who had

[38] Du Bois focuses a chapter of *Suppression* on the influence of "Toussaint L'Ouverture" and the Haitian revolution on American efforts to prohibit the trade. Indicating the disparity between Southern states, more directly affected by turmoil in the Caribbean, and Northern traders, he cites the "Act of 1803"— "a bill providing for the forfeiture of any ship which should bring into States prohibiting the same 'any negro,

any investment in slavery or the trade, was to preserve their interests. Thus "recognition" of the self-consciousness of the bondsmen hardly entailed working towards the supersession of African bondage and the realization of universal freedom. Rather, the fear in whose terms any recognition was couched precipitated the development new technologies for the suppression of revolutionary risk and the preservation of existing property relations.[39]

In Hegelian terms, these efforts strain against mutual recognition and amount, dialectically, to a desire for only more "unhappiness"—and not just for the slaves, but for owners and traders too, who actively delay the "necessary" realization of freedom. Thus the peculiarity of a white, economically-driven desire for institutionalizing "unhappiness"—what we might call a historical *pursuit* of unhappiness—is one that Hegel, for all his interest in slavery, was unable to address without abandoning that dimension of the *Phenomenology*'s grand narrative that sought to be world-historical. Still less could the philosopher have known the troubles seen by those who, over centuries, were forced into bondage and subject to more than just a dialectical despair. The souls of these black folk, in the age of their souls' systematic disavowal, lay beyond the historical, if not also the conceptual, scope of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Their story might begin to be located in a lacuna of that text, since Hegel famously breaks off the dialectic of

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mulatto, or other person of color'"—which was introduced into the House at the prompting of North Carolina on January 17, and passed into law on February 28 of that year. And yet "in spite of the prohibitory State laws, the African slave-trade to the United States continued to flourish. It was notorious that New England traders carried on a large traffic" (88).

[39] An episode from the period crystallizes the prevailing attitude: in 1794, nine years before North Carolina would spearhead an act prohibiting entry to "any negro, mulatto, or other person of color" from the West Indies, a Pennsylvania Congressman's petitioned on behalf of freed blacks in his state "for revision of the slave-trade laws and of the fugitive slave law, and for prospective emancipation," only to see the measure dismissed out of hand by his New England and Southern counterparts as "nothing but a farrago of the French metaphysics of liberty and equality." If we are to refer to something like "mutual recognition" in the aftermath of the Haitian revolution, especially among American masters and their African slaves, it must be while noting the role of such categorical dismissals, which bely a fundamental equation, within white minds, of black self-consciousness with imminent danger to white property. See Du Bois, *Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America*, *1638-1870, Writings* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1986), 86. Henceforth cited in the text as *Suppression*.

master and bondsman at the moment insurrection is implied. Yet the history of modern slavery, as the "peculiar institution" of dialectical unhappiness on a global scale, remains a problem outside the terms Hegel's purportedly historical narrative can offer. It is precisely to slavery's sorrows, then, that Du Bois shifts the philosophical scene.

Double-consciousness

How can one describe the unhappiness of the planter and trader—or more generally, the representative of colonial power—who, in being made aware of the self-consciousness of African slaves, recoils in horror and aims to suppress this consciousness at all costs for as long as possible? How can one make intelligible the unhappiness of the slave—or the colonized—whose being has been aligned with "thinghood" and who has witnessed the radical constriction of desire to a fugitive alternation between captivity and terror, quietude and blood? These, I'd like to suggest, are the questions to which Du Boisian double-consciousness is not only among the earliest to respond, but perhaps more importantly, the first to formulate. For as we have seen, Hegel's narrative "double consciousness" offers a "history" only of the "self-liberating" side of Spirit, resulting in a fatal terminological blindness concerning the stubbornly "self-bewildering and self-perverting" counterpart at stake in such questions. Furthermore, Hegel's insistence upon a teleological historical movement forecloses analysis of modernity's own unresolved dialectic of self-consciousness—namely, colonial slavery—which runs simultaneously *within* universal history and *against* it. Or put differently, the world-historical dimension of Hegel's grand dialectical narrative cannot but be revised in light of the institutionalization of what should have been a mere "station on the cross": the relation of lord and bondsman. If, as a contemporary commentator has suggested, "the dialectic is quite capable of being a historical category without,

as a consequence, having to fall into linear time," acknowledging such a modern counter-phenomenology of Spirit does not refute the terms of Hegel's account so much as seek to recognize its unwritten, dialectical double.[40] But how, exactly, can the shadow cast by teleological thought and *doppelte Bewußtsein* itself be brought to light?

Du Bois addresses this question by repeating an Emersonian gesture: he affirms a fundamental fracture between the "two lives, of the understanding and the soul"—or in Hegel's "double consciousness," of Spirit and world-history—which, rather than recognizing one another, compete for dominance and "discover no greater disposition to reconcile themselves." In this way, he rethinks the origins of modernity just as Emerson does those of abstraction: in the form of antagonism. But in marking a standoff between Absolute Spirit and the real course of world-history, Du Bois does not join Emerson in foregoing the dialectic altogether. Rather, in acknowledging the histories that the narrative of Absolute Spirit necessarily obscures, Du Bois reimagines a secret complicity between modernity's mutually unrecognizing modalities: freedom and bondage. The secret of this complicity, however, is not one that can be "told," but rather one which appears precisely as an elision, a blind spot, in the historical grand narrative. Put differently, inasmuch as the teleological dimension of Hegel's idealism requires world-history to follow a linear narrative structure, the realities of stasis and dialectical unhappiness will necessarily be muted. It is to expose this muteness and invert its repressive force that Du Bois hyphenates Emerson's "double consciousness": for with the insertion of this dialectical, diacritical mark, Emerson's simple opposition is transformed into an expression of the stasis of the world-historical present.

And if these observations are correct—if the hyphen in double-consciousness indeed announces the silences demanded by the Hegelian system—it enables us to devise a working

[40] The phrase is Giorgio Agamben's, in the essay "The Prince and the Frog" (IH 137).

definition of the term as a capacity to see the self-liberating and self-bewildering poles of modernity in their functional disjunction—that is, to think the dialectic of modernity beyond the horizon of *Aufhebung* (or as Derrida might say, "without reserve"). The role of slavery in reimagining this general dialectical economy cannot be overstated. For insofar as the "peculiar institution" constitutes not a passing phenomenon but an epoch-forming one; insofar as the dialectical *irresolution* between master and slave is as integral to the modern era as Reason or capital; and insofar, finally, as colonial slavery is the unwritten *history* of unhappiness that Hegel could not incorporate into his system, it can no longer be dismissed as a "moment" in the inexorable progress of human Spirit. Rather, slavery must be reconceptualized as the site in which modernity's unresolved oppositions crystallize in their tendency towards stasis. Indeed, if what is irreducibly "peculiar" about modern slavery from a teleological perspective is that it can become an "institution" at all, the scientific study Du Bois devoted towards the genesis, structure, and aftermath of this institution can be seen to determine how such an extreme dialectical oddity—a purported exception to the "purposive activity" of progress—actually bears witness to norms and tendencies of a historical counter-regime to the actualization of Spirit.

Where, then, does Du Bois's phenomenology of unhappy Spirit begin? With a diligent and longstanding undoing of the logical basis of slavery itself: the color line. Nahum Dimitri Chandler has defined the color line as

> an agonistically derived and hierarchically ordered mobile articulation of the differences and relations among groups of humans situated on a dimension of generality that we would today, in the early twenty-first century, tend to place under the colloquial heading of "the global." Its operative premise is that distinction can be rendered *effective*…. [T]he logic of opposition remains the form of its philosophical emergence and destination.[41]

[41] Nahum Dimitri Chandler, "The Figure of W.E.B. Du Bois as a Problem for Thought" (*New Centennial Review* 6.3 [2006]), 37-38.

When racial difference is "rendered effective," it becomes a means—indeed, for Du Bois the primary means—by which the social divisions that are internal to global modernity are naturalized and ontologized—to the point, significantly, of becoming *unrecognizable* as such. What Chandler calls this "logic of opposition" ensures that contradictions within the modern concept of property and capital are met by "masters" and "owners" not in the humbled astonishment of *self*-estrangement, but with a sense of uncanny dread before the "slave" as a fearsome "other."[42] And it is before this dread, which Du Bois significantly calls a "nameless prejudice," that the black American, ever unseen,

> stands helpless, dismayed, and well-nigh speechless; before that personal disrespect and mockery, the ridicule and systematic humiliation, the distortion of fact and wanton license of fancy, the cynical ignoring of the better and the boisterous welcoming of the worse, the all-pervading desire to inculcate disdain for everything black, from Toussaint to the devil,—before this there rises a sickening despair that would disarm and discourage any nation save that black host to whom 'discouragement' is an unwritten word" (369).

[42] While there is hardly space here, it is worth noting that the role of race in the history of property relations behooves any historically informed critique of capital to undertake an equally rigorous analysis of racism. In an important footnote to *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History,* Susan Buck-Morss limns this dynamic with great clarity. Discussing a fundamental contradiction in the Jena manuscripts of 1803-6, where Hegel first develops his dialectic of master and slave, Buck-Morss turns to the "crucial, final 'fragment 22,'" where she notes that Hegel's specific condition for the "absolute necessity" of "mutual recognition" is "injury to property." Personal property is thus something Hegel considers worth rectifying, in his words, "to the point of death," which also means that free property is inextricable from the freedom of persons in general. It is at this point, however, that the implication of Hegel's racial blindness for the critique of property comes to light: "But what if the 'property' is itself the injurer, the slave who rectifies the injury to *his person* by asserting his own freedom without compensation? Hegel does not raise this question but moves, rather, to a discussion of the 'customs' of 'the people' (*das Volk*) and the common 'work' of all." A few lines later she adds: "Fragment 22 ends (in 1804!) at just the point where Hegel's discussion of "possession" (*Besitz*), as the form in which the generality of "the thing" (*das Ding*) is recognized would have led him to confront the contradiction that the law of private property treats the slave…as a thing! *The slave is the one commodity like no other, as freedom of property and freedom of person are here in direct contradiction*. Is it for this reason that Hegel's manuscript breaks off suddenly?" (52n90, my emphasis). What Buck-Morss alerts us to here is how overlooking race, which serves to reify self-consciousness itself into a "commodity like no other," forecloses a critique of personal (or private) property in general. The black slave, in other words, is the "commodity" which places the commodity as such under a generalized critique. For in order to secure "personhood" as a slave, it is necessary to simultaneously *injure* the property of one's owner, by refusing to be it, and so also to *be* an injury oneself. In order for this contradiction to be remediated in any way, the relation of property to personhood has, necessarily, to be eliminated. One wonders what would have happened had this relation in Hegel's manuscript, rather than the manuscript itself, been "[broken] off."

This passage appears a few pages past the initial description of double-consciousness in *Souls*, after Du Bois has offered a condensed account of the trials of African American subjectivity in the three decades following Reconstruction. It can also be read, however, as a precise phenomenology of the static dialectic constitutive of the color line, one that achieves what Chandler calls its "operative premise" of rendering difference effective by polarizing affect into the symmetrical opposition, desire and despair. We are struck, then, first of all, by the significant role that aspiration, wish, and "fancy" of the white world play in constructing racial antagonism. Indeed, these modulations of desire contour the grievances suffered by a "black host" so that "sickening despair" derives from the cumulative effects of a white "welcoming of the worst," its "all-pervading desire to inculcate disdain for everything black," its "ignoring of the better" that is not naïve but "cynical." White *desire* animates prejudice so that it continues to operate undetected by the mind that might otherwise confer upon it a specific name; black *despair*, inversely, is formed into its own "unwritten word" by virtue of this namelessness, and thereby strangely suffers its own silence.

In response, Du Bois again turns to anaphora as if to circumlocute "nameless" prejudice by elaborating the shapes of "speechless[ness]" by which it is met. In this gesture, we can recognize his own unspoken counter to the fact that "the other [white] world does not know and does not want to know our power" (370)," for it is the white desire *not to know*, Du Bois implies, that makes color an effective safeguard of the "master's" unhappy consciousness—that is, of the specifically white form of self-ignorance (beginning with ignorance of white *as* a color)—while simultaneously keeping the "slave's" power from fully glimpsing itself (this is the unhappiness of seeing black *only* as a color). The color line thus names a technology of social inarticulacy that is at once mobilized by desire, and stunted by it. A machinery of and for "unhappiness," the

color line attempts to bring the dialectic of self-consciousness to a halt so definitive that the visual difference between white and black can stabilize the (in)difference between desire and despair. On account of its inarticulacy, the color line thus betrays a peculiar relation to language and space, since on the one hand, it is meant to divide white self-bewilderment from its own naming; on the other, it is a barrier keeping black self-consciousness from its own liberatory potential. The capacity for speech and naming remain on the white side of this line, while all that is black is relegated it to silence and contempt. Thus dialectical "unhappiness" is not only allowed to persist in its unsublated and nameless form; it is visualized and spatialized into a problem of racial distinction.

Threshold

In this perspective, the color line can be understood as a dialectical impasse that makes itself visible in, and defended as, physical or embodied space. It insists on the setting of borders and tenses against historical synthesis, consistently postponing—to the point of deactivating—the movement of dialectical overcoming. Insofar as the color line constitutes the logic of slavery, its dialectic corresponds to moments of a project Hegel could not have written, but which Du Bois reads in the history and aftermath of slavery itself. In this history, a counter-phenomenology of Spirit unfolds whose protagonist is not realized self-consciousness but its unhappy and divided counterpart; whose constitutively antagonistic "moments," rather than superseding one another, calcify in their opposition; whose central drama is not the supersession of antagonism, but its hardening, like territories on a map or bodies on an auction block, into private property.

Let us turn, then, to Du Bois's "philosophical" readings of history with an eye towards the way double-consciousness meets the color line with the precise form of its critique. If the

previous section has offered a genealogy of "double-consciousness" as a transatlantic philosopheme equipoised between Hegel and Emerson, what remains of this chapter seeks to understand double-consciousness as an epistemological and poetic paradigm in Du Bois's writing. What role, we ask, does double-consciousness play in how this writing thinks its practice and practices its thinking?

II. Double-Consciousness In/As Practice

Suppression

Unlike *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois's first book, a revised version of his dissertation on *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America 1638-1870* in 1896, has received fairly little critical attention. While it forms the first volume of the (still current) series of *Harvard Historical Studies*, it has mostly been omitted in histories of American social science, and marginalized even by those seeking to cement Du Bois's philosophical and literary legacy. While several critics, perhaps most notably Reiland Rabaka, have rightly cautioned against "intellectually assasinat[ing] Du Bois at thirty-five, the age at which he wrote his most famous work," *The Souls of Black Folk*, few have seriously turned to this earliest of texts as more than a precursor to *Souls*, or at least to *The Philadelphia Negro*—the monumental sociological treatise Du Bois would compile three years later about conditions of black life in Philadelphia's Seventh Ward (in which he was also living).[43] Almost forty years ago, the work on Philadelphia's slums was being celebrated as "one of the earliest, if not the earliest, empirical monograph published in United States sociology."[44] Similar remarks have yet to be made about

[43] Reiland Rabaka, *Du Bois's Dialectics: Black Radical Politics and the Reconstruction of Critical Social Theory* (Lanham, MD: Littlefield Publishers, 2008), xi.
[44] Dan S. Green and Edwin D. Driver, "W. E. B. Du Bois: A Case in the Sociology of Sociological Negation" (*Phylon* 37.4 [4th quarter, 1976]), 308-333.

Suppression as a work of historical sociology, let alone as Du Bois's first formulation of a critique of the modern world.

It is worth at least exploring this suggestion, however, for a number of reasons that we will explore below. The first has to do with the manner in which Du Bois's book coordinates several significant developments in modernity: specifically, the international slave-trade, the rise of colonial capital, the formation of the American nation, and the eighteenth-century discourse of universal freedom and human rights. Du Bois's constellation of these trends does not merely point to their concurrence, but to their actual correlation and forms of mutual presupposition. Secondly—and relatedly—Du Bois's recounting of the long, chancy history of the ending of the slave-trade contests ideas of modern teleology or progress, challenging not only the inevitability, but also the shape and directionality, of historical *Aufhebung*. Du Bois approaches this critical revision, characteristically, through terminology: in the context of the slave-trade, the operative dialectical term is not "sublation," "overcoming" or "supersession," but as his title suggests, "suppression." We will discuss the notion of "suppression" as a bringing to stasis, a notion that places Du Bois's term in dynamic relation to another historical mechanism of stasis, legal compromise, which in the case of the slave-trade delays suppression until the crisis of civil war can no longer be postponed. Du Bois's work on the slave-trade, I'll argue, offers nothing short of a meditation upon the temporality of historical crisis from both within and beyond the perspective of the nation.

Constellation

One of the most remarkable features of *Suppression* is its refusal to narrow in scope. An exemplary moment in this refusal opens the final chapter of the work, where Du Bois summarizes his project:

> We have followed a chapter of history which is of particular interest to the sociologist. Here was a rich new land, the wealth of which was to be had in return for ordinary manual labor. Had the country been conceived of as existing primarily for the benefit of its actual inhabitants, it might have waited for natural increase or immigration to supply the needed hands; but both Europe and the earlier colonists themselves regarded this land as existing chiefly for the benefit of Europe and as designed to be exploited, as rapidly and ruthlessly as possible, of the boundless wealth of its resources. This was the primary excuse for the rise of the African slave-trade to America.
>
> Every experiment of such a kind, however, where the moral standard of a people is lowered for the sake of a material advantage, is dangerous in just such a proportion as that advantage is great. In this case it was great. For at least a century, in the West Indies and the southern United States, agriculture flourished, trade increased, and English manufactures were nourished, in just such proportion as Americans stole Negroes and worked them to death. This advantage, to be sure, became much smaller in later times, and at one critical period was, at least in the Southern States, almost *nil*; but energetic efforts were wanting, and, before the nation was aware, slavery had seized a new and well-nigh immovable footing in the Cotton Kingdom. (193)

Here, Du Bois puts into global perspective the way in which the slave-trade first became tolerated and "excuse[d]" in America, despite the moral case against it, for almost three centuries. Notably departing from a moralistic argument, however, he also indicates that the "experiment" of African slavery was, from the perspective of Europe and the United States, remarkably successful. Thus the economic calculus was not flawed but exact: "agriculture flourished, trade increased, and English manufactures were nourished, in just proportion as Americans stole Negroes and worked them to death"; trading one form of life for another yields the logic of global industrial capital in the nineteenth century, beginning with the system Du Bois invokes under the colloquial but resonant heading of "Cotton Kingdom." Systematicity and a certain definition of sovereignty establish cotton's reign, for as Du Bois emphasizes by repeating

the phrase "in just a proportion" twice—first in relation to the lowering of the "moral standard of a people" which is off-set by "material advantage," second in relation to the destruction of black lives for the sake of white benefit—the logic of African slavery is self-justifying. Thus morality does not figure within the age's rationality because of its economic ratio renders it invisible: the wrongs of slavery are eclipsed by the all-too-effective, self-perpetuating machinery of gains.

An important correlate to Du Bois's remark upon the Cotton Kingdom is that its founding ratio of slave to European lives and livelihood also requires a visual regime. Slavery is based upon and secured by the color line. Thus the white world not only can erect its kingdom, but more importantly come to mistake the white world for the world itself. Within this regime, a new kind of dialectical relation emerges: one sufficiently static to be encoded visually: to the extent that the wealth of the Cotton Kingdom wealth is first "stole[n]," then entrenched into a ratio of profit, the form of Spirit at stake embraces an extreme version of dialectical irresolution, or "unhappiness," as its own sovereignly "immovable footing." Just as the contemporary sociologist cannot isolate power (or blame), then, to slave-owners because it circulates among the Northern traders, European merchants, and English manufacturers, so too does he remain unsurprised that "energetic efforts" of a moral, economic, or political counter-force are, historically, found wanting. When all but the slaves—that is, almost all those on the fair side of the color line—stood to gain from slavery, a counter-regime to the Cotton Kingdom appears not merely enervated, but unthinkable.

As if to address this unthinkability, the above passage appears under a subsection Du Bois calls, "How the Question Arose." In other words, it is meant to describe, in summary fashion, how slavery finally did reach the threshold of consciousness of its age. The difficulty, of course, is that the institution *behind* slavery—the slave-trade—only "arose" as a question to be

resolved after the fruits of this "problem" had been enjoyed (and its seeds, so to speak, were replanted in fields of cotton). The moral, like the dialectical, misfortunes of the trade thus did not fully appear to those who could have addressed them; indeed, they appear intelligibly only *now*, when a historical gaze takes into account the vast social ramifications of a trade that began as a short-sighted form of colonial investment. It is for this reason that Du Bois appeals to the figure of "sociologist," before whom a new problem can be said to "arise": not the problem of the slave-trade per se, but rather how, when it matters most, a problem of this magnitude was able, precisely, *not* to arise. Most worthy of study, in other words, is how the white world developed a consciousness of only its own power by maintaining a radical *lack* of consciousness, a systematic non-knowledge, of the power of those it subjugated within a system of trade and labor constitutes one of the most significant crises of the modern age. The task Du Bois sets before his socially-minded reader is to identify the nameless ignorance—the clung-to "unhappiness"—which continues, in the present, to render the color line not only effective but irresistible in its myth and its globality.

"Suppression"

Du Bois's call to sociologists of his time is thus not without implications for his own sociological practice. Stating that the particular difficulty of ending the slave-trade is only fully legible in the present, he reveals his own driving question: why is the tendency for the decisive moments in the history of a social problem to be missed, ignored, or postponed? With this query in mind, he prompts attention to the slave-trade's "chapter of history" not just for its importance to the past, but for how it continues to inform the shape of the present. And yet this plea for a full and studied appreciation of how a crisis of global proportion did *not* enter the consciousness of

its age has mostly been read as a didactic message, an impression Du Bois almost entertains with his text's humdrum final line: "From this we may conclude that it behooves nations as well as men to do things at the very moment when they ought to be done" (198). But if this platitude is Du Bois's putative "conclusion," perhaps it marks less a closure than a call for revitalized inquiry into the forces which occlude "the very moment" of action and make it so difficult to respond to or even notice. The tautological banality of his assertion, in other words, contours the question at the heart of his study: if "men" and "nations" undoubtedly should act when they should, what impedes the sense of urgency—the moment of decision—from becoming legible to them in critical situations?

There is, to be sure, a certain irony in this question because a similar force has usually kept critics from noticing what is decisive about Du Bois's text. Throughout *Suppressio*n's chapters, Du Bois diligently reconstructs the failures (and often refusals) on the part of the United States to recognize a real opportunity for ending the slave-trade when it arose, from the days of the early colonies, to the Constitutional Convention, to the agonizing compromises in the decades leading up to civil war. On account of just this diligence, then, it is easy to mistake *Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States 1638-1870* for a period history of American politics. For the quality of Du Bois's narration is discontinuous and lacks the same closure as his unfortunate subject matter; events do not follow predictably or in sequence, but relate to one another contiguously, and at times in an unpredictable manner. Even the book's chapters, which keep time by maintaining strict chronological coherence, are structured not according to an overarching theme, but in response to local incidents and emergent shifts.[45]

[45] Even a glance at the table of contents betrays the book's non-linear structure. For instance, the following sections follow in succession: "Chapter V: The Period of the Revolution, 1774-1787," "Chapter VI: The Federal Convention, 1787," "Chapter VII: Toussaint L'Ouverture and Anti-Slavery Effort, 1787-1807." If ever understated, the dimensions of Du Bois's text which attend to American slavery as a

Here, however, we can isolate Du Bois's intervention by introducing the question of the slave-trade's "suppression" as the topic of his work, noting not only the element of internal contradiction this word connotes, but also its difference from a word like "abolition," since the latter was most often used to describe Du Bois's general subject-matter. For instance, an anonymous 1896 article in the *Yale Review* expresses what appears to have been a common sentiment among contemporary readers: "[s]o far as precision and thoroughness of method are concerned, this is by far the best historical treatment of the slave trade that has been written since Hüne's work in 1820. It is of course more limited in scope, and deals not with the rise but the suppression of the trade."[46] In 1899, a French reviewer would agree, adding some of Du Bois's credentials: "The author, formerly a fellow at Harvard and currently a professor at Wilberforce University has undertaken, by means of direct study of sources, to recount the history of the abolition of the trade of blacks to the United States."[47] According to both reviewers, then, Du Bois produced an expertly researched history of the slave-trade's abolition. And yet, in a felicitous gesture, Du Bois's French reviewer indicates that abolition is precisely what the text is *not* about. After enumerating the sections, subsections, and appendices, he writes: "One has here, therefore, a solid and complete history of the commerce of slaves to the United States, achieved according to a proper method, through a general analysis of source materials" (182). Du Bois's expert "history of the abolition of the trade" has changed, in the course of a few lines, into a "solid and complete history of the *commerce of slaves* to the United States." Knowingly or not, then, the reviewer has aligned the history of abolition with the slave-trade itself, giving voice to

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colonial fact surviving the achievement of national independence are fully on display here. The Revolution marks, for Du Bois, merely a change in ownership; moreover, he reminds us: Southerners, in their fear of Toussaint, knew this.

[46] Anonymous, "The History of the Negro in the United States" [Du Bois, "The Suppression of the African Slave Trade] (*The Yale Review* 5 [November 1896]), 316.

[47] Ch. Sèignobos, "The suppression of the African-Slave Trade to the United States of America 1638-1870 by W.E. Burghardt Du Bois," (*Revue Historique* T. 69, Fasc. 1 [1899]), 181-183.

one of the more radical implications of Du Bois's text: the history of the trade is nothing other than the history of the struggle to end it.

If struggle is implied in the word "suppression," the place of conflict nevertheless retains a certain ambiguity as compared to other synonyms of "suppression" ("ending," "putting down," "victory over," etc.). We can make out this ambiguity by considering the two main definitions listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary* for "suppression":

> a. the action of putting down a person, group, community, etc., by the use of force or authority; reduction to a state of impotence or inactivity,
> b. The action of putting an end to or prohibiting an action, practice, movement, etc., or of putting down a rebellion or the like by the use of force or authority. [48]

The difference is subtle but important. Both definitions associate "suppression" with "the use of force or authority." In the first, however, force is wed to intention, implying that "suppression" is what results when an established power decides to use its power to put something "down." Here, suppression can be aligned with a hierarchy of force, since in reducing its "object" to "a state of impotence or inactivity," the suppressing body's verticality becomes pronounced. The second definition, by contrast, situates "force or authority" in a process where intention is almost entirely elided and emphasized is the durational phenomenon of "putting an end to." This ending may or may not derive from a single agent or a purposive act. And, even as "force or authority" re-appear, their deployment merely contributes—as one factor among others—to a rather impersonal and horizontal "action." While the first definition implies a vector of decision that points from the top, down, and from subject to object, the second definition is polyvalent, traversed by numerous lines of force that together constitute a contested and open-ended "putting an end to."

[48] "suppression, *n.,*" *OED Online,* 3rd Edition, December, 2012 (Oxford University Press).

Given that the "object" of suppression in Du Bois's title is not a sudden rebellion but a longstanding practice (the "African slave-trade to the United States") it defies the sense that it is really ever put down, or that this event is punctual, intentional, or decisive. Furthermore, in line with the second definition above, suppression of the slave-trade implies the slow pace and vicissitude of a dying institution. Du Bois's wide chronology (1638-1870) corroborates this element of slowness, and with surprising effect. For this time frame renders legible an otherwise implicit correlation between the practice of the slave-trade and the United States' development from group of colonies to independent nation. Slavery appears, in this configuration, as a practical element both irreducible to and in excess of the bounds of the United States' sovereignty. As such, it can no longer be considered a misfortune faced by the American nation, or "a plague sent from God and fated to be eliminated in due time"; on the contrary, slavery's pre-dating the United States forces us, as Du Bois writes, to

> face the fact that this problem arose principally from the cupidity and carelessness of our ancestors. It was the plain duty of the colonies to crush the trade and the system in its infancy: they preferred to enrich themselves on its profits. It was the plain duty of a Revolution based upon "Liberty" to take steps toward the abolition of slavery: it preferred promises to straightforward action. It was the plain duty of the Constitutional Convention, in founding a new nation, to compromise with a threatening social evil only in case its settlement would thereby be postponed to a more favorable time: this was not the case in slavery and the slave-trade compromises; there never was a time in the history of America when the system had a slighter economic, political, and moral justification than in 1787; and yet with this real, existent, growing evil before their eyes, a bargain largely of dollars and cents was allowed to open the highway that led straight to the Civil War. Moreover, it was due to no wisdom and foresight on the part of the fathers that fortuitous circumstances made the result of that war what it was, nor was it due to exceptional philanthropy on the part of their descendants that the result included the abolition of slavery. (197)

Exceeding the formation of the United States and determining both its fate and limits as a nation is its failure of "duty" regarding African slavery. From the colonies which "preferred" enrichment, to the Revolution, which "preferred" promises, to the Constitutional Convention

whose preference again was "a bargain largely of dollars and cents," it is impossible to refer to the United States without admitting slavery as, in every sense, its constitutional flaw or even, its original sin. And like an inborn sin, the slave-trade preceded the formation of the American nation and exceeded its borders, but has never been an external enemy or foreign ill awaiting sovereign "force or authority" to suppress it. On the contrary, it is American sovereignty which has depended upon the "real, existent, growing evil" of the slave-trade for its own establishment, while struggling with the fact that this evil has always been more internal and more intimate to it than the text of its own constitution. Du Bois thus isolates 1787, the year of the Constitutional Convention and the advent of American nationhood, as the decisive one. For by postponing, through compromise, the end of the trade for another twenty years—until 1807, that other fateful year, when Hegel's *Phenomenology* itself inveighed on the slavery question, and by which time the Cotton Kingdom had grown to be firmly established—the United States became a nation "in just proportion" to its indecision regarding slavery.

The Constitutional Convention itself is, for Du Bois, of paramount importance. For it marks, as he suggests above, the most opportune moment for suppressing the trade. Nevertheless, a peculiar obstacle intervenes in this case: not that the suppressibility of slavery was totally obscure, but rather that suppression appeared inevitable in no deed of intervention from the delegates. Consequently, slavery "occupied no prominent place in the Convention," which had really been "called to remedy the glaring defects of the Confederation"; "few of the delegates thought it expedient to touch a delicate subject which, if let alone, bade fair to settle in a manner satisfactory to all" (58). What remained, then, was only the moral question, but

> the difficulty of the whole argument, from the moral standpoint, lay in the fact that it was completely checkmated by the obstinate attitude of South Carolina and Georgia. Their delegates—Baldwin, the Pinkneys, Rutledge, and others—asserted flatly, not less than a half-dozen times during the debate, that these States "can

> never receive the plan if it prohibits the slave-trade;" that "if the Convention thought" that these States would consent to a stoppage of the slave trade, "the expectation is vain." By this stand all argument from the moral standpoint was virtually silenced, for the Convention evidently agreed with Roger Sherman of Connecticut that "it was better to let the Southern States import slaves than to part with those States." (60)

Debate over the "delicate subject" of the slave-trade takes the form, here, of a chess-match in which the moral side—as what remains of opposition, since slavery appears worth opposing here merely in principle—finds itself "completely checkmated by the obstinate attitude of South Carolina and Georgia." Checkmate, as anyone who has played chess knows, is a curious moment of defeat, for one's king is not toppled, but merely neutralized. And the experience of victory is no less unnerving: to be the victor, options of your opponent must be reduced to one: surrender. But this means that checkmate is also a form of stalemate for both sides: immobilizing the enemy cannot but result in a paradoxical self-paralysis, just as, at the moment of checking, not one, but both armies freeze. Hence the moves that each player has been able to make (or not) throughout the game are suddenly transformed into the static neutrality of having nowhere else to go (or being able to go nowhere without meeting the same fate). This paradoxical neutrality in chess is enacted in the apparent neutrality of the Convention: the conflict between the attitude of the Southern states and the moralists immobilizes both in a stalemate both parties are quick to celebrate as compromise.

There is, however, another way of reading the Convention's proceedings, as well as its outcome, and it is this alternative history that Du Bois tells. The constitutional compromise postponed the suppression of the slave-trade until 1807 and is traditionally considered, as Du Bois puts it above, a "promise" to do something about slavery. Yet insofar as the compromise demanded immobilization, it also constituted a stunning concession that slavery's suppression had to remain in the form of promise, had to remain undecided (which practically meant, of

course, that the slave-trade would go on). Compromise thus signified not simple neutrality, still less a form of resolution, but rather, stasis. "Stasis," as Dimitris Vardoulakis has recently reminded us, has an irreducible double-meaning or *Gegensinn*; it means both immobility and the mobilization of civil war; both self-identity and a mode of self-suppression.[49] To the extent that compromise is *static*, it marks both the evasion of crisis and its confirmation. And to the extent that constitutional compromise formed a *state* by suppressing or deferring the question of internal *stasis*, it simultaneously safeguarded against civil war and betrayed that the conditions for civil war were already afoot.

A closer philological look at stasis begins to illuminate the double stakes of the constitutional compromises even further. Vardoulakis explains that there are not two, but three clusters of meaning related to stasis, each deriving from the ambiguity of the verb form *istamai* in ancient Greek. The first cluster is theological in nature and associated with immobility, referring to the status of the god as "unmoved mover." The second cluster is political, equating stasis with civil war and *emphylios polemos,* a war against those of the same race (127-128). The third cluster of meaning involves an interpenetration of the two others and denotes "simultaneously and equally mobility and immobility, thereby undermining their opposition or mutual negation" (129). Vardoulakis characterizes this third cluster as one of "restless repose," where immobility and mobility, state and sedition, a body and its being-infected, cannot be told apart. He also provides an image of this undecidability, drawn from seventh-century Mytilenian poet, Alceaus, in which stasis is used to describe the impossibility of determining the direction of cross-winds aboard a ship. "I fail to understand the direction [stasis] of the winds," he writes, "one wave roll in from this side, another from that, and we in the middle a re carried along in

[49] Dimitris Vardoulakis, "Stasis: Beyond Political Theology?" (*Cultural Critique* 73 [Fall 2009]), 129-147.

company with out great black ship, much distressed in the great storm" (129). There are, for Vardoulakis, two ways of reading this image as political allegory:

> Either restless repose is a dissemblance of mobility and immobility and in this sense is a metaleptic presentation of their merge in political theology [as the combination of the first and second clusters of meaning], or restless repose can decisively disrupt the foundational separation between mobility and immobility and hence undermine the very idea of political theology. In other words, the space where the counter-directional winds cancel each other out can be viewed either as a dialectical overcoming, a station toward the anticipated result that legitimates it in advance, or as the sidestepping of any dialectical progression, a reversal of the dialectic or a "dialectic at a standstill" that eschews all attempts at legitimacy. (129)

In these terms, we might say that the self-cancelling or "counter-directional winds" blowing through the federal convention were those for slavery and against the suppression of the trade, and conversely, for this suppression and against slavery. Compromise, correspondingly, was situated in the undecidable space between the two, an emblem of "restless repose" itself. Just as much as compromise appeared to settle differences and mark, or at least anticipate, a "dialectical overcoming" (of slavery, of sectional division, of the earlier "moment" involving the Articles of Confederation), it also intimated what Vardoulakis, citing Benjamin, calls " 'dialectics at a standstill.'" In this case, stasis "decisively disrupts the…idea of political theology [i.e., of self-justification]" because it prevents the "merge" or articulation of theological immobility and political mobility. The restlessness *in* stasis, like the trepidation concerning compromise, bespeaks a fundamental disruption of dialectical synthesis and is reminiscent of the irresolution we earlier read under the sign of Hegelian "unhappiness" and located along the color line. Insofar as compromising on slavery is historically a criterion for American statehood, it stands as confirmation that the very sovereignty of the United States is *constitutively* undecided (and decidedly unhappy). The slave-trade could not be fully suppressed when, as in 1787, the moment was opportune—and not because this opportunity was illegible, but precisely because it was all

too obvious. The delegates (especially Southerners) insisted slavery was a phenomenon that would naturally die out,[50] and made of this a ground for compromise: the assumed inevitability excused the delegates from their duty, while simultaneously rendering explicit the extent to which the slave-trade's survival remained internal to, and formative of, the very political body it threatened with stasis. Du Bois's implication, then, is that the slave-trade could not be abolished at "the very moment" it was easiest to do so because this would have involved not a single but a double suppression: both of slavery and of the fiction of the *united* states.

Stasis of Aufhebung

In this perspective, the most philosophically radical dimension of Du Bois's use of the term "suppression" comes to light: it can now be glimpsed as a critical revision—even a critical retranslation—of Hegelian *Aufhebung*, which is most often rendered as "overcoming," "sublation," or "supersession." The relation of "suppression" to stasis here is key, for the most inflammatory association of "suppression" during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was

[50] Writes Du Bois: "Throughout the debate it is manifest that the Convention had no desire really to enter upon a general slavery argument. The broader and more theoretic aspects of the question were but lightly touched upon here and there. Undoubtedly, most of the members would have much preferred not to raise the question at all; but, as it was raised, the differences of opinion were too manifest to be ignored, and the Convention, after its first perplexity, gradually and perhaps too willingly set itself to work to find some "middle ground" on which all parties could stand. The way to this compromise was pointed out by the South. The most radical pro-slavery arguments always ended with the opinion that "if the Southern States were let alone, they will probably of themselves stop importations." To be sure, General Pinckney admitted that, "candidly, he did not think South Carolina would stop her importations of slaves in any short time;" nevertheless, the Convention "observed," with Roger Sherman, "that the abolition of slavery seemed to be going on in the United States, and that the good sense of the several states would probably by degrees complete it." Economic forces were evoked to eke out moral motives: when the South had its full quota of slaves, like Virginia it too would abolish the trade; free labor was found finally to drive out slave labor. Thus the chorus of "*laissez-faire*" increased; and compromise seemed at least in sight, when Connecticut cried, "Let the trade alone!" and Georgia denounced it as an "evil." Some few discordant notes were heard, as, for instance, when Wilson of Pennsylvania made the uncomforting remark, "If South Carolina and Georgia were themselves disposed to get rid of the importation of slaves in a short time, as had been suggested, they would never refuse to unite because the importation might by prohibited" (61-62).

with the idea of slave insurrection. Du Bois, however, places the very institution that supported and occasioned colonial slavery, the slave-trade itself, in the role of disturbance. This is a remarkable gesture, for it not only inverts the vector of power, aligning it with slave rather than master; it also suggests that what gets "put down" is not a revolt against the hierarchy of power, but a version of the hierarchy itself. Such an extreme contention is confirmed when we consider that the stasis surrounding the slave-trade officially ended only after that other definition of stasis was realized—namely, civil war. "Finally," Du Bois writes, "the Thirteenth Amendment legally confirmed what the war had already accomplished, and slavery and the slave-trade fell at one blow" (192). The slave-trade, in other words, could finally be "put down" only when the nation had "put an end to" itself. It had to abandon any abiding sense of its "union" (precisely while fighting on its behalf) in order to reach any moment of resolution. And this moment itself was less a matter of *deciding* upon suppression than of *undergoing* it in the most radical sense. Thus if the amendment abolishing slavery can be regarded as confirmation of dialectical *Aufhebung*, the definition of *Aufhebung* itself must be modified: slavery and the slave-trade were not, strictly speaking, superseded in this case; rather, they were "suppressed" on the occasion only of the most radical stasis, when the suppressing body, the United States, suppressed *itself* (hence the amendment is only "legal confirm[ation]" of "what the war had already accomplished"—by extra-legal means).

But what had the war accomplished and how had it been decided? What were the facts that legal amendment did not adjudicate but merely confirm? If the nation, as a sovereign body, had been constitutively unable to decide upon suppression, at whose hands was it precipitated? How could "suppression" be an accomplished fact? With these questions, we reach the limit of Du Bois's dissertation, which is also the threshold to a set of sociological questions he would

turn to in the next decade, and a set of answers he would provide forty years later in *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860-1880*. What was required first, for Du Bois, was a theoretical examination of contingency that could give due weight to the unseen as well as the unforeseen in human history. The story of stasis, given its inverted temporal structure (since what appears as a promise is also confirmation that the promise is already broken), required a way of assessing deed whose significance was decisive precisely by virtue of *not* being matters of anyone's will or decision. If this very incalculability could be better understood and delimited, Du Bois surmised, a new scientific model could also be arrived at without ignoring—indeed, without compromising—the critical role of chance in human life. By the time Du Bois turns to the era of Reconstruction in the aftermath of American stasis, his formulation of such a contingency-concept is on full display. For he will contend there, as we will see at the end of this chapter, that the sovereign indecision of the United States government, paralyzed by a double consciousness and mutual blindness between its moral and labor parties, found itself countered by a judicious restraint among African American slaves, a formation of "restless repose" that he would famously, and in revolutionary fashion, term the "general strike."

Sociology Hesitant

In this perspective, it becomes clear why Du Bois was fascinated, throughout his life, by the concept and temporal technology of the compromise. Compromise, as we have seen, forms the inverse—temporally and logically—of revolutionary stasis. Where stasis acknowledges an existing fracture, compromise, in a species of denial by deferral, projects this fracture into the future as a crisis to be averted. And where stasis avows the basis of relation in struggle, compromise justifies itself through a (political-theological) myth of harmony. As boldly as

compromise features in the annals of American history, especially regarding race, its significance deepened in Du Bois's sociological investigations in the decade following his first book. His 1905 essay, "Sociology Hesitant," marks an important juncture in this inquiry as Du Bois begins here to shed light on how he wants his discipline, historical sociology, to think not around, but *with*, the impasses thought to warrant compromise.

In the essay, which is as close as Du Bois ever comes to making a programmatic statement about sociological theory, he lays out some preliminary ideas for thinking in terms of the ambiguity of stasis and thereby of recuperating a positive possibility—a critical ambivalence—from an otherwise fatal "hesitancy." An image from *Souls* is apt for describing the central problematic of sociology as Du Bois sees it in 1905: the "contradiction of double-aims."[51] This figure was proposed as a corollary to double-consciousness to characterize the difficulty of conceiving racial uplift in the years following Emancipation. Ironically, a similar plight, in Du Bois's view, faces sociology at the turn of the century: unclear of its object or method, the discipline has been dispersed into a range of topics and procedures, from economics to ethnology, psychology, and social regulation. For the contemporary sociologist, this disciplinary polyvalence has posed an existential danger: "the devotee of the cult made the strange discovery that the further following of his bent threatened violent personal dismemberment."[52] Are the options, then, to reach a compromise or perish? Du Bois rejects the question, stating instead that the sociologist's "real confusion of mind" is itself the announcement of a new science that will no longer deny but embrace its constitutive stasis.[53]

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[51] *Souls*, 365.
[52] W.E.B. Du Bois, "Sociology Hesitant" (*boundary 2* 27.3 [2000]), 37. Hereafter cited in the text.
[53] Hortense Spillers offers an incisive account of double-consciousness as ambivalence in her essay "Moving on Down the Line: Variations on the African-American Sermon." There she aligns the ambivalence of the racialized subject with assuming the posture of reader. See *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003), 251-277.

False (or synthetic) unity, conversely, only spells a longer and more painful suicide for the discipline. And this is what Du Bois diagnoses in the logical circles into which Auguste Comte, one of sociology's founding figures, became ensnared: "steering curiously by the Deeds of Men as objects of scientific study and induction, [Comte] suggested a study of Society. And Society? The prophet really had a vision of *two* things, the vast and bewildering activities of men and lines of rhythm that coordinate certain of these actions" (38, my emphasis). Instead of identifying the unit of analysis in the deeds of singular human beings, Comte's "prophecy" was really a case of double vision; he isolated a wished-for whole called "Society," and then proposed, without evidence or the means of ascertaining it, that all human activity went into making up this unity. As Du Bois wryly suggests, "it was as though Newton, noticing falling as characteristic of matter and explaining this phenomenon as gravitation, had straightaway sought to study some weird entity known as Falling instead of soberly investigating Things which fall" (39). Comte's fallacy is a form of epistemic compromise, a price he and his followers are willing to pay in order to reconcile a historical wish for order with scientific rationality.

Unwilling to accept the terms of this compromise, Du Bois instead affirms historicity as the very basis of the sociological sciences. That is, rather than regard the stasis (or impending crisis) of the discipline as justification for accepting groundlessness (pseudo-scientific) principles, he chooses to affirm as a real and significant datum precisely the gap between historical life and its intelligibility. Doing so, he states, is a way to "flatly face the Paradox," to "frankly state the Hypothesis of Law and the Assumption of Chance" (42). Commendable, in this sense, are those who, as "true students of Sociology," have "adopted the speech and assumption of humanity in regard to human action and yet studied those actions with all possible scientific accuracy" (42). Of course the "humanity" in question here is not that of enlightened humanism,

but of a certain acknowledgment of mortality and finitude—including the finitude, ultimately, of knowledge. Du Bois writes of these scientists: "their object has been to determine as far as possible the limits of the Uncalculable—to measure, if you will, the Kantian absolute and Undetermined Ego" (42). In this case, it is not law, but *chance* whose limits must be determined scientifically. A "true" theory of sociology would thus have to be based not on immutable rules, but on the immanence, the "assumption," of contingency. Imagining such a basis for knowledge distinguishes Du Bois's thought from both the sociology of his time and its politics: for if necessity is the calling-card of compromise in either case, chance is the harbinger of a radical science and politics of stasis.

Finitude and Fugitives

Stasis, then, forms the major theme and meditation of Du Bois's 1935 masterpiece, *Black Reconstruction*, a work in which the stasis of the United States, the Civil War, is consistent backdrop and reference point. Lining the path from a relatively obscure early essay like "Sociology Hesitant" to a major work like *Black Reconstruction* is Du Bois's concern with the constitutive disjuncture between will and chance in the realm of historical action. And Du Bois wastes no time in announcing that his text on Reconstruction will be written from within this disjuncture, offering a counter-history of the Civil War and its aftermath that comes not from the perspective not of the nation, but from the position of the force that precipitated its internal rupture: slavery. Here, as in *Suppression*, Du Bois dismisses the idea of slavery as a misfortune befalling the American nation, insisting instead that to precisely the extent that it compels labor, slavery is contradiction at the basis of the United States' global power:

> Above all, we must remember the black worker was the ultimate exploited; that he formed that mass of labor which had neither wish nor power to escape from the

> labor status, in order to directly exploit other laborers, or indirectly, by alliance with capital, to share in their exploitation. […] [G]roups willing to join white capital in exploiting labor…were driven back into the mass by racial prejudice before they had reached a permanent foothold; and thus became all the more bitter against all organization which by means of race prejudice, or the monopoly of wealth, sought to exclude men from making a living.
>
> It was thus the black worker, as founding stone of a new economic system in the nineteenth century and for the modern world, who brought civil war in America. He was its underlying cause, in spite of every effort to base the strife upon union and national power. (*BR* 15)

The fact that slavery is compulsive, and that this compulsion is written on the body in the color of the skin, simultaneously excludes the slave from the benefits of capital, and makes him an economic "founding stone." A corollary of this suggestion is that the "founding stone" of nineteenth-century economics and the "cause" of American civil war are radically separate from questions of volition and actually hinge upon its suppression. Meanwhile, the slave's historical impact on civil war is, from the position of state power, as unforeseeable as it is indisputable. Much like the phenomenon of "chance" in the "Sociology Hesitant" essay, the importance of the enslaved for those who are "free" appears only at the limits of calculability.

Thus the problem of the deeds of slaves—beginning with slave *labor*—did not really arise in the decades leading up to civil war until it was too late. In his chapter on the "white worker," Du Bois explains that this blindness was double in nature: slavery, as an immoral institution, had its antagonists among the abolitionists, but "abolition represented capital" (25). By contrast, the burgeoning labor and Marxist movements "never got a clear attitude toward slavery" because they considered that "whites were a different grade of worker from blacks" (24). The mutual blindness of moral and economic arguments guaranteed that nothing would be done about slavery, and that compromises would continue to be made. Both sides had little idea of what only a coordination with the other could make clear: that slavery was the fulcrum for an epochal shift in labor, and that only a recognition of the excluded four million black workers

could have begun contesting it. It is this fact that leads Du Bois to write that while "the upward moving of white labor was betrayed into wars for profit based on color caste[,] democracy died save in the hearts of black folk" (30).

This statement reverberates throughout the chapter for which *Black Reconstruction* is rightly best-known, Du Bois's account of a "general strike" among slaves. However, the argument of this chapter—namely, that actions of the slaves both began and decided the war—loses any hint of hyperbole when seen in the perspective of the irreconcilable tension between will and chance.[54] Indeed, the course of the struggle is decided at the precarious point where unintended consequences of decisions made both North and South, by labor and abolition, planters and capitalists, encounters the slow, fugitive mobilization of slaves. In a series of striking pages, Du Bois portrays both sides, beginning his chapter with a peculiar couplet of historical accidents:

> When Edward Ruffin, white-haired and mad, fired the first gun at Fort Sumter, he freed the slaves. It was the last thing he meant to do but that was because he was so typically a Southern oligarch.
> […]
> When Northern Armies entered the South they became armies of emancipation. It was the last thing they planned to be. The North did not propose to attack property. It did not propose to free slaves. This was to be a white man's war to preserve the Union, and the Union must be preserved. (55)

Both North and South are complicit in black emancipation to the precise degree that they neither "meant," nor "planned," nor "proposed" to do so. The symmetry of their ignorance, in turn, clears space for the coordinated flight of four million slaves, whose own intent is never fully formulated, but rather determined according to the shifting consequences of white oversight in the struggle:

[54] See Thomas Holt's suggestion that Du Bois's account of the "general strike" may be exaggerated for the sake of crafting, but is not without its bases in the historical record.

> It must be borne in mind that nine-tenths of the four million black slaves could neither read nor write, and that the overwhelming majority of them were isolated on country plantations. Any mass movement under such circumstances must materialize slowly and painfully. What the Negro did was to wait, look and listen and try to see where his interest lay. There was no use in seeking refuge in an army that was not an army of freedom; and there was no sense in revolting against armed masters who were conquering the world. As soon, however, as it became clear that the Union armies would not or could not return fugitive slaves, and that the masters with all their fume and fury were uncertain of victory, the slave entered upon a general strike against slavery by the same methods that he had used during the period of the fugitive slave. He ran away to the first place of safety and offered his services to the Federal Army. So that in this way it was really true that he served his former master and served the emancipating army; and it was also true that this withdrawal and bestowal of his labor decided the war. (57)

Relying not upon deliberation but the "methods" of fugitivity, the slaves fled towards the union armies, thereby withdrawing labor from the plantations. And yet, this movement was not a reaction against their former masters, so much as a gravitation towards greater and greater freedom. With little or no coordination, then, what Du Bois calls a "general strike" is a materialization of the sense that the Union and southern forces were equally oblivious to the significance of four million laboring lives. Du Bois's emphasis is thus upon this cumulative mass rather than individual choices, on the rhythms and limits of chance. This was the beginning of the swarming of the slaves," he writes, "of the quiet but unswerving determination of increasing numbers no longer to work on Confederate plantations, and to seek the freedom of the Northern armies. Wherever the armies marched and in spite of all the obstacles came the rising tide of slaves seeking freedom. Gradually, the fugitives became organized and formed a great labor force for the army" (65). A turn to natural imagery—to swarms, tides and swells—aligns the labor force of slaves with the unwilled, unforeseeable proscription of the white will. This is a reinscription of the color line as critique.

Color critique

Du Bois offers the following telescopic rendering of the modern age in the opening chapter of *Dusk of Dawn* (1940) which is exemplary not only for its dual focus, but also for the image of modernity that such focus produces:

> [A]fter the scientific method had been conceived in the seventeenth century, it came toward the end of the eighteenth to be applied to man as he appeared then, with no wide or intensive inquiry into what he had been or how he had lived in the past. In the nineteenth century however came the revolution of conceiving the world not as a permanent structure but as changing growth and then the study of man as changing and developing physical and social entity had to begin.
>
> But the mind clung desperately to the idea that basic racial differences between human beings suffered no change; and it clung to this idea not simply from inertia and unconscious action but from the fact that because of the modern African slave trade a tremendous economic structure and eventually an industrial revolution had been based upon racial differences between men; and this racial difference had now been rationalized into a difference mainly of skin color. Thus in the latter part of the nineteenth century when I was born and grew to manhood, color had become an abiding and unchangeable fact chiefly because a mass of self-conscious instincts and unconscious prejudices had arranged themselves rank on rank in its defense. Government, work, religion, and education became based upon and determined by the color line. (556)

In characteristic fashion, Du Bois's lucidity belies the trenchancy of his argument. He begins by glossing the epistemic shift (from space to time) that informs nineteenth-century historicism, including, notably, Hegel's dialectical method; yet, with a subtle shift, he also addresses a crucial element that Hegel himself, for reasons that become clear over the course of the passage, could not. Indisputably, then, the history of science (and thought in general) witnessed a "revolution" from the static paradigm of the seventeenth century to the dynamic one of the late eighteenth; but—and this is Du Bois's critical or double displacement—the application of these scientific principles to man's nature (to his desires, labor, ethics, and consciousness) reached a fatal impasse once it was realized what it could mean for the age's other "revolution": the rapid ascent of industrial and colonial capital. A mode of historical consciousness capable of regarding man

across variations of color and caste as a "changing and developing physical and social entity," Du Bois explains, threatened to liquidate the truth of "racial differences" that formed the basic premise of colonial domination. It would put at risk the "tremendous economic structure," both in Europe and in the colonies, upon which Western society had already become based. Insofar, then, as a scientific elaboration of the radical historicity of modern enterprise, from colonialism to industry, imperiled Western modernity itself with a lasting crisis of legitimacy, the energies of this project had to be denied or displaced, lest they reveal the bulk of contemporary life to be based upon no principle other than systematic violence; lest they bring a political and economic revolution on the heels of the scientific one.

What supplants the historical investigation of man in nineteenth-century thought? Du Bois calls it by name: "the color line," which at once stabilizes and obscures the power differential between oppressor and oppressed, master and slave, by "rationalizing" these "into a matter mainly of skin color." The peculiar tenacity of racism can be understood to derive, then, "not simply from inertia and unconscious action" but from the considerable historical exigency its naturalism belies. For Du Bois, the color line can be seen to constitute what Michel Foucault would later call a *dispositif*: "a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid….which has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an *urgent need.*"[55] And the need to which the *dispositif* of the nineteenth-century color line responds is that of securing a "rational" basis for the structures of economic rationality by which the white world increasingly found itself governed.

[55] Michel Foucault, "The Confession of the Flesh," *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Vintage, 1980), 195-196.

In this way, the color line marks not only the age's most advanced technology of social degradation, but also its most significant compromise. For the "matter of skin color" is itself a grand bargain struck between historical reason and relations of historical power, rendering a set of phenotypical features the permanent markers of hierarchy among men so that the historical imagination can ignore its own conditions, and actually endorse the interests of power. In practical terms, the color line guaranteed that scientists and philosophers could go on "conceiving the world…as changing growth" while promoting the bases of political and economic institutions exactly as they were; "government, work, religion, and education" could all stay in their current configuration—for just as long as the color line held as a historical barrier to history itself.[56]

Like every compromise, then, the color line employs a logical impasse to dislodge a strategic one. This is why Du Bois emphasizes that its founding contradiction—that race is "an abiding unchangeable fact" while the world is a "changing growth" there for the making and the taking—is not just dialectically unsublated; it is precisely the dialectic whose suspended resolution liberates the Western historical imagination to dream up its grandest imperial schemes. Racism's naturalization of inequality makes certain that the white world's entitlement to historical agency goes undisturbed and unquestioned; or, in Hegelian terms, that historical desire—as the power of the *negative*—remains in white hands alone. And yet while negativity,

[56] Of course Hegel himself, as a representative of the social thought of the period, is not unaffected by the apparatus of race and the demands it meets. The passage above can also be seen to include a thinly-veiled critique of Hegel's philosophy of history—in two ways. First, if nineteenth-century historicism had, unlike its precursor, announced the task of "intensive inquiry into what [man] had been or how he had lived in the past," Hegel's "philosophical geography," which (in)famously relegates the continent of Africa to timelessness, does not ignore this task, but fully assumes it. For timelessness is precisely a *resistance* to change, which acknowledges the powers of history at the same time that, in the African's case, these are supposedly *negated*. Second, just as Hegel's idea of history hones its movement by deciding the races it may exclude, the "purposive activity" of spirit is propelled by the temporalities it excludes: looking forward blocks any real reckoning with a time in which the unsublated past announces its presence, in the present.

for Hegel, has the irrepressible tendency to expose, double, and turn upon itself (and it is this very tendency, lest we forget, that is the necessary precursor to the *Aufhebung*) the negation at work in the color line is different, because it, too, is compromised. The powers of desire in its case are free only to the extent that they actively suppress the forms of self-estrangement, self-questioning, and general unhappiness that accompany the canceling-retaining movement of the dialectic. Negativity takes a manifestly wayward course along the color line, no longer unfolding with the symmetry that Hegel prizes, but in a manner that is lop-sided and fundamentally unstable. The powers of white desire now come at the expense of enchaining both its own self-consciousness, and that of its colored counterpart, to indefinite "unhappiness." Thus with the color line, the white will emancipates itself, but only by demanding the bondage of universal spirit.

By reading the history of Western modernity on condition of the color line, Du Bois attunes us both to the dialectical structure of the era, and to the form of stasis upon which it rests. The account he offers, in turn, is one in which this static element is on full display: the color line is the chief mechanism by which the white world works to falsely stabilize alterity and exempt itself from historical self-questioning (two movements amounting to the same). The visual regime of race is modernity's pre-eminent effort to tame, in Jean Luc-Nancy's phrase, the "restlessness" of the negative, as well as to belie the dialectical stasis Vardoulakis calls "restless repose."[57] The domestication of the dialectic in the name of mastery and ownership therefore comes at more than the cost of indefinitely postponing the moment of *Aufhebung* and universal

[57] See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*, trans. Jason Smith and Steven Miller (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2002), a work reminiscent in some ways of Derrida's sympathetic reading of Bataille, for Nancy's claim is also that Hegel's dialectic unleashes a mechanism that both conditions, and exceeds, its systematicity. Nancy differs from both Derrida and Bataille, however, inasmuch as he argues that Hegel himself is attuned to the asystematicity implicit within his own construct. Nancy's is a Hegel whom we must now understand as being in on his own dialectical joke.

freedom; it also withholds an immense tide of revolutionary thought from the shores of nineteenth-century and twentieth-century consciousness. But where the color line has subtracted the white man as an object of historico-philosophical inquiry—allowing him to lose his "color" and represent mere Spirit—there arises, too, the thinking and practice of double-consciousness, wherein stasis no longer suggests a mere stabilization of the present, but offers proof, within and against that present, of the strivings of which Spirit and souls alike are made.

CHAPTER 2: RALPH ELLISON AND FIRST PHILOSOPHY'S UNDERGROUND

Ralph Ellison recently found himself in some select company. In 2004, a volume published under the name *Basic Writings of Existentialism* chose the Prologue to *Invisible Man* to conclude its collection of philosophical excerpts from Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*, Heidegger's *Being and Time*, Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity*, and literary samplings by Fyodor Dostoevsky, Miguel de Unanumo, and Albert Camus.[58] The effect of encountering the narrator at the end of this illustrious list of names is uncanny not (or not only) because he is anonymous, but rather because he fits in so well. The Prologue's famous opening line—"I am an invisible man"— seems custom-fit as a coda for the works that have preceded it: for instance, if nausea has been established the emotional tonality of existentialism, invisibility itself entails a nauseating form of sociability; if "existence precedes essence," invisibility characterizes how existence persists *in* essence. In brief, "I am an invisible man" offers up a neat syllogism of existential logic: the truth of one's existence will never meet the eyes of others; thus the authentic subject of existence is consigned to invisibility by default.

Ironically, the *Basic Writings* volume itself does not heed this logic with regard to Ellison. Or rather, heeds it only partially, as it joins a long line of attempts precisely to sight the real author of *Invisible Man* by citing him. Such efforts at claiming Ellison have generally redoubled in moments of heightened racial tension, beginning in the tumult of the 1960's, when the writer was frequently called upon as a voice of reason against burgeoning radical and separatist positions both in the United States and abroad. Critics imagined him, in Kenneth

[58] Gordon Marino, ed., *Basic Writings of Existentialism* (New York: Modern Library, 2004). Hereafter cited in the text.

Warren's phrase, as "a transracial messiah heralding the return of humanism and reason to redeem an American society threatened by racial medievalism."[59] *Shadow and Act*, the collection of essays Ellison published after *Invisible Man*, was received by the white mainstream "almost gratefully," according to John S. Wright, for its "aesthetic and integrationist concerns."[60] Against a steady stream of "apocalyptic social essays" by James Baldwin, LeRoi Jones, Claude Brown, and Franz Fanon, Ellison cut a relatively meditative figure, devoted to diversity without discord. His novel was duly canonized and, in Wright's phrase, became "a quiet counterpoint to the discordant literature of Black Power and American Negritude" (SRE 17). By 1965, *Invisible Man* already represented "an all-American story about the search for self that expanded the 1950's preoccupations with existentialism, 'identity crisis,' and introspection" (SRE 16). At the same time, this sparkling reputation among white critics earned Ellison the scorn of devotees of black radicalism, for whom he exemplified racial treason. Consigned to the role of cultural mediator and rational non-aggressor, Ellison found himself either praised or censured on this basis for the remainder of his life.

For its part, *Basic Writings of Existentialism* casually appeals to the pluralistic author-function associated with Ellison. Celebrating the Prologue as a case of diversity in existentialism (adding to the philosophy's multicultural appeal), the anthology positions Ellison's version invisibility as a general formula irreducible to race, even as it shows how race constitutes a properly existential concern. Invisibility, that is to say, operates in the context of the collection as an index both of the universality of experience and of the particularity of racial being. In this way, it promises to elevate the *being* of race beyond the color line (and presumably into the

[59] Kenneth W. Warren, *So Black and Blue: Ralph Ellison and the Occasion of Criticism* (Chicago & London: U of Chicago P, 2003), 16.
[60] John S. Wright, *Shadowing Ralph Ellison* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2006), 16. Hereafter cited in the text as SRE.

philosophical domain proper). At the same time, invisibility serves to confirm that philosophy is up to the task of thinking a historico-political formation like race. In a word, philosophy can annex race, colonize it.

That such a perspective privileges theory over history (obscuring the depths and "lower frequencies" from which Ellisonian invisibility sounds), or that it dismisses the dual inheritance of double-consciousness in the unitary name of Being, is, given Ellison's reception history, somewhat unsurprising. What does give pause, however, is the manner in which existentialism glimpses in the term "invisible" only what the latter reflects of itself. It thereby perfectly fulfills the description of blindness from *Invisible Man*'s opening lines:

> I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me. (3)

By emphasizing the optical, and especially reflexive, dimension of his *visibility*, the narrator defines his *invisibility* as the way in which his image is swiftly incorporated into the consciousness (and unconscious) of others. In other words, his invisibility is not a substance but a (disavowed) relation. If we consider this fact in the context of *Basic Writings*, the proponents of existentialism are the ones who "refuse" to see the narrator as anything more than a "bodiless head[]"—that is, a philosopher—and, taking him for a "sideshow," to a strand of twentieth-century Western philosophy, they render him invisible a second time, assimilating him now to a conceptuality that has only tangentially to do with the "group of contradictory forces, facts and tendencies" that Du Bois calls the "race concept."[61] In brief, philosophy places its own reflexivity (its mirrors) *before* Ellison, dissolving the historical, social, and racial specificity—or, in a word, the *minority*—of his thought into the image of a common questioning of the meaning

[61] *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1986), 651.

of Being. As long as "invisibility" simply means race-qua-philosophy, it offers the reassuring picture of a blackness finally absolved of both color and contradiction. In this way, the anthology elides the *other* form of invisibility that Du Bois places under the heading of "Negro problems" (that is, problems not only pertaining to African Americans, but addressed to them) and to which Ellison devotes the bulk of his psychological, sociological, and musicological essays. And so in the very gesture of including Ellison among major thinkers, the anthology erases him as a minor one. Ironically, it fails to see or think the very figure it wishes to canonize; and more importantly, this failed reckoning itself goes fundamentally un(re)marked.

The following chapter sets out, first, to note this pattern of double, or second-order, oversight in which theoretical grasps of (or at) Ellisonian invisibility tend to erase its minority, invisibly, in turn. The thesis I will be proposing subsequently has little to do with the "true" identity or meaning of Ellison's narrator and seeks even less to establish the prestige of his philosophical pedigree. Rather, I will be concerned, on the one hand, with the voracious tactics of philosophical universalism that labor interminably to *see*—and thereby quietly to eliminate—invisible men, and on the other hand, with the strategic responses *of* the invisible—responses comparably understated—to this very danger. The focus will therefore (and somewhat irremediably) be double: for at the same time that the chapter describes the tendencies of metaphysical watchmen who deny minority in the very act of welcoming it to thought and visibility, it also limns the counters to such erasure which issue, undetected, from within minority itself. The emphasis will oscillate, then, between invisibility in the context of two distinct metaphysical operations: a major one which erases the other and a minor one that others erasure.

In the case of the existentialism anthology, the tactics of its double-edged hospitality are relatively clear: Ellison's margin of minority is excised by a philosophical flattery (initiation into an elite philosophical fraternity) that belies its own violence. However, things are not as clear within the conceptual system from which existentialism itself derives—that is, from the mode of thought that itself foregoes canonicity and tradition in order to claim a primordiality so basic that even its universalism can go without saying. I am referring, of course, to the phenomenological ontology of Martin Heidegger who, in *Being and Time*, explores that which all local or "ontic" disciplines, including traditional philosophy, merely presuppose: the meaning of Being and that of Dasein as the being for which Being itself is a problem. Heidegger's interest lies, then, not in the figure but the *ground* of metaphysics, and his problematic is not merely philosophical but *first-philosophical*. In this way, he seeks a sort of footing that should, in principle, reside both *below* and *prior to* the sort of critique we have begun elaborating. But this means, too, that ontology poses a real problem for the thinking of minority: for how, in the sphere of first philosophy, is it possible to distinguish an erasure of history, politics, or racialization from a necessary principle of methodology? Or, put more crudely: if Being is everywhere presupposed, how can it not but speak for you?

The difficulty of answering such a question, far from justifying its dismissal, reveals the undiminished urgency of returning to first philosophy if we are interested in critiquing Western thought's (elided) elisions of minority. In other words, we must begin precisely with the faceless, nameless question of Being in order to ask what difference it makes who asks it and how. For this reason, the following chapter will revisit certain pages from *Being and Time* that elucidate the terms and manner of Heidegger's posing of the question of the meaning of Being. And it will also compare these first-philosophical formulations to those of Ellison's anonymous narrators (in

Invisible Man and elsewhere)[62] who speak to us, I will suggest, in a dialect or vernacular form of Heideggerian ontology. As with any dialect, there is a strain of the dialectical—that is, the hint or threat of a reversal—in this discourse. And in Ellison's case, I will argue that this reversal hinges upon the way the "forgotten" question of Being itself forgets (and forgets that it forgets) the question of minor being. In other words, I am interested in how Ellison reopens, within ontology, a fugitive line of inquiry pertaining to the being of the color line as such.

And yet, precisely because this forgotten inquiry is immanent to ontology and at large within it, it complicates the comparison between major- and minor-philosophical questions still further by proving that the two are, finally, one and the same. This is why Heidegger and Ellison, in their respective conflicts of unconcealment, tend to draw so near to each other at times that it appears one can almost speak for the other. And yet it has been the former, of course, who has almost always done the talking, while the "problem of Being" has almost never been raised with the racial dynamic Du Bois calls "being a problem" in mind. This merely confirms, then, what (and how much) is at stake in transposing first philosophy into a minor key. For if universality belies bias in the same measure that particularity belies exemplarity, it is all the more important to indicate the elusive ontological object to which Ellisonian critique is addressed and the degree of subtlety required to displace it.

Below I will be suggesting that Ellison's target is, as the narrator's image of "hard, distorting glass" suggests, not an overt power that obliterates or dramatically wipes minority from sight. Rather, it is a more pervasive and invisible violence that seeks, precisely, to make minority visible, to consign it to a set of meanings, and thus to subject it to what can be thought

[62] For reasons that will hopefully become clear, I will be insisting that even those essays written, so to speak, in Ellison's "voice" and name are, structurally and strategically, as anonymous as his novel's narrator.

of as erasure by means of overexposure.[63] This is the violence, then, that characterizes liberal gestures of valuing, including, and canonizing minority, as we saw in the existentialism anthology; it is also the violence (and apparently insuperable privilege) of first philosophy, whose "essence of ground" authorizes a thinker of Being to have *always already spoken for* the other.[64] These two stances differ, we might note, only in the explicitness with which they presuppose their knowledge of minority: the former says it knows, while the latter knows without having to say so, though in both cases the knowledge itself is placed beyond doubt. Ellison's philosophical radicality, this chapter argues, is to bring this knowledge back into question—that is, to unseat both modes of minority's overexposure, the explicit and the implicit, by parodying the violence of making-visible itself. This is the singular virtue of categorically asserting the invisibility of his novel's narrator: for by enabling him to recede from view, what rounds into shape for the first time are all the normally unseen tactics of compulsory visibility. *Invisible Man* can thus be read as a veritable catalog of "ways of seeing," and a map of the ways such mechanisms easily change hands between racists and race-men, philanthropists and philosophers, black radicals and white liberals alike—all at the expense of those who disappear from thinking by virtue of being overexposed to knowledge.

Ellison's response, as we will see below, is the ingenious formulation of a "counterinvisibility," that is, a critical gesture that does not resist overexposure by seeking ever new and better forms of being-seen, but rather renders the very mechanisms of visibility inoperative by fully inhabiting the role of the erased without compromise or remainder. This radical assumption of invisibility—and what this chapter will describe as a *habituation* to and

[63] Ellison, in his introduction to IM calls this the "high visibility" of race that he wished to problematize in his novel. What I am calling overexposure also corresponds to Saidiya Hartman's theorization of racial "hypervisiblity" in *Scenes of Subjection*.
[64] See Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides,* trans. Andre Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana U P, 1998).

with it—deactivates the forces of representation by coinciding entirely with them, and thus redirects their epistemic compulsion toward all those who have historically enjoyed the privilege of seeing unseen. Counterinvisibility mirrors the techniques of visibility, then, rehearsing their forms and "yessing" their claims to know what they are looking at, until, finally, it is only this looking that is exposed beyond repair. And as this chapter hopes to show, even the meaning of Being can be tinkered by an invisible man.

I. Shadow (Being): Philosophy's Wounded Quail

The riddling mischief—the "thinker-tinker[ing]" (IM 7)—in Ellisonian invisibility corresponds directly to the complete seriousness with which philosophy, and especially first philosophy, takes what cannot be seen. In his course on Parmenides, for instance, Heidegger famously excavates the sense of originary concealment that the Greeks called *lētheia*, which is "*older* than every openedness of this or that being…older even than letting-be itself."[65] Like the Hadean river *Lēthē* that is the essence of all memory, this concealedness, Heidegger says, is primary to, yet always forgotten in, the unconcealed. The essence of truth is so shot through with forgetting that what is fundamentally at stake in it is not this or that memory but the forgetting itself. Unconcealment—truth—is consequently a *privative* forgetting, a seat upon the banks of the oblivion: *alētheia*. A vision that is no vision, truth as *alētheia* consists only in the implacability of concealment that it brings before thought as such. The invisible, then, is the primordial: it is the condition for and essence of all that will ever be seen.

Ellison heartily agrees. Indeed, just as it took the ingenuity of a Heidegger to track the dark course of the *Lēthē* beneath the luminous clearing of Western thought, so too is it Ellison's

[65] Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), 148.

genius to have watched this same river run beneath the streets of Harlem, in the bowels of the New World, breeding forgetfulness in those who pass over it, and invisibility for those forced to live along its shores. Invisibility, Ellison says, is a "by-product of Western civilization";[66] not only is it the essential and enigmatic shadow of thought, but it is also the banal effect of political realities of the last few centuries on—of all people—black people. Black people, he says, are the ones living underground, along the river. But unlike the Greek sages, their initiation into the mysteries of invisibility has revealed the original secret of unconcealedness to be no secret at all. Instead, it is man-made, historical; *lētheia* is, for them, characterized neither by timelessness, nor by what Hegel imagines is African a-historicity, but rather by modern techniques of Western oppression, primary among which is racism. The invisibility of black folk, in a turn the Greeks could not have anticipated, is subtracted from the very concept of truth that lets darkness be. This makes invisibility fundamentally double in conception, a Janus-faced phenomenon resulting, on the one hand, from racial subjugation and its corresponding modes of political abandonment and, on the other hand, to the zoot suit and the folk tale. Invisibility is, that it so say, an existential strategy that Ellison, in his essay "Richard Wright's Blues," calls a "will to camouflage, to dissimulate" (SA 93). In the essay—which is itself a response to the accusation of Irving Howe (a white liberal) that *Invisible Man* forsakes radicalism by deviating from Wright's social realism—Ellison characterizes invisibility as the specifically black inheritance of Western rationality, an assumption of the tasks of enlightenment under the sign of their contradiction. His case in point is the inscrutability of black cultural forms to the gaze of white sociology. What the white sociologist cannot see (and what a figure like Howe depends upon a social realist like Wright in order to see) is the skilled adaptation of black life to its social and political invisibility. White sociology can hardly guess at the transformation of the violence of erasure into a

[66] Ralph Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues," *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 93.

culturally disseminated power of illegibility. This illegibility is a matter of black survival, perhaps paramount to black truth—in any case, it is a vital strategy for inverting invisibility's vector of power by rendering it a cultural and "conscious work." As Larry Neal would write in his own re-evaluation of Ellison's work: "rather than locating the mechanisms for organizing political power totally in an analysis of the black man's class structure, Ellison turns Marxism on its head, and makes the manipulation of cultural mechanisms the basis for black liberation."[67] In this way, black cultural life assumes its place as the subterranean and forgotten—perhaps even the Hadean—emblem of modernity itself, a cipher for the way its contradictions have been inherited from an infernal position of prolonged endangerment.

And yet after praising Wright's autobiography, *Black Boy*, for its unflinching critique of the contemporary conditions of African American life, Ellison concludes "Richard Wright's Blues" on what looks to be a conciliatory note. The essay's penultimate paragraph reads: "Wright knows perfectly well that Negro life is a by-product of Western civilization, and that in it, if one only possesses the humanity and humility to see, are to be discovered all those impulses, tendencies, life and cultural forms to be found elsewhere in Western society" (93). There is commonality in our differences, a transcendent human strain, these words seek to suggest. Ellison carries this note into his final paragraph, where it bends a half-step towards the minor. He writes:

> The problem arises because the special condition of Negroes in the United States, including the defensive character of Negro life itself (the "will toward organization" noted in the Western capitalist appears in the Negro as a will to camouflage, to dissimulate), so distorts these forms as to render their recognition as difficult as finding a wounded quail against the brown and yellow leaves of a Mississippi thicket—even the spilled blood blends with the background. Having

[67] Larry Neal, "Ellison's Zoot Suit," *Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man: A Casebook,* ed. John F. Callahan (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004), 93. Such a statement means a lot coming from Neal, a central figure and theorist of the Black Arts movement, who in this essay also rejects his earlier dismissal of Ellison as a timid political figure who dissolved the concrete struggles of black in Kafkaesque mazes of abstraction.

> himself been in the position of the quail—to expand the metaphor—Wright's wounds have told him both the question and the answer which every successful hunter must discover for himself: "Where would I hide if *I* were a wounded quail?" But perhaps that requires more sympathy with one's quarry than most hunters possess. Certainly it requires such a sensitivity to the shifting guises of humanity under pressure as to allow them to identify themselves with the human content, whatever its outer form; and even with those Southern Negroes to whom Paul Robeson's name is only a rolling sound in the fear-charged air. (SA 93-4)

Dissimulation and the will to camouflage are symptoms of the "defensive character of Negro life," Ellison says. More precisely, they are a reaction to a sense of being hunted upon the American continent. The ravages of this predation have been considerable. Indeed, they have distorted the Western inheritance of Negro life *beyond recognition*—thereby reducing it to the paradoxical form of a socially induced, sociological invisibility. And yet, it is important not to misrecognize this invisibility for an essential primitivism or natural resistance to historical change. On the contrary, Ellison insists (with an appeal to "the human content" of a shadowy "outer form") that one must recognize backwardness as a defensive dissimulation of historicity—that is, a stylized and timely response to Western civilization and especially the rise of capitalism within it. The apparently stalled or timeless manner of Negro life is simultaneously its inheritance of, and defense from, Western principles. For this reason, one in pursuit of racial insight must also develop an unusual sympathy with the historically victimized, and learn to ask the rather remarkable question: "Where would I hide if I were a wounded quail?"

This experiment in empathy, in which hunter identifies with quarry, forms the accent around which the emphasis of passage begins to shift its meaning. Just as a good hunter can put himself in the place of his prey, a skilled reader of culture should be able to "identify…with the human content," even of the most wretched, here exemplified by "those Southern Negroes" as yet deaf to signs of racial advancement in popular culture ("Paul Robeson's name"). The

wounded Mississippi quail still hides in the thicket. And yet Ellison's address, here, is to the sociologist whom he has very quietly aligned, in an appeal to empathy, with the quail hunter.

Knowing all too well that what he appeals *for* is "more…than most hunters possess," the very need to solicit it has indicated a secret feature of most sociological interest in black life. Historically, this interest has corresponded to a predatory urge, one legible not in the method of the chase, but in the fate of the "quails" themselves, among whom not only Wright, but Ellison, too, must be counted. It is precisely from this endangered position—that is, as prey—that Ellison assumes the ingeniously impenetrable defense of *aiding the hunter*. While pleading a form of "sympathy," he approaches the armed man (the sociologist), informs him of local geography, then allays the risks of his own capture by having assumed the voice of a scout. Thus Ellison's discursive position in the passage above simultaneously proves the adaptiveness of black camouflage to contemporary modes of knowledge, and indexes its undetected role in social evolution. Ellison is a quail undreamt of by his hunter, impossible to discern not only because his blood blends into the thicket, but because the wounded batting of his wings sounds like the voice of reason.

The series of reversals and shifts of emphasis in this passage turn again upon the problem of invisibility: that of the wounded quail, the hidden hunter, and finally, the quailing speaker himself. Escaped from his Mississippi thicket, let us listen to this Ellisonian figure as he speaks, this time, from underground.

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If the narrator's underground hole flips the image of what is already inverted about his prior experience, the figure who first alerts him to the unreality at ground-level is a character who, fittingly, cannot be real: the Harlem trickster, Rinehart ("Rine the runner and Rine the

gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rinehart the reverend" [IM 498]). In one of *Invisible Man*'s most pivotal scenes, the narrator, who has again been boomeranged and broken by misrecognition (this time by the Brotherhood), decides to hide behind dark green glasses and a new hat. He puts them on, whereupon he is transfigured, swiftly and without warning, into the likeness of Rinehart. Taken for this contemporary *nemo*, the narrator is brought face-to-face with living proof of *an existence without essence*: "I wanted to know Rinehart," he says, "and yet, I thought, I'm upset because I know I don't have to know him, that simply becoming aware of his existence, being mistaken for him, is enough to convince me that Rinehart is real" (498).

This conviction inspires an insight that decisively changes the novel's course: "[a]ll boundaries down," he remarks, "freedom was not only the recognition of necessity, it was the recognition of possibility" (499). The world, after Rinehart, is no longer one with itself: riven by two parallel modes of action, it marks the juncture of the necessary and the possible. If, up to this point, the narrator had spent his life battling royally to prove the necessity of his race and his person to the world, now Rinehart unveils a world of *counter-necessity* to the narrator. Guardian of a "vast seething, hot world of fluidity" (498), Rinehart introduces the narrator to a strain of unreality, of *fiction*, which runs so tightly along the seams of necessity as be to have been forgotten within it. Within this invisible segment of reality—once misidentified by J. L. Austin as that of the illocutionary "*misfire*"—the trickster finds the most auspicious conditions for action.[68] For the narrator, who "believe[s] in nothing if not in action" (13), Rinehart shines a new light of chance upon episodes he had only known as "failures of felicity." Insofar as Rinehart

[68] See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1962), 16-18. In Austin's proliferating taxonomy of performative "infelicities," a "misfire" (in which the "procedure which we purport to invoke is disallowed or is botched" [16]) is opposed to an "abuse" (in which the procedure is achieved in a mode contrary to, or despite, the norm). The trickster's agency is positioned at the place where these two infelicities coincide—that is, where a misfire of the act of recognition constitutes an abusive procedure (a con), while the success of this abuse predicates itself upon a prior misfire.

exemplifies how misrecognition can be active and real, "being mistaken for him" is a paradigm for a most vertiginous possibility: *that the counter-technique to invisibility is invisibility itself.*

By the time the narrator breaks his silence to begin the Prologue, this implication has gained considerable force, and Rinehart, accordingly, is on his mind. It is thanks to Rinehart, indeed, that the narrator first *realizes* his invisibility, both in the sense of being aware of it, and in the sense of grasping the way in which it is real (that is, as Rinehart himself is real). With his decision to "do a Rinehart" (507), moreover, the narrator unwittingly plots his course underground, turning a corner from his fraught place in the Brotherhood; to the bedroom of the wife of one of its powerful white members (Sybil, "Sib": a woman more sibling than lover) who asks him would he please be a "brute" with her (518); to a Harlem race riot; to an abyssal hole. Having learned from Rinehart's example how one may greet others with a gaze tinted enough to disguise their own, the narrator plunges into a subterranean dimension of his own experience.

Yet as much as Rinehart teaches the narrator about the freedoms of misrecognition, he disturbs him in equal measure. Indeed, even before the Prologue, the narrator suspects Rinehart's freedoms of a certain imperfection. While the latter may be ambassador of a "hell of a state of affairs"— a "real chaos…outside of history," in a queer way the trickster also provides the mirror image to the Brotherhood's stronghold on the dialectics of historical *necessity.* Both, upon reflection, control opposite ends of a "sacrificial merry-go-ground" whose "trick is to take advantage of [people] in their own best interest" (504). This unforeseen proximity between the Brotherhood's "recognition of necessity" and Rinehart's "recognition of possibility" attests to a structural oversight, a necessary fold or wrinkle, in which they blend into one another and begin to exchange roles: the Brotherhood's intervention *in* history, while claiming the objectivity of the necessary, belies the *freedom* of its sacrificial violence; inversely, Rinehart's intervention

"outside of history," claiming the absolute reign of chaos, belies the *necessity* of its trickery. Rinehart, master of possibility, is slave to his disguises; the Brotherhood, slave to necessity, is master of its actions. The Brotherhood's adherence to "scientific necessity" is the lowly guise of its sovereignty; Rinehart's liberties, boastful of "real chaos," wear the shackles of chaos itself.

By the time the narrator has rigged his basement into shadowless warmth, he has come, perhaps, to grasp this dialectical pair with more clarity. Rinehart and the Brotherhood, placed alongside one another, not only constituted each other's antithesis, but revealed one another's internal contradiction. Rinehart's pledge to the necessity of disguise begins to merge and coincide with the Brotherhood's free interventions within historical necessity. Likewise, the irony that Rinehart, for all the masks he may assume, can never bare his own face is met by the paradox of the Brotherhood's inability to claim responsibility for its own powers. Hence the Brotherhood views its actions as means justified by the sheer necessity of their ends, while Rinehart freely chooses his ends (the targets of his trickery) while no longer being able to revise his means. Yet as conjoined emblems of necessity and possibility, the two figures constitute not a single contradiction, but a double dialectic: *an antithesis of symmetrical oscillations*.

The narrator's grasp of this double contradiction defines his method in the Prologue. For if Rinehart's "recognition of possibility" is as structurally flawed as the Brotherhood's "recognition of necessity, a new form of action must be imagined. In this connection, the mere fact that the narrator can be *mistaken* for Rinehart takes on new significance. For the idea of being mistaken for someone who is, himself, a disguise, is a paradox only if one forgets the real difference between contingency and necessity. Rinehart himself can *never* be recognized *as* misrecognized; his disguise must *never* be detected, and thus it constitutes, with a certain tragedy, his *destiny*. The narrator, on the other hand, who is *not* Rinehart but *could* be taken for

him, maintains the potential not only for dissimulation, but also for its interruption. He is able, unlike Rinehart, to *not* be *mis*recognized (which, again, is not equivalent to being *properly seen*) and therefore to become a properly comedic figure. As a *pseudo*-Rinehart in the most rigorous sense, the narrator is precisely *not* a master of disguise, but rather someone *able oneself to suspend chaos without any claim to necessity*; someone able to meet possibility with *counter-possibility*, and potentiality with impotentiality. Someone able to joke. The narrator retains his ability to take off his mask without expecting, thereby, to be seen. He is able to define his invisibility in the doubly negative terms of a potential *to not be not-himself.* Call this his counterinvisibility.

II. Invisibility and Counterinvisibility

Counterinvisibility becomes a compositional strategy in the Prologue to *Invisible Man*, as it not only *anticipates* misrecognition by the reader, but also gives itself room to freely fulfill this illusion. The polished inscrutability of Ellison's prose pronounces its feigned confirmation or "yessing" (as the narrator's grandfather calls it) to whatever affirmations the reader seeks in it. Taking place simultaneously *after* the novel's "action" and *before* it—that is, rupturing the seam between what Paul Ricoeur calls "narrative time" and the "time of reading"— the Prologue obscures everything but readerly expectations, allowing these to stand in place of its own content.[69] Readers in search of racial moderation will thus "discover" in the narrator a pliable pluralist; while, by the same token, a philosophical reader, seeking a bodiless head, will be

[69] See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Volume 1*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago & London: U of Chicago P, 1990), esp. pp. 76-81. Ricoeur draws on Gunther Müller's distinction between *Erzählzeit* (time of narrating) and *erzählte Zeit* (narrated time) which "looks for a new key for interpreting time in fiction in the distinction between utterance and statement" and "opens to a *time of life*" (76, original emphasis).

pleased indeed at the elaboration of a metaphysical system. The narrator nods eagerly at the latter suggestion: "Call me, since I have a theory and a concept, a 'thinker-tinker'" [IM 7], he says.

How well "an invisible man" fits within the philosophical tradition is, from this perspective, far less germane a question than how the tradition itself is recast (tinkered) by "an invisible man" so that, at every turn, he mirrors it. Again, Ellison's gesture is not to offer a new philosophy, so much as to stylize the latter into an image of itself; to render in an image a set of conceptual presuppositions that cannot, as an image, be concepts any longer. It is the task of his "'thinker-tinker'" to work upon conceptuality, to use its "junked" forms, and to engineer thought as it misfires, that is, in its impropriety. Thus, rather than extending or refuting any particular claim, the Prologue merely shows certain claims as such. It renders philosophy itself a matter of seeing and being-seen, of exhibition with all the concomitant risks of scuffles or seduction, illumination or shock. The effect we all-too-easily mistake for its debt to philosophy is this advanced exposition of philosophy. Terms like "invisible," then, do not reflect the way the narrator has appropriated Western metaphysics and rendered it in his own image; rather, in conveying such an impression, these terms betray just how completely he has already been overlooked by the tradition itself.

If this oversight is detected in the very ease with which we take the narrator for a philosopher, Ellison uses this as an index for when the joke is up. In a gesture to which we will now turn, which recalls the "wounded quail" who escapes precisely by coming to the hunters aid, we will see how his talk of reflection, especially the "mirrors of hard and distorting glass" which originally obscure the narrator, work *on* philosophy itself. Indeed, transposing the question with which philosophical reflection began and transfiguring the text which sought to end its tradition,

Ellison re-raises the question of the meaning of Being, and syncopates its signal text, Heidegger's *Being and Time*.

To be sure, Heidegger shares with Ellison's narrator a keen sense that "the end is in the beginning, and lies far ahead" (IM 6), for *Being and Time* seeks nothing less than to confirm the truth of this intuition, to reawaken philosophy's infancy, its ancient questioning, and thus to clear away two-thousand years' worth of metaphysical obstruction. The epigraph to *Being and Time* harkens, aptly, from Plato's *Sophist*, in which a speaker remarks upon the sudden strangeness of the most common of words: "For manifestly you have long been aware of what you mean when you use the expression "'*being*.'"[70] We, however, who used to think we understood it, have now become perplexed" (qtd in BT 21). Here, it is the manifest which proves most perplexing, and the obvious, most remote. The aim of an introduction to a problem of "'being'" must reorient philosophical understanding towards this fact—indeed, towards the peculiar generativity of its interrogative uncertainty:

> Do we in our time have an answer to the question of what we really mean by the word 'being'? Not at all. So it is fitting that we should raise anew *the question of the meaning of Being*. But are we nowadays even perplexed at our inability to understand the expression 'Being'? Not at all. So first of all we must reawaken an understanding for the meaning of this question. (21)

Significant here is how Heidegger indicates the limit of our ontological knowledge ("what we really mean by the word 'being'") without attempting immediately to correct it. We must first see this limits *as such*, he insists, which means that the "word 'being'" must transform into the "*question of the meaning of being."* The word's status *as a question* depends upon having suspended its normal use so that it no longer corresponds to the copula (to the predication of this-or-that thing which is). Having bracketed the familiar, the characteristic affect of questioning is

[70] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 2008), 21. Hereafter cited in the text as BT.

perplexity. Like an uninvented coffee-pot, perplexity is the thoughtful tangle in which our ontological questioning exists as such. Beseeching our ingenuity (our very potentiality for thought), Heidegger assures us that Being first shows itself as this tangle—that is, when Being no longer *is* anything at all.

Achieving the critical suspension of all prior knowledge, however, is no small task (no less difficult than cutting through two millennia of philosophical thought). The first half of the Introduction to *Being and Time* is thus devoted to explicating the dual nature of this undertaking and its proper method. On the one hand, Heidegger says, we must bracket our every *answer* to the ontological question, since these will only lead us astray. On the other hand, though, we must *use* these answers as means to an end; they constitute forms of "preunderstanding," clues to guide our investigation.

The first half of this process (that of refusing answers) requires that we grasp something of the *ancientness* of the question at hand. It is so buried in our ways of speaking that it has not only led to its dismissal as mere sophistry, but to its oblivion. "The question we are touching upon," he writes

> is not just any question. It is one which provided a stimulus for the researches of Plato and Aristotle, only to subside from then on *as a theme for actual investigation.* What these two men achieved was to persist through many alterations and 'retouchings' down to the 'logic' of Hegel. And what they wrested with the utmost intellectual effort from the phenomena, fragmentary and incipient though it was, has long since been trivialized. (21)

The ontological has not concealed itself except through being "trivialized." It has, in other words, been so relentlessly presupposed that even mentioning it is enough to elicit immediate suspicion or disbelief. Halting the habit of presupposition, however, and heeding whatever estrangement ensues—*this* is the critical first step to raising the question of Being again, and correctly. The second step (and this is only an apparent paradox) is to *resume* our habit of

presupposition, now deliberately. By means of this deliberateness, presupposition becomes a *method*, a mode of questioning which has since come to be known as the *hermeneutic circle*. The key to entering it properly, of "com[ing] into it the right way" (159),[71] depends on how we experience presupposition itself. He explains this experience in terms of the two-fold or double nature of "appearance" [*Erscheinung*]:

> The appearance, as the appearance "of something," does *not* mean showing [zeigen] itself; it means rather the announcing-itself [das Sich-melden] by [von] something which does not show itself, but which announces itself through something which does show itself. Appearing is a *not-showing-itself*. (52)

In every "something" that appears, something else *announces itself* precisely in *not* appearing. What necessarily disappears in every appearance is the advent or self-announcement of appearing itself. Like perplexity which attunes us to questioning, this predicament of appearance is valuable *as a problem*. "What we really mean by 'being'" is to be found no where else than in all the ways we so casually "mean" it. Hence our way around the inscrutability of Being is in remembering that ours has always been an ontological vernacular.

In the distinction Heidegger draws between appearance and announcement, *zeigen* and *melden*, we may recognize the plight of invisibility. The refusal to ask the question of Being takes the form of having always already answered it, just as a refusal to see Ellison's narrator takes the form of assuming that one has actually seen him. The inverse is also true: the narrator "announces himself" in "*not*-showing-[him]self," and so is indeed "invisible"; Being exists as a presupposition of our every utterance, and so is unsayable. In both cases, something so fundamental to appearance and to language as to have been definitively forgotten *in* them, flashes up. Ignoring (or refusing to see) this indication requires no animosity, just habit. We miss

[71] In the questioning of the meaning of Being there is no 'circular reasoning' but rather a remarkable 'relatedness backward or forward' which what we are asking about (Being) bears to the inquiry itself as a mode of Being of an entity. (28)

the signal because habit operates on the "basis," precisely, of mistaking its oblivion for its understanding and its blindness for its vision. In relation to this *learned oversight* Heidegger and Ellison's definitions of the invisible coincide, for a moment, before they decisively diverge.

In both cases, invisibility can be likened to the surface of a mirror. For Heidegger, the mirror is an *image* for the ontological difference—that is, for the way in which the fracture between appearance and announcement, visibility and invisibility, plays out—since Being is forgotten in its self-reference as easily as the surface of a mirror dissolves into a reflection. Moreover, the "hard and distorting glass," like the hermeneutic circle, remains our only index for learning to grasp the invisible in the visible—or at least to heed its announcement.

But for Ellison, the mirror is also a figure for the *non-figurable* (in the same manner in which figuring oneself as Rinehart simply means becoming a disguise oneself). And the mirrors of "hard, distorting glass," in Ellison's case, serve to reference a dimension alongside the play of appearance and disappearance, which remains adjacent to the mirror. Besides the visibility/invisibility of its surface, beside the ontological question itself, is the forgotten one who raises it. Behind the looking-glass, or beneath it, the question of the meaning of Being may be investigated anew; or the question itself might, depending on the one asking, catch in the throat.

Ellison's ontological use of the word "invisible" breaks up, even as it anticipates Merleau-Ponty's claim in *The Visible and the Invisible*, published seven years after *Invisible Man*, that

> With the first vision, the first contact, the first pleasure, there is initiation, that is, not the positing of a content, but the opening of a dimension that can never again be closed, the establishment of a level in terms of which every other experience will henceforth be situated. The idea is this level, this dimension. It is therefore not a *de facto* invisible, like an object hidden behind another, and not an absolute invisible, which would have nothing to do with the visible. Rather it is the

> invisible *of* this world, that which inhabits this world, sustains it, and renders it visible, its own and anterior possibility, the Being of this being. [72]

As translator Alphonso Lingis paraphrases this passage, "to see is to see with, according to the invisible axes and pivots, levels and lines of force of the visible" (VI lii). One would always have to account for the "with," the philosopher suggests in this last, unfinished work, to describe the *experience* of existence; such experience predicates itself upon the invisibility not of *who* one is, but of that *with* which, and *according to* which, one opens to the dimension of Being. The invisibility of Ellison's narrator, similarly, functions as an existential optic. And yet, as we will see, invisibility aids in the description of his own experience only after serving as a mode of self-description for others.

As noted earlier, the narrator of *Invisible Man*, for his part, does not say "I am invisible," nor "I am, invisibly." He says, "I am *an invisible man*," and in this way, marks a slight discrepancy from Merleau-Ponty's suggestion. For in the narrator's formula, the "idea" is also an entity, *another being*, rather than just the armatures of Being; the ontological "level" and "dimension" coincides with the lineaments of this man's *body*—made, as he reminds us, "of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids" (IM 3). Hence there is a subtle transmutation of ontological invisibility into a strange—and, as we find out, racial—corporeality.

Here, we can recall the impossible sociality of the narrator's phrase and ask anew: what is the effect of identifying oneself as "an invisible man"? To begin with, it announces *how* he exists by evoking the perspective of an other whose own reflexivity depends upon a failure to see him. Such a gesture comes not from beyond, but from inside ontology, and does not so much refute or negate as double its measure of thought. For "I am an invisible man" indicates, from *within* the difference of Being and beings, a second division: that between ontology and ethics. Indeed, the

[72] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible: Followed by Working Notes* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1968), trans. Alphonso Lingis, 151. Hereafter cited in the text as VI.

narrator's statement suggests that this distinction between Being and the Other grows precisely *indistinct* when the latter happens to be black. Negotiating once more the proximity between "being a problem" and "being as a problem," Ellison's own formula now poses its own question: how does racialized experience inscribe an invisible ethics into Western ontology? *Where, in the thicket of Being, would you hide if you were a wounded quail?*

The answer lies, as Ellison is wont to do, by the hunter's side. It takes the form, that is to say, in the way the notion of "an invisible man" translates a major Heideggerian term to which race is presumed to be not only external but extraneous: *Dasein*. Within this word for distinctly human existence, "an invisible man" marks a minor displacement, or rather, a displacement into the minor, in the sense Deleuze and Guattari suggest becomes possible when one is "a stranger *within* his own language."[73] What an "invisible man" does to the project of fundamental ontology, in other words, is akin to what Kafka does to the German language, allowing it to "take flight on a line of escape" (26). However, let us be cautious in our descriptions, for Ellison's "deterritorialization" of the meaning of Dasein is not itself an escape from ontology, but a fundamental displacement of it. An invisible man, that is to say, does not travel the same hermeneutic path as Dasein to arrive at knowledge of himself. Rather, he *is* the path Dasein treads. A close examination of the existential hermeneutic in *Being and Time* shows that in order for Dasein to reach self-transparency (or what is "ownmost [*eigenst*]" to it), it must traverse, unwittingly, the body of the invisible.

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[73] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986), 26. For Deleuze and Guattari, minority is also a matter of undergrounding. Their text begins: "How can we enter into Kafka's work? This work is a rhizome, a burrow. […] It might seem that burrow in the story of that name has only one entrance; the most the animal can do is dream of a second entrance that would serve only for surveillance. But this is a trap arranged by the animal and by Kafka himself; the whole description of the burrow functions to trick the enemy" (3). We perhaps recognize in this description the trick or trap laid by the narrator, who anticipates the reader's assimilation of invisibility toward his own uses, and confirms his invisibility thereby.

III. Dasein and Nicht-Da-Sein

On account of its familiarity, Dasein's difficulty as a term is not often remarked. It is usually understood to indicate an existential capacity for self-relation or auto-affection, though the nature of such a capacity is less often explained than presumed. This is also true lexically, as English translations of *Sein und Zeit* often leave Dasein untranslated.[74] Like the word "Being," it seems that Dasein's familiarity embeds it within a form of immemorial presupposition, from which it is not easily recovered. In Dasein's case, as in that of Being itself, such a structure is fitting, since Dasein's *priority* in ontological questions is also what makes it difficult to interrogate.

Heidegger defines Dasein is an entity that "includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its Being," (BT 27) and its significance to the question of the meaning of Being becomes apparent once we recognize that

> looking at something, understanding and conceiving it, choosing, access to it—all these ways of behaving are constitutive for our inquiry, and therefore are modes of Being for those particular entities which we, the inquirers, are ourselves. Thus to work out the question of Being adequately, we must make an entity—the inquirer—transparent in his own Being. The very asking of this question is an entity's mode of *being*; and as such it gets its essential character from what is inquired about—namely, Being. This entity which each of us is himself and which

[74] As early as the 1962 first Blackwell edition, translators Macquarrie and Robinson would explain in a footnote why they have (not) done what they have (not) done. They write: "the word 'Dasein' plays so important a role in this work and is already so familiar to the English-speaking reader who has read about Heidegger, that it seems simpler to leave it untranslated except in the relatively rare passages in which Heidegger himself breaks it up with a hyphen ('Da-Sein') to show its etymological construction: literally 'Being-there'." The "familiarity" they suspect in the English reader is, notably, second-hand (in those who have "read about Heidegger"). And yet the note is important, too, for its clarification of what, to a translator, is considered *untranslatable*—not in the sense of being unable to be translated, but in the sense of being able *not* to be translated. Dasein is not left intact as such because its rendering as "being-there" would not do. On the contrary, Dasein is left untranslated because it already exists as a term in the English philosophical idiom. *Its idiosyncrasy is already idiomatic.* Lost in non-translation, then, is the experience of Dasein *as a* translation.

> includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its Being, we shall denote by the term "Dasein." (27)

Here, Heidegger explains that if Dasein is an entity whose inquiring is "constitutive" of its Being, something unexpected happens when its inquiry is also *about* Being. In such a case, what exists *to* Dasein as a question, also exists *for* it, as part of its own Being. In this way, what Dasein knows of itself already offers an implicit or refracted theory of Being in general.

Since Dasein's Being remains presupposed, however, it remains invisible. The goal of the existential hermeneutic is not to make this Being visible so much as *transparent*—that is, evident in its invisibility. This is why transparency [*Durchsichtigkeit*] turns out to be a crucial term in Heidegger's lexicon: it offers Dasein knowledge of itself in an experience markedly different than confronting (or handling) an object.[75] For as a seeing-through (literally, *Durch*, through + *sichtigkeit*, sighting), transparency is a sight evacuated of its ontic content; it is the form of understanding which becomes possible in the suspension of the visible as such.

In a pivotal passage, Heidegger explicitly links *Durchsichtigkeit* to the self-knowledge of Dasein. He writes:

> In its projective character, understanding goes to make up existentially what we call Dasein's "sight" [*Sicht*] . […] The sight which is related primarily on the whole to existence we call "*transparency*" [*Durchsichtigkeit*]. We choose this term to designate "knowledge of the Self" [*Selbsterkenntnis*] in a sense which is well understood, so as to indicate that here it is not a matter of perceptually tracking down and inspecting a point called the "Self," but rather one of seizing upon the full disclosedness of Being-in-the-world *throughout all* the constitutive items which are essential to it, and doing so with understanding. In existing, entities sight "themselves" [*sichtet "sich"*] only insofar as they have become transparent to themselves with equal primordiality in those items which are constitutive for their existence: their Being-alongside [*Sein bei*] the world and their Being-with Others. (186-7, original emphasis)

[75] Heidegger's two modes of encountering entities in the world are decidedly *manual*, divided between the readiness-to-hand (*Zuhandenheit*) of equipment and the idle presence-at-hand of useless things which becomes objects of observation (*Vorhandenheit*).

Dasein's existential understanding constitutes a form of vision, *Sicht*, which when related to the constitutive dimensions of its Being, becomes transparency, *Durchsichtigkeit*. A knowledge of self is, for this reason, not a matter of knowing *something* ("tracking down and inspecting a point called the 'Self'"). Rather, it involves glimpsing the *mode* in which one has been existing. What can be encountered in the mode of transparency—and in no other way—is *the invisibility of sight itself*. Dasein's self-knowledge, in Heidegger's account, is thus a sight capable of seeing through itself.

Ellison's narrator is perhaps the literary character most singularly accustomed to being looked through. Invisibility, after all, is his identity. And yet there is an important difference between invisibility and transparency, one which Ellison takes pains to mark and which informs his "minoritizing" of Dasein. We might formulate this difference as follows: although the narrator is looked through by others, he never becomes *transparent* in Heidegger's sense. Instead, when he is looked through, he merely suffers his own disappearance. This disappearance places an invisible man at odds with the *Durchsichtigkeit* of Dasein. For rather than opening the way to self-awareness it, invisibility bars it; and rather than apprising the narrator of a self, invisibility pries a self from him. This dispossession, I suggest, constitutes what we might call an *ontological double-consciousness*. Here, the "two-ness" ever felt is not that of distinct identities, but rather, of a self which dissolves in the self-relation—or Dasein—of unseeing another.

In the Epilogue to *Invisible Man*, the narrator addresses this problem explicitly when he attempts to be sincere, totally transparent in his motives, but falters:

> Let me be honest with you—a feat which, by the way, I find of the utmost difficulty. When one is invisible he finds such problems as good and evil, honesty and dishonesty, of such shifting shapes that he confuses one with the other, depending upon who happens to be looking through him at the time. Well, now I've been trying to look through myself, and there's a risk in it. I was never more hated than when I tried to be honest. Or when, even as just now I've tried to

> articulate exactly what I felt to be the truth. No one was satisfied—not even I. (IM 572-3)

The narrator's attempt at honesty betrays the extent to which he is used to not being seen. His invisibility is so engrained that he can now even "look through" himself. And yet, an awareness of being invisible, rather than "seizing upon the full disclosedness of Being-in-the-world," has inaugurated the incurable malaise of being what someone else is looking through. For the narrator, the shapes of moral dichotomy—good/evil, honesty/dishonesty—have lost their density at his own expense, "depending on who happens to be looking through him at the time."

There is a crucial implication to this shape-shifting, extending beyond a notion of moral relativism. For relativity itself shows that while the narrator remains invisible, those looking through him aim to become transparent. It is the nature of this transparency which the passage brings into focus. For others, the narrator's invisibility simultaneously enables and compromises what they can know of and for themselves. In other words, an invisible man plays precisely the role that transparency does in Heidegger's account.

Insofar as he can be "looked through" (Ellison's language evoking precisely a lens or optic), he is thus the medium of others' moral articulation and self-knowledge more generally. In Merleau-Ponty's terms, an invisible man is what others see good and evil, honesty and dishonesty, *with*. Precisely as this medium, however (and as something of a hidden force of conscience), the narrator forms the irreducible remainder of others' self-awareness. As they look through him, they see only good or evil in themselves; hence they can do no better than cast his invisibility aside as that minimal difference of self-reflection which Rodolphe Gasché has called "the tain of the mirror."[76]

[76] See Gasché's groundbreaking text on Derrida (*The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* [Cambridge, MA, Harvard UP: 1988]). Gasché places the French philosopher's concept of différance as a *quasi*-transcendental—and hence, in a contestational proximity to transcendental

In this case, Heidegger's remarks *Selbsterkenntnis* apply to an invisible man in a most unexpected way. For we no sooner ask "What, has an invisible man to do with Dasein?" than recall that his invisibility *enables* others to enter into a self-relation, to become Dasein themselves.

Two consequences follow from this. First, the narrator's invisibility, in the eyes of others, is configured in terms of the ontological difference (which divides others from themselves and permits a mode of their *self-relation*), rather than as an ethical difference (which separates them from him). Invisibility is thereby consigned to the role of helping someone know *himself* rather than someone else.[77] This gesture renders an invisible man an existential transparency—that is, a mode which supplies "the there" in which others find or lose *themselves*, the *Da* in which they find or lose *their* Da-sein. Grasped in this immanence to others' Being, an invisible man also suffers a second form of invisibility, one which in fact is only an intensification of the first: from the perspective of others, he can be evoked only under the sign of *Dasein's own negativity*. In this connection, we realize that the hatred the narrator elicits with his attempts at honesty is not directed at him. Rather, it is part of the individuating anxiety [*Angst*] Dasein feels in thinking it confronts *itself*. The encounter with "a nothing and nowhere [*nirgends*] within-the-world" (BT 231), as Heidegger defines anxiety, is, then, paradoxically closed to an Other. Within the existential scheme, there is no way for the alienation of anxiety to indicate an actual *alien* to the

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philosophy from Kant to Heidegger. However, insofar as Gasché approximates the role of différance to the inscription of *philosophy*, its ethical and political potentialities remains somewhat obscure. It is precisely to these potentialities that I wish to turn attention by foregrounding invisibility. This concept, I am suggesting, enables Ellison's critical inhabitation—and ethical displacement—of the philosophical tradition.

[77] It is this elision of ethics, we might note, that the narrator responds to in his ambivalence regarding honesty: traditional morality cannot account for his role in the sincerity of others. Truth and lies thereby obtained by means of an invisible man must be taken, as Nietzsche says, in an "non-moral sense." See "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense" in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, ed. (New York: Cambridge UP, 1999), 140-153.

self. Just as there is no place within others' *Da* for the one who opens it, there is no place, in the nowhere, for an invisible man.

Thus we return to the problem of where and how an invisible man exists. How, indeed, can he know himself, and what happens when he looks through himself? This proves to be an impossible question within the scheme of fundamental ontology, at least insofar as it is predicated on an existential analysis of Dasein. To the extent that an invisible man *supplies* Dasein with the positive convictions of morality, as well as the negative coordinates of anxiety, only to be *dispossessed* of both, he exists only as a potentiality-for-being which others take to be their "ownmost." His exteriority, in turn, is always already consigned to the interior of Being. But from this perspective the Harlemite's self-report, 'Oh, man, I'm *nowhere*,'" takes on its full significance: for in order that Dasein be self-present, or *now here* [*Jetzt-hier*], an invisible man must, by definition, *be-nowhere*.

Might this qualify an invisible man, then, not so much as a Dasein but as a *nicht-Da-Sein*—that is, an entity who, insofar as he supplies "the there" for others, *can be its own not-there*? This is a minor displacement of ontology that also minoritizes Being, for a not-there-man, or no-where-man (a Harlemite) falls outside of traditional philosophy but nevertheless goes on speaking even and especially when spoken-for, *as and because* the exemplars of majority (and first philosophy) claim so vividly to have penetrated the meaning of the unseen. He thereby counters the ruse of overdetermination and the violence of oversight not by becoming transparent, but rather by seeing and hearing around corners, by seeing and playing on the ways he is seen-through. Thus in the very event of effacement, he wears the mask, re-articulating and dis-articulating, deactivating and re-purposing those very structures of thought that confine, capture, and presuppose his legibility. Most importantly, he does so undetected.

Perhaps somewhere in this imperceptible reordering there is a reversal of the oversight of minority into the political potentiality of the overlooked. Perhaps if the paradox of minority is, as the figure of an invisible man perfectly crystallizes, that its "high visibility" (IM xv) is all-too-easily mistaken for high legibility; and if this conflation of seeing and reading prevents minority from appearing as an Other (that is, not as a signifier but as *one who signifies*) to anyone but itself, then the sphere in which minority acts, speaks, and thinks is none other than the sphere in which majority acts, speaks, and thinks *about itself*. The *medium* of minority, we might say, is this domain of majority's (whiteness's) self-relation, self-identity, and auto-affection. Minority, we might say, occupies the length of the hyphen in each of these terms. Thus the undiminished relevance of Ellison's (counter)invisibility might be situated in the way it situates minority as a stranger immanent to—and always invisible in—the *ipseity* (the sovereignty or selfhood) of those in power. Minority as the *intimate* of philosophy, of abstraction, of the means of representation; minority as simultaneously captive and fugitive, manservant and mutineer of philosophy.

IV, Heterotopia and the Underground

Implicit in such impious immanence is the notion not just of revolt but uprising. That is to say, there is a *spatiality* of counterinvisibility that configures the shape and orientation of its power along a vertical axis. In this perspective, the significance of Ellison's prizing of an underground imaginary comes to light, since it functions as if what were at stake in minority and the questions of minor being is not "raising a problem anew" but, rather, of rousing oneself and rising up precisely insofar as one has been called a problem. Thus it might be that Dasein tells only half the story, and that nicht-Da-Sein simply points the way underground. In the context of

Ellison's novel, reminders of the narrator's underground life, strewn throughout the ground-level chapters of *Invisible Man*, confirm the significance of this spatial arrangement. For it is underground in particular, Ellison implies, that an invisible man can wire enlightenment to one's own designs (as the narrator does from "Monopolated Light and Power") and where one can also develop a philosophy of history in the wily shape of a boomerang. It is underground that the narrator cultivates his unusually deft sense of possibility (so that he can, for instance, rebuild a phonograph by the pirated glare of 1,369 filament light bulbs) at the same time that it is being underground that keeps him from ever resolving or fully absolving himself from the violence of being put in one's place, especially when that place is *beneath*. The ambiguity of invisibility therefore reverberates in the concept-metaphor of the underground, as an invisible man is underground wherever he goes. It is for this reason that an invisible man cannot recognize or become transparent to himself in the world (where he only disappears in the eyes of others). And it is also why he *can* encounter himself underground—that is, in a space where others also disappear, where they become invisible to him.

Ellison voiced this intuition four years before publishing *Invisible Man*, in a short article called "Harlem is Nowhere."[78] The essay, first drafted as part of Ellison's work with the WPA, describes the extent of social and economic exploitation of African Americans in its distinctly "psychological character—a character that arises from the impact between urban slum conditions and folk sensibilities."[79] In leaving the South, Ellison explains, the Negro has been obliged to "surrender[] certain important supports to his personality," including "peasant cynicism" and "a body of folklore" (SA 298). Upon reaching the Northern metropole, what orientation this

[78] Although it was composed in 1948, "Harlem is Nowhere" remained unpublished until the release of Ellison's 1964 essay collection *Shadow and Act.*
[79] Ralph Ellison, "Harlem is Nowhere," *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 296. Hereafter cited in the text as SA.

"Southern Negro rationality" once offered has been ruined (SA 299); all existential reference-points, "bulwarks which men place between themselves and the constant threat of chaos" (SA 299), have been liquidated. In terms which anticipate the narrator's own journey, Ellison describes the migration northward as a spiritual downspiral which completes itself in Harlem and whose emblem is a radical relinquishment of customary modes of being in the world.

Significant to the question of invisibility and the underground is the way this psychic loss of foundations invests itself within the spatial dynamics of the city. Harlem, Ellison writes, is "the scene and symbol of the Negro's perpetual alienation in the land of his birth" (SA 296). It is "nowhere" because it constitutes a democratic contradiction, an underground to the promises (and premises) of American life. For this reason, "to live in Harlem is to dwell in the very bowels of the city; it is to pass a labyrinthine existence among streets that explode monotonously skyward with the spires and crosses of churches and clutter underfoot with garbage and decay" (SA 295). The "psychological character" of such a dwelling sits below the traditional sightlines of sociology and economics, revealing itself only in a negation which simultaneously contests and subtends existing principles of order, custom, and discipline.

Harlem thus serves, in relation to other American cityscapes, as what Michel Foucault (twenty years after Ellison's essay) would call a heterotopia. For Foucault, a heterotopia is a "counter-arrangement of effectively realized utopia, in which all the arrangements that can be found within society are at one and the same time represented, challenged and overturned"; "a sort of space that lies outside all places [nowhere] and yet is actually localizable."[80] Harlem is heterotopic insofar as its racial configuration presents a topsy-turvy version of American social life, one in which a nightmarish carnival of democratic wishes unravels in "masquerade," and

[80] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias" in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural* Theory, ed. Neil Leach (New York: Routledge, 1997), 333.

"exotic costumes are worn everyday" (SA 297). Black life in "the bowels of the city"—generally imperceptible but imperative to the city's subsistence—is an underground elaboration of democratic existence.

Yet to precisely the extent that Harlem constitutes a dead and wasted democracy, or a democracy in and of the bowels, Harlem's own underground also opens a space, Ellison suggests, for Harlem's own counter-arrangement. This, precisely, is the point of investigation in the essay, as it takes as a privileged vantage for reflecting (upon) Harlem not Lenox Avenue, but the Lafargue Psychiatric Clinic, a scarcely funded project whose site is, like the narrator's hole will be, a deep basement. To reach the clinic, Ellison writes, "one must descend to the basement and move along a confusing mazelike hall; twice the passage seems to lead against a blank wall; then at last one enters the brightly lighted auditorium" (294). What one encounters in this labyrinthine burrow, according to the writer, is one of "few institutions dedicated to recognizing the total implication of Negro life in the United States" (295). Lafargue's interest for Ellison is not so much its therapeutic program as its underground configuration. For this configuration is what sheds light upon Harlem's physical and psychic makeup by mirroring and inverting it. Lafargue acknowledges, in its very structure, the subterranean element into which the patient's inner life has, from above-ground, already been plunged. Its curative principle, for Ellison, is therefore staked upon an exact inversion of "streets that explode monotonously skyward." A contestation in negative space, Lafargue comes as close as anywhere to providing Harlem's nowhere with an address.

In this way, as a zone which foregoes horizons and requires a precipitous descent, the clinic relates to Harlem as Harlem does to the rest of American life: just as Harlem is democracy's underground and fundamental inversion, Lafargue is an inversion of Harlem's

inversion, and hence "an underground extension of democracy" (295) itself. In this way, the clinic abides in the paradoxical duality of being a heterotopia *to* a heterotopia. For insofar as Harlem is a dreamscape of disenfranchisement housed in the bowels of the city, Lafargue, burrowed within these entrails, seeks the rumbling of awakening.

Ellison, as we have seen, carries this concept of the underground (and *its* underground, or heterotopic inversion) into *Invisible Man*, where the psychic topography of "Harlem is Nowhere" informs the primary locus of narration. In the novel, then, there are again two heterotopias: first, in the boomeranging of the narrator's above-ground life, whose recursive (traumatic) structure simultaneously reflects and contradicts the utopian principles of American life; second, in what Robert Stepto calls the "frame": the hole that is the underground setting of both Prologue and Epilogue and which makes the trauma of invisibility the occasion for a *tale*—that is, a thinkable and speakable structure.[81] Such heterotopic redoubling achieves the effect Ellison had observed in the Lafargue clinic: it retains, relieves, and also inverts the above-ground destitution which is itself already an overturning of every normative principle. In this way, a double heterotopia makes "nowhere" inhabitable (for a while), just as an urban crypt can be made into a warm hole, and scraps of junk metal can be tinkered into Louis Armstrong's trumpet. If the narrator as Harlemite knows that " 'Oh, man, I'm nowhere'" (SA 295), the narrator of *Invisible Man* has come to counterarrange this nowhere in a way neither the current phase of democracy, nor the

[81] Stepto sees the narrative structure of *Invisible Man* as an innovative imbrication or superimposition of two fundamental types of narrative that he identifies in the African American tradition: the immersion and the ascent. Where the ascent usually leaves the protagonist alone in his achievement, alienated from the gift and community of his race (often in the North), immersion usually finds the protagonist integrated within a community at the expense of his individual achievement (most often in the South). Ellison's well-lit hole—site of his narrative frame—inverts both narrative schemes, revealing a zone of indistinction between them: for the Prologue represents a solitude without achievement and an immersion without community, whereas the more optimistic Epilogue represents, for Stepto, an achievement without solitude and a community in the absence of immersion. See "Literacy and Hibernation: Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*," in *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (Urbana & Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1991), 163-194.

contemporary human sciences can fathom: as a habitation (and rehabilitation) *by* the invisible, *of* the invisible, *for* the invisible.

V. Speech and (Non-)Phenomena

What distinguishes "Harlem is Nowhere," with its underground home for the invisible, and *Invisible Man* with its well-lit hole, is that the latter carries its (doubly-)heterotopic counterarrangement into the realm of speech. That is to say, the novel's own discourse is modeled on an invisibility that is both a negation of the norm and therapy for it. What such a counterarrangement means for language, and especially the language of fiction, is the theme of the remainder of this chapter, since it is in storytelling that invisibility shifts from a philosophical vernacular to a vernacularization of philosophy itself.

Certainly, Ellison's strategic use of myth as well as his mobilization of cultural symbolism has longstanding importance in literary criticism of his fiction. Houston Baker, for instance, has identified in the Trueblood episode of *Invisible Man* a "metaexpressive commentary on the incumbencies of Afro-American artists," that is, an articulation of the commercial demands on black art that Ellison could express in no other way—and perhaps in no more effective way—than in the voice of a marginal character whose self-awareness wears the mask of a reprobate sharecropper.[82] In a similar vein, Hortense Spillers's influential essay on Ellison's construction of a coherent mythology of black life suggests that the novel's autobiographical mode has distinctive power insofar as it "embraces history as an act of

[82] Houston A. Baker, Jr., "To Move Without Moving: An Analysis of creativity and Commerce in Ralph Ellison's Trueblood Episode" *Speaking for You: The Vision of Ralph Ellison,* ed. Kimberly W. Bentson (Washington, DC: Howard U P, 1987), 324.

consciousness."[83] What both Spillers and Baker point out is Ellison's use of language toward ends only obliquely related to those of traditional signification or realism. Indeed, they show how Ellison's construction of symbolism, and his allegorical embedding of this construction within his text, are predicated upon having glimpsed the structural failure of Western traditions and myths to account for a blackness upon which their own self-concept depends.

What has received relatively little critical attention in this context, however, is the strategy by which Ellison transforms a tradition that cannot see him into a poetics of invisibility. Indeed, if I have been suggesting that the discourse in which Ellison operates is itself in a state of disrepair, then it is worth asking how, from out of this tangle of exhausted metaphysical machinery, he rigs the communicative mechanism of a novelistic voice.

Thirty years after the publication of *Invisible Man*, Giorgio Agamben would shed new light on the nexus of invisibility, Being, and voice. In *Language and Death* (1982), he argues that Western philosophy has derived its concept of Being not just from the oldest mystical notions of an invisible and ineffable Deity, but also from an irreparable—and utterly banal—feature of human language: the unsayability of "the instance of discourse," or the "taking-place" [*aver-logo*] of language itself. "Being," Agamben explains, has been philosophy's name for the *event* of language, for the taking place of an utterance which can only be indicated (most notably, by pronouns and deictics), but never *said* in the utterance itself. In a critical passage, he writes:

> The sphere of utterance [*enunciazione*] thus includes that which, in every speech act, refers exclusively to its taking place [*al suo aver-luogo*], to its *instance*, independently and prior to what is said and meant in it. Pronouns and other indicators of the utterance, before they designate real objects, indicate precisely *that language takes place* [*che il linguaggio ha luogo*]. In this way, still prior to the world of meanings, they permit reference to the very *event of language*, the only context in which something can be signified. Linguistics defines [*coglie*] this dimension as the putting into action [*la messa in opera*] of language and the

[83] Hortense Spillers, "Ellison's 'Usable Past': Toward a Theory of Myth," *Speaking for You: The Vision of Ralph Ellison,* ed. Kimberly W. Bentson (Washington, DC: Howard U P, 1987), 148.

> conversion of *langue* into *parole*. But for more than two thousand years, throughout the history of Western philosophy, this dimension has been called *being*, *ousia*.[84]

Significant here is that Being not only names the transcendent advent of meaning; it is also the dimension produced in and by a practical human activity: enunciation, or "the putting into action [or putting to work] of language." For Agamben, the virtue of modern linguistics is that it illuminates precisely the centrality of this practice, as well as of its habituation, to all signification and discourse. A turn to a thinking of the habitual (insofar as it is always already a habituation of thinking) therefore marks, in his view, a first but decisive step beyond metaphysics. Specifically, it allows us to move past a thinking which seeks to "define[]" or grasp Being in its abyssal opening of *logos*, towards the *open question* of habit and dwelling, which bears the equally ancient name, *ēthos*. Displacing the question of Being onto the plane of ethics, we encounter something other than the unutterable. In its place emerges a human capacity for dwelling in and alongside the unsayable, which Agamben calls "infancy" [*infanzia*]. A technical term in his work, *infanzia* signifies not a chronological childhood, but a persistent being-without-language (infancy/*infanzia* derives from the Latin *infans*, for "unable to speak") in the human being. In his earlier *Infancy and History* (1978), he defines infancy (in terms which anticipate the passage above) as "the transcendental experience of the difference between *langue* and *parole*" (IH 50). Infancy is, in other words, "located" or "based" in the same unsayable and negative interval designated above as dividing "*being, ousia*" from that which is (said).

The philosophical intervention made by the concept of infancy, therefore, is that the latter references not only the age-old abyss between Being and beings, *zeigen* and *melden*, or *langue* and *parole*; it also names the very potentiality for our *having* this negativity, for our bearing it as

[84] Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity,* trans. Karen E. Pinkus and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006), 25. Hereafter cited in the text as LD.

a custom and a *habit*. Inseparable and correlative to the meaning of the locution, "I speak," which Agamben claims to inform all his work ("I have stubbornly pursued only one train of thought: what is the meaning of 'there is language'; what is the meaning of 'I speak'?" IH 6), is this constitutive puerility of being able *not* to speak. (Infancy explains the casualness with which Agamben mentions his unwritten books—"the book I did not write," "my unwritten work"—alongside those actually written.) Since it dwells between the "sphere of utterance" (or "*being*, *ousia*") and utterance itself (beings) and is able precisely *not* to articulate *phonē* and *logos*, infancy develops instead an *ear* for the enunciating *voice*. Infancy, that is, can cultivate a sense for the way this voice desires and says *yes* to language, desires and says *yes* even to death (since death, precisely, names the most extreme negativity upon which Being is staked). In this way, infancy is the condition for any *ēthos*, for the very possibility of knowledge, history, and becoming. Counter to the metaphysical tradition which has always *presupposed* the existence of language in every act of speech—from the moment, indeed, that Aristotle claimed that the voice bears articulated signs of the soul as *grammata*—infancy insists that there is precisely *no relation* between the voice and language, between *phonē* and *logos*. Rather than assuming their "connectedness as lack" (IH 7), infancy grasps the non-relation between language and the voice as that which alone "can open the space of ethics and the *polis*" (IH 9).

Hence, in an infantile perspective, the groundlessness of human existence no longer demands to be met with a mystic muteness or a philosophical nihilism (it is no longer unspeakable as a dead letter). On the contrary, infancy's *ēthos of logos* permits the return to visibility of a practice of speaking itself, of what Agamben calls the "*trite* words that we have" (94). ("Trite," he reminds us, comes from *tornios*, the Greek word for a carpenter's lathe, a tool that shapes precisely in encircling.) So while there must indeed *be* language as long as *there is*

anything at all, this need not cast our speech endlessly back upon its unthinkable and unsayable "basis." Rather, our very circling back to the most extreme negativity at the heart of our language (and being) may, like a lathe, shape and pronounce the otherwise in-visible and in-fantile habits of our form of life, habits which each time *expose* and *instantiate* themselves in the things we say.

In light of Agamben's concept of "infancy," the stakes of Ellison's transforming "invisible" into a potentiality—into the genius of *minority*—gains concreteness and form. For rather than drawing on "invisible" to indicate the oft-forgotten groundlessness *beneath* human life and language (which is, if we are to believe Agamben, a millennial practice), Ellison uses the word "invisible" to signify a mode of "habitual dwelling." Indeed, "invisible" denotes precisely that mode of dwelling characteristic of one who calls the abyssal non-ground subtending human affairs—that is, the underground—home. "Invisible," in this connection, is simply Ellison's word for living as an initiate to negativity: for dwelling in, and assuming habits of, the fissure between langue/Being and parole/beings. As a conceptuality, Agamben's "infancy " somehow completes—through subterranean channels—the philosophical circuit that Ellison's "invisible" begins.

With regard to *Invisible Man*'s narrator, moreover, "invisibility" characterizes his style, or habitual manner, as one who has been cast into the abyss at the heart of human language and Being and has learned to *bear* it ("Call me Jack-the-Bear," he says). At the same time, invisibility describes the way in which certain secrets of the depths—the usual mysticism or nihilism with which it is, from above-ground, beheld—have, for the narrator, grown *trite*. Indeed, if triteness is a way, precisely, of *saying* nothing, its privileged form cannot be silence, but riddle, allegory, fable, and *fancy* (as both a fleeting vision, and as suspended *in*-fancy). In

making use of these elliptic modes of enunciation, the narrator simultaneously *shows* the constitutive muteness of his utterances, and as minors are wont to do, *plays with them*. He exposes both the meaning of his words and the content of his identity to a comparable at-*trit*ion.

Triteness, in the realm of light, is *glare*. Not one, not two,…but 1,369 lightbulbs, are needed to show it (as light showing itself). And when the narrator proclaims, "light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form," he thus makes explicit the proximity of his "reality" to the invisibility of light. Like light, he is obscure not because he is *hidden*, but because he has been *overseen*: "I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind," he writes; "I am invisible, understand, simply because people *refuse to see me*." His invisibility depends upon this *refusal*—as a characteristic form of negation, of immediate recollection (to re-fuse), of rejection (refuse, garbage). Light, of course, is subject to the same fate: *un*seen to the extent that it illuminates, it is *reflected* immediately therein, and irreparably *cast* about. In both cases, habituation has obscured what is in plain sight. If our task, then, is to see the narrator *in his invisibility*, we must learn to see him *as* refused, in the accustomed form of his overlooking. Just as the invisibility of light cannot be brought out of the shadows it alone has cast, so the narrator can become visible to us only once his invisibility is exaggerated and multiplied into the glare of a sparkling obviousness.

Triteness is glare in language. For Ellison, it implies a form of narrative overexposure equivalent to the effect of 1,369 lightbulbs on what the narrator calls our "inner eye." Just as the shadowless surface of the invisible man's hole simultaneously indicates "the darkness of light" (shadowlessness being a perfect inversion of pitch black), so a similar ex-orbitance in the novel's discourse polarizes its contents, rendering these references negative indexes of invisible existence. From here derives the somewhat disquieting sense that the autobiographical story we

are reading is either a joke or a fable. Perhaps the expropriation of meaning is a cipher for the way in which invisibility *itself* is communicable. As the invisibility of habitual and repeated oversight (of refusal), it can be seen not through a form of disconcealment, but only through the parabolic shape of overt secrecy. This is true, too, in the novel's persistent play with moments which surpass realism and thereby accede to an empty *visibility*. Just as the narrative doubles as fable in order to announce the importance of its shape and delivery, so the novel, at its most dreamlike, detaches words from their contextual meaning to a reveal their resonant hollowness. Surrealism punctures narrative, offering up a phantasmatic dimension in which invisibility renders itself visible, without, for that reason, being eliminated.

A word can suffer attrition of its meaning in a number of ways. The first and maybe most obvious is as an utterance in a foreign or dead language. Agamben, for one, is fond of recalling a passage from *De Trinitate* (he calls it "one of the first places in which the idea of a dead language appears"), in which St. Augustine imagines a *vocabulum emortum* (his example is the "dead" word for wine, *temetum*) whose meaning we desire to know. For Agamben, it is important to underscore that while we precisely don't know what this word *means*, we know it is a *word*. As he writes: "it is necessary that he [someone hearing the word *temetum*] already knows that the sound he has heard is not an empty voice (*inanem vocem*), the mere sound *te-me-tum*, but rather a signifying sound. Otherwise that trisyllabic sound will already be fully known the moment it is perceived." [85] Here, the "dead word" is *no longer* just a material fact, and *not yet* a significant utterance. Instead, it exists in the "no-man's land between sound and sense [which] is the experience of love as will to know" (64). One thus experiences the dead word as an epistemic

[85] Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1999), 63. Hereafter cited in the text as EP.

passion in which it is not too difficult to recognize the experience of *Being*, or the prevalence of the *letter*, in whose amorous encounter there is also "an unheard dimension sustained in the pure breath of the voice, in mere *vox* as insignificant will to signify" (65).

But a word can also suffer obscurity in another way: through the radical foreignness of its very utterance. Agamben intimates this second kind of obscurity in a brief commentary on St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, in whose "stubborn critique of the linguistic practice of the Christian community of Corinth" we read the following statement: "If I know not the meaning of the voice, I shall be unto him that speaketh a barbarian, and he that speaketh shall be a barbarian unto me" (qtd in EP, 65). The experience described here is an encounter with *glossolalia*, with one who speaks in tongues. Unlike *temetum*, whose hidden meaning appeals to its hearer love of knowledge, the "barbarism" of foreign speech alienates speaker from listener by virtue of the mutual inscrutability of their meanings. However, Agamben notes, a consideration of Paul's unusual choice of words (*ho lalon en emoi*) requires that a translation of the phrase "he shall be a barbarian unto me" be modified as "he that speaketh in me." This leads to a consequential difference. For the barbarian is now a most *intimate* stranger, one I hear speak only insofar as he already *inhabits* my voice. To speak-in-glosses is consequently to encounter one's very "will to signify" as a barbarism.

Unlike Augustine's description of the *vocabulum emortum* which takes place before a reader or listener, glossolalia takes place within a living speaker. As such, it corresponds not to the deciphering of letters (whose presupposed relation to a *langue* or "sphere of utterance" is not challenged but precisely *guaranteed* by the assumption that the this language is dead), but rather to the experience of infancy. "To-speak-in-glosses," Agamben writes, "is thus to experience in oneself barbarian speech, speech that one does not know; it is to experience an 'infantile'

speech…in which understanding is 'unfruitful'" (66). The dead letter which elicits a measured love and will to know is, from the perspective of its enunciation, a beastly suspension of meaning and exposure of one's very ability to understand. Instead of a "fruitful" experience of desire, one undergoes the mute shock of language itself. If little is understood in this encounter, it is because one has brushed against the capacity of understanding *itself*.

In an exemplary scene, both experiences of linguistic estrangement—as a love of knowledge and the internal barbarism of speaking-in-glosses—befall Ellison's narrator. Indeed, the first memorably transforms into the second. The scene in question takes place in chapter twelve's famous "eviction scene"—the precise midpoint of the novel—after his last failure to live out the designs of his college-aged self. It is also the scene in which the narrator makes his first impromptu speech, a bit of oratory that so impresses its listeners as to earn him an invitation into a powerful underground political group, the Brotherhood. Given the centrality this speech, one should not be surprised to find a meditation on language which the eviction itself inspires.

An elderly couple protests as their belongings get thrown onto the snowy pavement, and the impatience of the crowd amplifies at the sound of each of their laments. The narrator's eyes cast among the piles strewn around him—he sees a Bible, "knocking bones," "a faded tintype of Abraham Lincoln, and the smiling image of a Hollywood star torn from a magazine…" (271)—and he drops into a daydream. Without warning, the displaced but familiar objects before him spark an involuntary memory. Yet this memory pertains not to a past experience, but to a form of speech. The past recalled is of a vernacular whose words have only now begun to shape themselves as such in his mind.

By means of this daydream, Ellison transforms the eviction scene into a theater of language:

> I turned and stared again at the jumble, no longer looking at what was before my eyes, but inwardly-outwardly, around a corner into the dark, far-away-and-long-ago, not so much of my own memory as of remembered words, of linked verbal echoes, images heard even when not listening at home. And it was as though I myself was being dispossessed of some painful yet precious thing which I could not bear to lose; something confounding like a rotted tooth that one would rather suffer indefinitely than endure the short, violent eruption of pain that would mark its removal. And with this sense of dispossession came a pang of vague recognition: this junk, these shabby chairs, these heavy, old-fashioned pressing irons, zinc wash tubs with dented bottoms—all throbbed within me with more meaning than there should have been: *And why did I, standing in the crowd, see like a vision my mother hanging wash on a cold windy day, so cold that the warm clothes froze even before the vapor thinned and hung stiff on the line, and her hands white and raw in the skirt-swirling wind and her gray head bare to the darkened sky—why were they causing me discomfort so far beyond their intrinsic meaning as objects? And why did I see them now, as behind a veil that threatened to lift, stirred by the cold wind in the narrow street?* (273)

With an obsolescence comparable to Augustine's *temetum*, the discarded articles pile up as artifacts of a past life, a different generation, signaling expressions of a dead language. Yet these are no antiques, and this language is, in fact, his own mother tongue. Thus the narrator's eyes, affixed and repelled by their "jumble," grow soft and unseeing as he turns a corner to "the dark, far-away-and-long-ago" of this language in relation to which he remains an infant. Irreducible to his "own memory," his vision "of remembered words, of linked verbal echoes, images heard even when not listening at home" enters his consciousness as a form of glossolalia in which the vernacular of his youth, saying nothing but itself, constitutes the barbaric tongue. This remembrance raises the problem of the vernacular's characteristic impropriety. It is as if it may only be heard without listening—and heard as an image, no less.

Like the eviction, Ellison's implication is that the African American vernacular—the folk vernacular, spoken in and out of slavery—belongs to its speakers only as an intimate and paradoxically unalienable dispossession. For what the narrator undergoes in the alienness of his mother tongue is nothing other than the collective historical expropriation of which this tongue

speaks. Thus in a memory or daydream of his childhood's words, the narrator's language suffers the uncanny transformation of a thing doubly evicted: first, stripped of "intrinsic meaning" and exhibited its devastating triteness, and second, thrown in relation to its ownmost history of dispossession. At the end of the passage, Ellison's compares this eviction of vernacular language to a veil. Drawing on the motif Du Bois once used to signal the historical bar to African American self-consciousness, Ellison uses it here to indicate the peculiarly elliptical form in which this bar itself is recalled. And indeed doubleness is implicit in the definition of the "vernacular" itself. As Houston Baker also reminds us, the vernacular in relation to language it signifies an indigenous or mother tongue, while "in relation to human beings [it] signals 'a slave born on his master's estate.'"[86]

Just as words suffer a form of overuse to become trite, individuals suffer a repeated way of being seen, an overexposure, to become invisible. This connection links *Invisible Man*'s rhetorical structure—its use and play with words—to its optical metaphorics. The relation of the optical and the rhetorical in *Invisible Man* is a function of a shared redoubling, which hinges upon a potential for repetition. James Snead once noted that "whenever we encounter repetition in cultural forms, we are indeed not viewing the same thing, but its transformation," [87] and this, indeed, is true regarding the repetitive/transformative use of a phrase, motif, or event which simultaneously renders it opaque as a meaning and conspicuous as a word. Analogously, the narrator's identity, in its repeated failures at consolidation, becomes *unknowable* as a name but *pronounceable* as a question. When motifs repeat, then, as when they exceed credibility, they suffer a double exposure: on the one hand, their original contextual meaning is destabilized; on

[86] Houston A. Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago & London: U of Chicago P, 1994), 2. Hereafter cited in the text.
[87] James A. Snead, "Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture," *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture,* ed. Robert G. O'Meally (New York: Columbia U P, 1998), 52.

the other, they are exposed precisely as motifs, events of language, and thus as barbarous or infantile ploys. Each episode in which the narrator is refused visibility thus *alienates* him from who he thinks he is, at the same time that this repetition *accustoms* him, more and more, to anonymity. Not-seeing takes practice; just as repeated failures are required to reveal an oversight.

The narrative of *Invisible Man* proceeds, then, by repeating what only, after several parallel instances, is legible as a failure on the narrator's part to either see or be seen. This gesture invites the reader, too, to *overlook* the narrator (or see in him only what he reflects of ourselves), only to wake us *from* this oversight *to* this oversight. In this way, we learn to see an invisibility within the novel's images and a muteness in what it says. The paradoxical *voice* of unsayability has the form of what Agamben, in his "Notes on Gesture," calls a "*gag* in the proper meaning of the term, indicating first of all something that can be put in your mouth to hinder speech, as well as in the sense of the actor's improvisation meant to compensate a loss of memory or an inability to speak."[88] Insofar as a *gag* is a technology that, in "hinder[ing]" discourse, "compensate[s]" by exhibiting the very potentiality to speak (that is, to *improvise*), each of the narrator's words is signed with the wry and childish cunning of one accustomed to speaking in parables. Ellison's gag is to show off the puerile irreverence of one equipped not merely to tarry in, but *to tinker with* the unspeaking, negative space of narrative.

VI. Body and Beat

The narrator rarely forgets his stomach. Careful descriptions of bowels, innards, vague and acute processes of the body, of a pleasing or terrifying senselessness which precedes the

[88] Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics,* trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000), 59. Hereafter cited in the text as MWE.

regaining of consciousness —these occupy and characterize the mode in which a series of accidents punctuate his experience, as well as puncture the narrative texture of *Invisible Man*. Between these moments transpires what we can call *the event of invisibility*, an advent of radical negativity, whose violent character Ellison is keen to emphasize. It leads one to gather that in the author's imaginary—for all its play with underground habituation and inhabitation—this event proves as abyssal as in the history of philosophy. Indeed, there is more blood involved for Ellison, and usually some form of electricity. Shock and blood are the means by which he shows that invisibility, accustomed as it becomes, is never any less suffered by its bearer. Hence, perhaps, the verticality in which this experience is cast: in terms consistent with both literary and philosophical traditions, Ellison characterizes the initiation to invisibility as a *fall* (including from grace, but also as painful contact with the ground) and a *descent* (more often dizzying than slow). This dimension is so prevalent in the novel that one may read its chapters as so many *declensions* from its opening and paradigmatic Battle Royal scene. The episodes which follow, in relation, comprise only a protracted *dénouement*.

Traversing this vertical axis of shock, however, and generative of the plane of narrative continuity, is a horizontal axis of experience. The formula of their relation is the promise, uttered in the Prologue, that "the end is in the beginning and lies far ahead." What *situates* the "end…far ahead" is a horizon of the *experienceable*—that is, what the narrator *is able to* gather of what has befallen him—rather than a simple chronological difference. For while the time it takes to arrive *back* underground depends upon a chronological delay (diegetically and extra-diegetically), it is the horizon of experience alone which opens a possible space of *relay* between start and finish. The narrator may well promise his tale as a ring; he can do so only because the end will furnish an introduction to something which is nevertheless "*in* the beginning"—that is, present and

absent at once, perhaps, *overseen*. To produce this relay, the horizon of experience does not merely extend, but internally gravitates around the pole of shock.

The violence of realizing invisibility is intimately involved in an alternation between beginning and end, past and future, which we can characterize, with a certain precaution, as dialectical. For on the one hand, each narrative moment recalls an earlier one in a form of sublation. On the other, both maintain intelligibility in relation to the *end*, such that they resolve into miniatures or snapshots—stills of the *penultimate*. Temporal polarization thus gives each chapter its simultaneously episodic and continuous character.

As unforeseen deceptions, fights, and shocks take place, the event of invisibility plunges the narrator anew into an abyss of senselessness, though this very shock repeats, and *percusses*. Narrative ruptures or disruptions to which the narrator grows accustomed at the same time prove cadenced to the reader. Violence, then, has two functions: one is coordinated to narrative time, to its beginning and end; the other correlates to the beginning and end of the time of reading.

In relation to narrative (diegetic) time, violence functions as a downbeat in which the measure of the narrator's (non)identity (or invisibility) is shaped and pronounced. In the insistence of its impact the irruption of invisibility each time surprises the narrator (dissolving or suspending the *ground* of his current identity, including the ground rules by which he has been taught to live), while also apprising him of another identity, a self born in the very cadence of its dissolution. In relation to the time of reading, violence suffered by the narrator's sense of self slowly unveils his invisibility in its appropriability as an "identity." The Prologue is indispensable in clarifying this relay of violence and visibility or emergence (of at*trit*ion, we might say, and the trite form to which it gives shape). Here, we encounter Ellison's privileged

figure for the doubled, or more properly, syncopated movement of his narrator's experience: a boomerang.

Indeed, even the novel's first five words— "I am an invisible man"—conceals one. Recalling the unsayability of the "instance of discourse," we can note that its indication by the pronoun "I" is not, here, consigned to what Agamben calls "vulgarly ineffable" (IH 4). Rather, the unsayability of "I" strikes upon—and echoes in—the word "invisible." The effect of the relay (between "I" and "invisible) is to suspend the propositional meaning of this sentence and to expose it instead as a sort of *prosaic rhyme*. Agamben writes, with regard to poetry, as the ancestral home of rhyme, that its

> metrical-musical element demonstrates first of all the verse as a place of memory and a repetition. The verse (*vesus*, from *verto*, the act of turning, to return, as opposed to *prorsus*, to proceed directly, as in prose) signals for a reader that these words have always already come to be, that they will return again, and that the instance of the word that takes place in a poem is, for this reason, ungraspable. Through the musical element, poetic language commemorates its own inaccessible originary place and it says the unspeakability of the event of language (*it attains*, that is, *the unattainable*). (78)

Yet a comparable movement, we've seen, is signaled by "I am an invisible man," which boomerangs from its (indexical) pronoun to its (denotative) adjective and back again. The difference between this utterance and a line of poetry, consequently, is that what the narrator's formula bequeaths to endless recurrence is not the event of dictation (the sense that "these words have always already come to be"), but of signification. In other words, it is not a sound but a sense which now echoes and promises to return, rhythmically.

The effect of this formula is profound. For just as it renders "I" resonant with "invisibility," it installs a potentiality in each moment the narrator's story to emerge in any other—or as the narrator puts it, to hibernate as "a bear retires to his hole for the winter," only to "come[] strolling out like the Easter chick breaking from its shell." Thus the Prologue's *forward*

turn to what is ahead (*prorsus* is literally pro, "forward," + vorsus, "turned") is, at the same time, a *future return* to what is behind. This is the sort of jerky, boomerang movement the narrator hints at in his quip that the world moves "by contradiction." For the world's history—like his own tale—prosaically proceeds, and yet not without also trailing itself in advance, that is, without jerking into the future what remains in the past.

Just as rhyme, then, determines a poem's meter, so repetition in prose determines a metric of *meaning.* And if a poem's rhyme makes its rhythm *audible* for the first time, the recurrence of a prosaic meaning also makes the rhythm of thought—what Agamben might call its mode of dwelling—*sayable* as such. What the narrator appreciates in Louis Armstrong—that "he's made poetry out being invisible"—is this feature of his own storytelling, albeit upon the plane of sense rather than sound. When, towards the end of the Prologue, the narrator claims to "play the invisible music of my isolation," he adumbrates this possibility. And when he then interrupts himself, saying "The last statement doesn't seem just right, does it?," he rejoins precisely with a musical figure:

> But it is; you hear this music simply because music is heard and seldom seen, except by musicians. Could this compulsion to put invisibility down in black and white be thus an urge to make music of invisibility? But I am an orator, a rabble rouser—Am? I *was*, and perhaps shall be again. Who knows? All sickness is not unto death, neither is invisibility. (13)

A compulsion, a beat, moves the narrator's pen. And yet it is the rhythm of *oratory*—that realm to which, classically, *ēthos*, *logos*, and *pathos*, co-belong—which drives him. It is the prosaic return to invisibility itself, to the unsayable enunciating voice, which the narrator at once marks ("in black and white") and *plays*—in the recursive form of his narrative discourse. We do well, then, to heed his advice and seek the protection of a "steel-helmet" in pursuing, proceeding with,

his boomerang tale. We'll need one—not just to survive the impact, but far more importantly, to feel the beat.

VII. Syncopated Philosophy

Syncopation's long history in questions of the African American literary tradition[89] as well as its place in African American music, especially jazz, has rendered it something of an easy metaphor for modes of black writing. This is especially true with regard to the so-called "jazz novel," for which *Invisible Man* usually serves as the archetype. However, syncopation is not merely an analog for narrative, but a *determinant* of it. A term as intimate to language as to music, it bridges the two realms of expression under the aspect of time and temporalization. Nevertheless, to grasp the intimacy of text and tone achieved through syncopation, the latter must be understood not as an *effect* of timing, but as the *mode of existence* of timing itself.

According to the OED, syncopation derives from the past particle of the Latin *syncopē*, a failure of the heart's action and suspension of vitality—in other words, a bum ticker. Syncopation, in its contemporary usage, no longer connotes (faulty) cardiology, but two other discourses equally comprised of stress and beat: grammar and music. In grammar, syncopation means the compression of a word, such as the word *governor* from *gubernator*. It contracts several syllabic stresses into a form more accustomed in one's language, thus aiding in linguistic derivation. In music, syncopation refers to "the action of beginning a note on a normally unaccented part of the bar and sustaining it into the normally accented part, so as to produce the

[89] See, for instance, the collection of essays in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, which tightly intersperses discussions of African American literary and musical techniques.

effect of shifting back or anticipating the accent; the shifting of accent so produced."[90] – in other words, the abbreviation or elongation of emphasis which shifts it. This effect makes syncopation a typical term for describing Ragtime, the early twentieth-century transposition of classical music into a blues vernacular.

In each case, syncopation's tinkering with the accents of a metrical pattern—whether phonological or musical—constitutes a covert or overt act of translation. When this translation moves into the vernacular or "mother tongue" (spoken or sung), it can, as in the case of Ragtime (or later, jazz), give birth to a new form. In this possibility for innovation, however, another important aspect of syncopation comes into relief, one which links the fecundity of transformation back to the *syncopē* and other frailties of the heart: prior to coming to expression, syncopation pertains to a *passion*. This passion is the undergoing of the *conditions* of something's inheritance or transmission—that is, the very conditions of repetition itself. One must not only hear a word, but sense its components, as one detects the time-signature of a musical theme. Such an experience locates itself between event and fact, emergence and recurrence. As an experience, syncopation belongs to a dimension in which rhythms and accents, syllables and stress—in brief, all those elements which ensure something's repeatability—stand forth as such. Thus it is not reducible to the audible shifts of emphasis it produces, nor the quantifiable changes of duration it results in. Rather, these perceptible elements are themselves indexes of the experience to which syncopation corresponds: the experience of what in a word, or phrase of music, is transmissible—its beat.

To call Ellison's ethos of invisibility an example of a *syncopation* of philosophy is to attempt to revise our understanding of his writing's theoretical significance in this double sense.

[90] "syncopation, n.," *OED Online*, July 2013, Oxford University Press, http://www.oed.com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/view/Entry/196416?redirectedFrom=syncopation (accessed July 20, 2013).

It is, on the one hand, to remark significant shifts in philosophical emphasis which it effects by means of timing, and on the other, to refer these shifts to an experience of (perhaps, *with*) the philosophical tradition which is first determined in the historical form of life Ellison calls "Negro." In attending to the patterns of his prose in this way, we glimpse at once their inheritance of a Western philosophical conceptuality, and their uncanny mode of its inhabitation. This is due to the prevailing concepts of being and time to which Ellison's writing is privy: namely, the difference between Being and beings (or existence and essence), on the one hand, and historicism on the other. If historicism consigns non-white others to the "waiting room of history," in Dipesh Chakrabarty's phrase; and if a traditional sense of Being relegates racial difference to an essential ontic-ness (or entity-hood), the "Negro" inheritance of such a tradition can only take place under the sign of its contradiction and dispossession.[91] Ellison's articulation of this dialectical *ēthos*, I want to suggest, *is* syncopation—that is, a decentering and "provincializing" of the experience of philosophy as such.

"I am an invisible man" is uttered by someone who (in a celebrated existentialist phrase) was not born but has *become* invisible, but by having been *rendered* such; describing someone who, on account of his race, is deprived the simplicity of stating "I am a man," it forewarns the dangers of claiming humanity *in general* without eliding a historical violence *in particular*. We also detect in the formula a *critique* of this violence, and a woeful resistance to the overdetermination of admitting "I am a black man"—which would, in this case, be as good as an admission of guilt. Hence, a double-bind ("I am a man" says too little; "I am a black man," too much) positions the narrator to finally claim *invisibility* as an identity, to embrace non- or in-appearance as the very form of his being. Suspended between "the human content" and "its outer

[91] See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007), 8.

form"—that is, between a pure opening of the world and a violent foreclosure of its possibilities, Ellison's narrator renders the paradigmatic feature of Being indistinguishable from the most quotidian reality of racial experience. The utterance "I am an invisible man" situates itself at the precise juncture where *ontological* invisibility radically coincides with the *ontic* everydayness of social overdetermination. In the life of his invisible man, existence "looks" exactly like social death and political abjection.

In his hyperbolic gesture of self-effacement, however, the narrator's claim to invisibility asks also that we recognize him in and as a form of non-identity. That is, if we are to "see" the invisible man, we must discern him in the very *indifference* by which he remains, to us, unknown. This requires a paradoxical *optic* of invisibility, a capacity to see our *not* seeing. And the danger of this form of vision—a vision Ellison's narrator solicits from the reader—is that it rests upon a suspension of the difference between visible and invisible—that is, a dismantling of the ontological difference itself. "I am an invisible man" proves to be less a philosophical statement than a play on its grammar. A vernacular ontology—this is how the currents of philosophy give off a shadowless and stolen light.

Still, much rests on the invisible man's wager. If invisibility succeeds as an existential strategy—that is, if invisibility enables the narrator to withhold a statement of identity at the same time that he asserts one—then it allows him to undercut, and perhaps even topple, the major claim of first philosophy. For if the meaning of human life *withdraws* not on the sole basis of existential structure, but also as a historical effect; if one *disappears* both by necessity and by chance; if, as black, one is invisible both ontically and ontologically—then we can no longer say that Being withdraws while the world appears, that existence precedes essence rather than coinciding with it. Instead, we know only that there is much that plain sight hides, and much

hidden that is plain. The wager of saying “I am an invisible man” is to risk being black in the blackness of being.

CHAPTER 3: DOUBLY ILLEGIBLE: JEAN TOOMER'S "RACIAL COMPOSITION"

To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word.
- W.E.B. Du Bois

Without the touch of the black soul, Jean Toomer was not an artist but a scribbler.
-Robert Brinkmeyer Jr.[92]

A specter haunts Europe. –Karl Marx[93]

The specter of race haunts Jean Toomer, and the powers of criticism (from African Americanists and modernists, to poststructuralists and biographers, to black radicals and FBI ghostreaders)[94] have entered into alliance not to exorcise this ghost but to confirm its existence.[95] They merge around the following critical consensus: that Jean Toomer was a man haunted by the blackness he could not assume;[96] that his failing to ask himself the "real question, How does it feel to be a problem?" led to a wasted art and a bourgeois forsaking of public for private life; that Jean Toomer never really wrangled with, though he was subject to, the irreconcilable tensions of racialized being that Du Bois named double-consciousness. It has become a commonplace to name Toomer's 1923 masterpiece, *Cane*, among the formative texts of the Harlem Renaissance,

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[92] Robert Brinkmeyer, Jr., "Wasted Talent, Wasted Art: The Literary Career of Jean Toomer" (*Southern Quarterly: A Journal of Arts in the South* 20.1 [1981]).
[93] *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2002.
[94] On the FBI's surveillance and formative influence upon black literary movements over the last century, see William J. Maxwell, *F.B. Eyes: How J. Edgar Hoover's Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton U P, 2015).
[95] For catalogs of such critiques of Toomer see, for instance, J. Martin Favor, "'Colored; cold. Wrong somewhere.': Jean Toomer's *Cane,*" *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance* (Durham & London: Duke U P, 1999) and Mark Whalan, "'Taking Myself in Hand': Jean Toomer and Physical Culture" (*Modernism/Modernity* 10.4 [Nov. 2003], esp. FN 5; Whalan names Alice Walker and Robert B. Jones as among the harshest of Toomer's critics.
[96] This is the argument of Rudolph P. Byrd and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in "'Song of the Son': The Emergence and Passing of Jean Toomer," the afterword to Toomer, *Cane* (New York: Liveright, 2011). Donald B. Gibson argues that "*Cane* was the response of one for whom black life . . . was too much to bear" ("Jean Toomer: The Politics of Denial," *The Politics of Literary Expression: A Study of Major Black Writers,* ed. Donald B. Gibson [Westport: Greenwood, 1981] 179).

just as it is customary either to pity or shame the artist who proved such a troubled heir to his racial birthright. Mentioned in the same breath as *Cane* is Toomer's repudiation of its marketing as the work of a Negro poet; dogging his significance to the New Negro Renaissance is his reluctance to appear in its anthologies;[97] qualifying *Cane*'s elegies for the "souls of slavery" is the soul-searching that led it author to forsake black folk for a Greco-Armenian mystic named George Ivanovich Gurdjieff.[98] Toomer, as we most often encounter him, is a conservative literary talent whose industry had nevertheless, for a time, outpaced itself to side with what Marx calls "association,"[99] before falling prey to Gurdjieff's illusion of individual wholeness. If Toomer offered *Cane* as the "song of an end" for the South, this same work is now understood as swan-song to Toomer's own racial significance;[100] inversely, his "spiritual turn" is read as a turn away, an evasion befitting a Johnsonian "ex-colored man" that is best left footnoted as the

[97] In his 1930 letter to James Weldon Johnson, Toomer justified withdrawing his poems from *The Book of American Negro Poetry* in the following terms: "I aim to stress the fact that we are all Americans. I do not see things in terms of Negro, Anglo-Saxon, Jewish, and so on. As for me personally, I see myself an American, simply an American. As regards art I particularly hold this view. I see our art and literature as primarily American art and literature. I do not see it as Negro, Anglo-Saxon, and so on. Accordingly, I must withdraw from all things which emphasize or tend to emphasize racial or cultural divisions. I must align myself with things which stress the experiences, forms, and spirit we have in common" (*A Jean Toomer Reader: Selected Unpublished Writings*, ed. Frederick L. Rusch (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1993), 106. Hereafter cited in the text as JTR.

[98] This phrase comes from the elegiac concluding lines from *Cane*'s most famous poem, "Song of the Son": "What they were, and what they are to me/Caroling softly souls of slavery." These lines are often seen as Toomer's proclaiming himself prodigal son and bard to the dying South (*Cane* [New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011]), 16. Hereafter cited in the text.

[99] As Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels argue in the opening chapter of *The Communist Manifesto*: "Wage-labour rests exclusively on competition between the labourers. The advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the labourers, due to competition, by the revolutionary combination, due to association. The development of Modern Industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable."

[100] See Ronald Dorris, *Race: Jean Toomer's Swan Song* (New Orleans: Xavier Review Press, 1997). In her essay on "The Divided Life of Jean Toomer," Alice Walker similarly claims "Cane was for Toomer a double "swan song." He meant it to memorialize a culture he thought was dying….but he was also saying good-bye to the "Negro" he felt dying in himself." (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* [New York: Mariner Books, 1993], 65.)

squalid afterlife to genius. It is almost unseemly to mention. Not only is Jean Toomer haunted by race, critics suggest; a failure to reckon with race also turned him into a ghost of himself.

Rarely noted, however, is how vital Toomer's literary afterlife itself was, how he wrote far more after *Cane* than before, or how he held on to these pages with a diligence absent in the earlier work. Rarely noted—far more often "flutter[ed] round"[101] in the debate around Toomer's race—is the problem of his passionate turn to the poiesis of self-transformation.[102] The problem of Toomer's race, a ubiquitous haunt, is itself dogged by the abundant evidence—thousands upon thousands of pages housed in Toomer's archive at Yale's Beinecke library—of a scribbler's (or scrivener's) spiritualism. Gurdjieff, I'd like to suggest, changes the complexion of Toomer's problem, leaving us to face the following discomfiting notion: perhaps the specter of Toomer's race, thought to have stunted his art, is itself haunted by a spirituality that never ceased to stir his pen.

The following chapter takes up the tandems of ghosts by which Toomer was so often visited: race and spirituality, literature and self-transformation, writing and experience. What, if any, is the relation between the archival Gurdjieff papers and the literary production by which Toomer is best known? The answer is hardly straightforward, and for a number of reasons. First, as a matter of philosophical principle, the Gurdjieff papers pay no heed to race or class, and focus entirely upon the techniques of subjectivation and self-mastery. Second, in form, these notes are repetitive and didactic, with no autobiographical narrative, and no clear speaker. (When

[101] *Writings,* 365.

[102] An exception would be Whalan's "Taking Myself in Hand: Jean Toomer and Physical Culture," cited above, which considers Toomer's early dedication to body building techniques as subversion of the production of white, middle class masculinity. Still one of the most nuanced accounts of Toomer's racial "apostasy"—both its logic and its problems—is Charles Scruggs's "Jean Toomer: Fugitive" (*American Literature* 47.1 [Mar., 1975]): 84-96. Importantly, Scruggs ends on the note of assimilating a protagonist of Toomer's raceless fiction ("Mr. Custyve Duditch") with Ellison's invisible narrator as well as with Richard Wright's "The Man Who Lived Underground" (95).

the first-person pronoun appears, it is either as a technical term or a word in quotation marks; if used in the normal way, "I" reports or transcribes what is said in its vicinity with little or no commentary. Toomer, throughout, is less narrator than stenographer, compiling notebooks that are faithful accounts of Gurdjieffian philosophy.) Finally, the papers record a spiritual education that says more about the "how" of practice than the "who." Thousands of pages are devoted to a system of dubious philosophical value, contributing to an archive that complicates Toomer's already vexed literary legacy simply by virtue of existing.

It is almost worse, in fact, that the archive exists than if it didn't, for rather than allowing race and modernist aesthetics to fall together into silence with *Cane*, the archive perpetuates both elements as a *coordinated illegibility*. Identifying this illegibility is as trivial as it is necessary, since it marks a lasting undecidability between racial content and literary form in Toomer's later writing. How, indeed, can one distinguish the elision of race from that of lyricism when neither appears in the Gurdjieff papers?[103] How can the ghost of blackness be told from the ghost of literature? Rather than marking the definitive absence or negation of race and literariness, I would like to suggest that the writing found in Toomer's Gurdjieffian archive retains the interrelation between these spheres as its constitutive illegibility or "unsaid." This writing is, furthermore, staked upon its relation to the unsaid; through its kinship with not-saying, it uses writing as means of self-transformation. It has been noted that the sort of discourse found in Toomer's archive brackets both writerly voice and signature. I will argue that this bracketing—

[103] See also Charles Harmon's argument in "Jean Toomer: Cane, Race, and 'Neither-norism'" (*Southern Literary Journal* 32.2 [2000]): "Inasmuch as *Cane* describes a longing for organic connection between self and universe even as it rejects all available modes whereby such a connection can be effected, the text is congruent with the paradoxes of Barthes' notion of neither/norism. Cane is thus continuous with Toomer's later career in that it attempts to demonstrate that intimations of universal significance are only allowed to individuals who maintain their psychic distance from black culture, white culture, and all shades of culture in between" (92). If Harmon's insight is correct, and *Cane* both produces and maintains distance from the dualism of American racial categories, I would suggest that the form this distance assumes in the later writing is precisely that of both racial and literary illegibility.

an *epochē* of aesthetic and personal identity—assumes the polarity between race and aesthetics evidenced in *Cane* but displaces it into a tension between the sayable and unsayable, where the sayable corresponds to a text that Toomer copies, and the unsayable to an experience of that text suffered by the writer. In this sense, the archive's problem of writerly passivity—of a privation of speech that itself comes to speech in the form of a copy—proves to be the afterlife of the dialectic between race and literature first articulated in *Cane*.

The contours of this problem come into further relief if we momentarily return to *Cane* itself, since this is where Toomer establishes the relation between race and literature not as a harmony (where, for instance, the latter would express the essence or truth of the former), but rather as a disjuncture. Consider, for instance, the blazon entitled "Portrait in Georgia," which reads as follows:

> Hair—braided chestnut,
> coiled like a lyncher's rope,
> Eyes—fagots,
> Lips—old scars, or the first red blisters,
> Breath—the last sweet scent of cane,
> And her slim body, white as the ash
> of black flesh after flame. (38)

Here Toomer places into extraordinary tension the pastoral aesthetics of the blazon and the history of racial violence. Literalizing the strategy of a genre that memorializes the female love object vis-à-vis her dismemberment, the poem's burning imagery exposes in a single gesture (perhaps in the unspeakable dashes) the circular justification for racial violence: the horror of lynching is inextricable from a perverse rite of purification that procures whiteness through the smoldering of black flesh, just as the logic of racial purity itself depends upon the unseen violence of aestheticizing death into the lore and lifeblood of the South (including its prizing of white womanhood as a dismemberable trophy). Literalization of the blazon therefore ignites the

genre itself into a mechanism that charges the racial theme and its metrical formulation with greatest tension at precisely the moment of maximum proximity. This poetic mechanism emblazons itself upon *Cane* as a whole, revealing at every stage an aestheticization of black life that burns, like "Portrait in Georgia" at both formal and thematic ends. It spells out in ashes (and dashes) the necrophilic negrophobia of the South.

Let us imagine *Cane* as an extension of this poem, a work whose "sound" is the cadence of modernist aesthetics and whose "sense" is the American race problem. As in "Portrait in Georgia," *Cane* itself now would (according to an insight that Giorgio Agamben develops form Roman Jakobson and Paul Valéry) "live[] only in the tension and difference (and hence also in the virtual interference) between sound and sense, between the semiotic sphere and the semantic sphere" (EP 109). *Cane* would thus prove capable of *enjambment*, "the opposition of a metrical limit to a syntactical limit" (109), which in this case means that the aesthetic and the racial could clash and repel one another throughout the text, as we saw in "Portrait." But the end of *Cane*, like the end of any poem, would also consequently mark a crisis in its form, for as Agamben notes, at the end of the poem "there can be no opposition between the metrical series and the syntactical series" (EP 112); there can be only *prose*. *Cane*'s concluding section, "Kabnis" dramatizes this crisis: a closet drama, it says what will never be seen, and in its embedded staging of Father John's long, but momentarily broken silence, it shows what will never be said. "Kabnis" thus prepares for the end by simultaneously narrativizing and enacting *Cane*'s passage into the prosaic. Yet it does so, ingeniously, by mobilizing the figure of *muteness*. John's muteness is a privation of language wherein, precisely as in prose, sound cannot oppose sense. At the same time, unlike prose, the tension between sound and sense is, in muteness, finally irresolvable. Thus with John's momentarily broken silence—the irruption into speech that proves

silence to be a privation of language rather than its absence— "Kabnis" declares that "state of poetic emergency" to which Agamben refers when he calls the end of the poem its immanent impossibility: "as if the poem as a formal structure would not and could not end, as if the possibility of the end were radically withdrawn from it, since the end would imply a poetic impossibility: the exact coincidence of sound and sense" (113). But when *Cane* does end, with the impossible happening—with Father John speaking and Kabnis ascending from the underground cellar and the virginal Carrie K murmuring her messianic wish, "Jesus, come"[104]—what is announced is not just the end, but also that which, after the end, persists as a sort of realized impossibility. For with the conclusion of *Cane* dawns the unwritable difference between sound and sense, literary form and racial theme. This tension persists, as does John's return to silence, only in stasis and illegibility. Agamben credits Dante with inventing a prosody in which such stasis prevails and "the double intensity animating language does not die away in a final comprehension; instead it collapses into silence, so to speak, in an endless falling" (EP 115); perhaps something similar can be said about the "birth-song slanting down gray dust streets and sleepy windows of the southern town" that closes *Cane*. For the promise of these last lines beckons a dimension in which the crisis of poetry is neither resolved nor deferred but finally *communicated*, a dimension in which sound and sense, the lyrical and the racial, *speak* the crisis of their indistinction and paradoxically preserve their "double intensity" by falling mute. Like Father John's fleeting accusations of white sin before sinking "back into his stony silence" (159), *Cane* announces the withdrawal of the dialectic of race and literariness into an unsaid. It is this unsaid that the archive never ceases to speak.

[104] A wish that itself recapitulates calls to Jesus throughout *Cane* from "Becky," in which "O pines, whisper to Jesus" (9-11) to the vignette "Calling Jesus," to Fern's "spatter[ing] inarticulately in plaintive sounds, mingled with calls to Jesus Christ" (21), to the traveling preacher Barlo describing his vision, "Lord Jesus whispered strange good words deep down" (25). These whispers consistently counter some muteness or compulsory silence.

I will propose, then, that Toomer's archive is nothing but the prosaic afterlife of his poetics, where the latter term is understood not in the usual sense—that is, as an instance of high modernist techniques—but rather as the *use* of such techniques to oppose them to and *enjamb* them with the theme of race. Aesthetics and race are, *Cane* teaches, a dialectical pair; as Du Bois says of the categories of American and Negro, they live only in and as their tension. But rather than having been abandoned after *Cane* ends, this tension survives in the archive's double privation, or double illegibility, of race and art. The archive's artlessness—its mute indifference to both literature and race—immobilizes their dialectic for a new use. This new use, I will show, is self-transformation, a practice that, borrowing a term from Foucault and Plutarch, we can call *ēthopoiesis*. What is important to note for the moment, though, and in light of thinking *Cane* as a poem, is that the archive which Toomer devotes to his self-transformation retains both race and art as an illegible "double intensity." More than an insuperable presupposition, this illegibility is precisely communicated and exhibited—in a word, it *takes place*—in the archive *as its unsaid*.

The following chapter seeks to delineate, define, and understand this taking place of the unsaid. It traces how *Cane*'s enjambment of art and race passes into the archive's polarization of the written and the unwritable, persisting as a practice of copying, or of saying precisely in order to suffer what is said. In this perspective, Toomer's assumption of the role of scrivener or, in Brinkemeyer's derisive but exact phrase, "scribbler"—proves especially significant. For scrivening or scribbling, I will suggest, does not imply the absence or loss of the capacities of the artist, but on the contrary, their self-suspension. Using this self-suspension in different ways, in turn, constitutes a practice of not-appropriating race and not-appropriating the name of an author. My argument will thus be that Toomer's copying redoubles Gurdjieffian practices of self-care in a way that renders his "racial composition," both in the sense of a racial work of literature and of

racial identity, jointly illegible. The chapter's latter portion follows the after-life of this double illegibility of Toomer's ex-colored, ex-literary period (two "ex's" the chapter hopes to show to be inextricable) by exploring the importance of illegibility within diverse figures of African American letters from Alain Locke to Henry Louis Gates, Jr.. Here, too, I will suggest that illegibility is not only a feature of black discourse, but constitutive of a positive political power that does not always align with overt assertions of black radicalism.

I. Writing Down, Doing Nothing: Toomer the Scrivener Grotesque

Between July 22 and August 16, 1954, a sixty year-old Jean Toomer experienced an inspired period of writing. The force that penetrated and overwhelmed him left behind twelve handwritten pages of text, treating of a range of topics, from how to use remorse as purification of the past, to love and food as cosmic substances, to instructions for a better night's rest. The text itself came to be through a dynamic interplay of reading and writing, one that generated what the writer could only describe as a force within him but not entirely his own. Still, he harnessed that power for a while and named his little *récit* after its source: "G to the French group 1943-44," where "G" stands for modern mystic George Gurdjieff, Toomer's spiritual master, and "the French group" refers to a set of lectures he delivered near Paris, which Toomer never attended but encountered in written form a full decade after they took place.

At the end of the twelve pages, Toomer affixed a parenthetical remark, without which neither the power of his encounter with Gurdjieff's lectures, nor the brief interval of illumination it occasioned, would have been known to us. It reads:

> (Fred [Leighton] let me read, in N.Y., about July 22, [19]54, the material from which these notes were made. I read intensively from about 10.30 to 2.00 or later in the afternoon. Next day I read more. Too much to be taken in, so. But, a bit later, I became aware of my sensing, feeling, that a definite force had entered me from that material. Never before have had such a sense of force coming to me from any written material. Aug, 16, [19]54)[105]

This, perhaps, is the kind of statement one might expect from a canonical writer who could be no stranger to the production of powerful "written material" himself. Within Toomer's archive, however, and especially among his papers regarding Gurdjieff, this addendum constitutes an extremely rare instance of readerly address, offering precious indication of the mood and circumstance in which this collection of papers was composed. In its brief account of an event that only later and gradually reveals its impression, it recalls something of Sherwood Anderson's "The Book of the Grotesque," which precedes the 1919 short-story cycle, *Winesburg, Ohio*, as a sort of paratext, introducing Anderson's collection not in content but tone. In the "Book," Anderson describes a "writer, an old man with a white mustache" who, lying in the bed where he expects sometime to die, has "a dream that was not a dream" in which a "young indescribable thing within himself was driving a long procession of figures before his eyes."[106] Upon witnessing this procession, in which figures pass in the manner of words on the page, the old man finds within himself force enough to rise:

> [A]lthough it was a painful thing to do, he crept out of bed and began to write. Some one of the grotesques had made a deep impression on his mind and he wanted to describe it.
>
> At his desk the writer worked for an hour. In the end he wrote a book which he called "The Book of the Grotesque." It was never published, but I saw it once and it made an indelible impression on my mind. The book had one central thought that is very strange and has always remained with me. By remembering it I have been able to understand many people and things that I was never able to

[105] Toomer, Jean. [Lectures]: Transcripts 1941-44 Box 68, Folder 1541. Jean Toomer Papers. Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. July 2014. Hereafter cited in the text as Toomer Archive.
[106] Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio,* eds. Charles E. Modlin and Ray Lewis White (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 6. Hereafter cited in the text.

> understand before. The thought was involved but a simple statement of it would be something like this…. (6)

An allegory of reading and writing here unfolds as a procession of impressions: a dreamless dream impresses an old writer to compose a (never-written) "Book of the Grotesque" that makes an "indelible impression" (that is not *Winesburg*) on the mind of a narrator (who is not Anderson). Inasmuch as neither writer nor "Book" is in existence, and inasmuch the narrator, as lone reader and witness, is himself without more than momentary report, the true protagonist of the episode is not a specific impression—that is, not a text or writing, not a "book" (or "Book")—but rather the specific passivity capable of yielding to impression: *an impressionability to language*. The way in which this impressionability exists is distinct (but also indivisible) from an actual text. It is described as something "altogether young" inside the writer "that saved the old man," a figure that does not itself write but rather "drives" the procession of "grotesques." Furthermore, Anderson characterizes the young thing in a manner evocative at once of the poetry of courtly love (whose poetic text was most often configured as a female body) and of the amorous troubadour himself: "No, it wasn't a youth, it was a woman, young, and wearing a coat of mail like a knight"(5). Anderson's lady-knight unites in a single figure the experience of the poet with the otherwise impossible object of his desire, thereby avoiding the nihilism of "courtly love" as pursuit of that which is—in love as in language—inaccessible and ineffable.[107] The "young thing" inside the writer, by contrast, integrates language and its desired object in a form the old man already *has*, and this, curiously, is able to "save" him. No less

[107] According to Giorgio Agamben, the Provençal troubadours were first to transform the *inventio* of classical rhetoric into the *razo de trobar* of courtly love—that is, into "an experiencing of the event of language as love" (LD 69). However, to the extent that this love was "courtly" and thereby impossible, the amorous object was obliged to become a phantasm whose basis in negativity plunged troubadour poetics into a kind of nihilism. An alternative reading of this phantasm which assigns it a positive potentiality can be found in Agamben's *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture,* trans. Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1992) and *The End of the Poem*.

important, still, is the fact that "had you come into the room you might have supposed the old man had unpleasant dreams or perhaps indigestion" [6]. His vision, like the young woman that drives the grotesques, remains a sight unseen. For just as the "Book" has never been published and the "indelible impression" it leaves on the narrator does not find its words, the impression made on *us* will only take place in the pages of an entirely different text—a collection of short stories about rural Ohio—felt by whatever impressionable "young thing" may be within us.

Toomer's addendum is comparatively sparse in imagery, and comes at the end rather than the beginning of a text, but much like Anderson's "Book," it limns the integral non-equivalence of impression and impressionability. Indeed, the "force" that Toomer attributes to the impression made on him by reading Gurdjieff precisely does not correspond to "notes" he made from reading. The text we have, in fact, reads neither as commentary nor analysis, and still less as literature. Instead, it resembles a generic lecture transcript. It is filed in Toomer's archive under the heading "[Lectures]: Transcripts 1941-44," and is thereby dated according to the event it references, not the time it was written. Its entire significance hinges, however, upon its negotiation of a written impression and an unwritable impressionability, upon a tension that results in a text that can itself barely claim the status of writing. Anderson, who served as a sort of mentor and model for Toomer in his composition of *Cane* here sheds light on a piece of writing produced long after it; for just as *Winesburg, Ohio* without the Book of the Grotesque" might still unveil its characters in "a long procession of figures" but with no sense of the young thing driving them, "G to the French Group" without its addendum would be the transcript of a lecture with no indication of its unwritten, "definite force." The addition of this one paragraph, however, within hundreds of files and thousands of pages labeled as Toomer's "papers relating to G.I. Gurdjieff," changes that. Like a book seen only once, it leaves the reader with a sense of

the passive potency within the type of dry writing we might otherwise mistake for "unpleasant dreams or perhaps indigestion."

"Be apart internally"

The addendum derives its explanatory power from the fact that "G to the French Group, 1943-44" itself constitutes such a typical specimen of Toomer's Gurdjieffian writing. The transcript of a lecture, it reads not in Toomer's voice but Gurdjieff's, and includes first-person references that are clearly remarks the latter made to individual members of the audience.[108] Thus Jean Toomer figures in the pages neither as participant or witness, neither character nor narrator. At one point the injunction is made to "be apart internally," and this could well serve as a subtitle for both lecture and notes, for not only is dispassion its theme, but a certain structure of internal division also informs Toomer's relation to the lecture as its copyist. His notes bear witness to a double remove: first that of Teacher from Students (Gurdjieff from audience) and, second, that of Toomer himself from both. It is this double remove which renders Toomer neither student nor teacher, yet still intimately involved in—one might even say constitutive of—the pedagogical scene as such. A witness who does not testify but transcribes—or rather, who testifies by means of transcription—Toomer neutralizes the distinction between remove and intimacy, study and copy, in a gesture that becomes something of a characteristic posture in many of his Gurdjieffian papers.

The injunction to "be apart internally" is repeated and reworked a few pages later: "The key of everything: <u>remain apart</u>. Our aim is to have constantly a sensation of oneself, of one's individuality. This sensation cannot be expressed intellectually because it is organic. It is

[108] For instance, Toomer uses the first person a few times in his notes, where this "I" is actually referring to Gurdjieff, as when the latter says, "For you (Mr G. B.) specifically I give an exercise…"

something which makes you independent when you are with other people" (Toomer Archive). The little dictum, "remain apart," underlined (we might guess) because neither sufficiently explanatory nor aphoristic on its own, distills the lecture's topic to a single practical impulse. While the rest of the text details the difficulty of distinguishing sensations not just from external stimuli but from their own "organic" effectivity, the brevity of the imperative to "remain apart" prompts a new set of reflections on how and why a division of the self from itself might be a desirable objective. If the mind is to observe sensations apart from meaning with minimal effort (and indeed, a main thread of the notes focuses on how sensations are experiences whose fullness hinges upon remaining meaningless as concepts), what does this achieve? Why would one's task be to split off, or become anonymous to, oneself? Why limit the scope of spiritual labor to a stasis between sensing and being? And why define selfhood as nothing more than the empty space between embodied consciousness and conscious embodiment?

These questions about internal division gain valuable concreteness if framed discursively: when one copies down the injunction to "be apart internally," one performs the very redoubling of consciousness prescribed. If, in turn, this conscious redoubling of Gurdjieff's text permits comparison to an act of Du Boisian double-consciousness, it is precisely because it sets aside the problem of what counts as inside or outside the intention (or what Du Bois might call the "soul") of the speaker, and shifts attention, instead, to how the speaker introduces into his discourse an internal difference from itself. "Be apart internally" can thus be seen as the interruption of any decisions on meaning; it brings critical attention up short by throwing into relief the ways that reading implicitly demands that the writer speak in his own name or in that of another. Toomer, as a copyist, does neither. His text, in the voice of Gurdjieff in the manner of a dictation, does not explain but rather *is* a double-consciousness. Indeed, to the extent that double-consciousness

entails subjectivation by means of an irreducible distortion, bespeaking a racialized self precisely by misspeaking it (and affirming this peculiar *méconnaisance* as such),[109] an injunction like "be apart internally" identifies a surprising proximity between racial subjectivation and copying as a textual practice. Both are easy to misrecognize, since both predicate themselves upon the interruption of self-identity. Considering Toomer's copying under this practical aspect of double-consciousness allows his texts to emerge not merely as a record of spiritual conversion, but as the work of converting and accustoming the racial self to the double being it already is.[110]

So on the one hand, the notes lack the privilege (some might say sovereignty),[111] enjoyed by both literary text and autobiography, to leave the occasion of their utterance unstated. On the other hand, Toomer's diligent copying says something about when or how an act of reading has

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[109] Jared Sexton, for instance, suggests in the context of "a world structured by a negative categorical imperative – 'above all, don't be black,'" that "we might create a transvaluation of pathology itself, something like an embrace of pathology without pathos. To speak of black social life and black social death, black social life against black social death, black social life as black social death, black social life in black social death – all of this is to find oneself in the midst of an argument that is also a profound agreement, an agreement that takes shape in (between) méconnaissance and (dis)belief. Black optimism is not the negation of the negation that is afropessimism, just as black social life does not negate black social death by vitalizing it" ("Ante-anti blackness" [*Lateral Issue 1* (2012)]).

[110] Space does not permit development of this point, but it is worth placing Toomer alongside another figure of conversion, Malcolm X, whose embrace of Islam would consist less in the revelation of a new religious substance than of the insubstantiality of blackness itself as "white man's problem." Toomer's spiritualism similarly *unlearns* race as a thing to be, and redefines its *resistance* as a practice of learning how not to be what one is (thought to be). And just as Malcolm X, with his famous copying out of dictionary definitions, configures *literacy* as liberation, so too does Toomer, as Gurdjieffian scrivener, render spirituality a literate practice—that is, a function of what one reads, hears, and attends to. The difference between the two, of course, is that unlike Malcolm, Toomer never *names* race as the problematic guiding his spiritualism and regimen of self-observation. But perhaps a liquidation of the substance of race is precisely what informs the spiritual notes. Perhaps this is not cause for further neglect, but for asking: how can one read the unsigned and sign the unread? For Haley's narrative of Malcolm X's conversion, see the chapters "Satan" and "Saved" in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told to Alex Haley*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987).

[111] The self-standing text, unlike the note, purports to stand apart from the occasion of its making. And inasmuch as, to cite Derrida, "the sovereign, in the broadest sense of the term, is he who has the right and strength to be and be recognized as *himself, the same, properly the same as himself*," then discursive appeals to self-sameness or "ipseity" are assertions of sovereignty. Notes, by contrast, are by definition not self-same but characterized by their secondariness, at best similar or responsive to something else that incites their inscription. See *The Beast and the Sovereign*, *Volume I***,** trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago & London: U of Chicago P, 2011), 101.

rendered itself *notable*. This element of notability can be attributed or claimed neither by Toomer nor the text he draws from; rather, it is attributable only according to the (unwritten, undated) moment at which something already-said itself has rung true. Toomer thus cites Gurdjieffianisms as they have struck him, retaining them in wait for *another* time, *another* occasion, at which point the sayings will re-emerge from his own lips unprompted. Fragments like "be apart internally" are thus composed with the express purpose of being apart, detachable, from their source, while still retaining an indexical relation to it. It is this tension between detachability and origin that characterizes the difficulty of dating these notes.

But if Toomer's citation installs an internal distance from its source while marking that same distance as an opportunity for use and reactivation (which remains distinct from appropriation), perhaps Toomer's Gurdjieffian manuscripts ask to be read as a particular technology for *using* language without *speaking* it, or in an inversion of Stanley Cavell's formulation, for *meaning* words without *saying* them.[112] If Toomer's archive characterizes him more as ghostwriter than guru and more as scrivener than sage, perhaps our task is not to plumb the depths of the copied text for aesthetic worth or racial content, but rather to see how copying itself doubles consciousness into a usable, even therapeutic form of illegibility.

Scrivener

[112] This inversion of the title of Cavell's classic *Must We Mean What We Say?* is intended to indicate the vexed status of first-person utterances that are *copied* in relation to both meaning and saying. Indeed, the point about Toomer above is that the coherence of his copies/notes depends upon the convergence of what Cavell calls "pragmatics" (ordinary language usage) and "semantics" (factual propositions made in language). As he puts it "learning what these implications [of ordinary usage] are is part of learning the language; no less a part than learning its syntax, or learning what it is to which terms apply: they are an essential part of what we communicate when we talk" (Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* [Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1958], 11-12). So perhaps in copying out Gurdjieff, Toomer neither says nor means anything, but rather shows his means of "learning the language" of Gurdjieff's system.

Usable illegibility is concretized in documents like "G to the French Group," where Toomer's role as scribe of the classroom (a space which may or may not be marked as such) permits the reader to become versed in Gurdjieffian philosophy not as neomystical doctrine but as a pedagogy of self-transformation. A key aspect of this pedagogy involves writing and, specifically, transcription. Thus at the same time that there is an evident impetus in the notes to present spiritual practice in the form of dialogue, there also appears just as strong a need for Toomer to retract himself from any featured exchange. It is as if it constituted a privileged form of participation in this spiritual training to become its copyist.

There are two methodological implications of this posture (and the corresponding illegibility to which it consigns the writer) that must be take into account. First, there is the fact that any search for Toomer's "voice" (as a function of narration) in his Gurdjieffian archive has been obviated by the transcriptive character of the notes found therein. Likewise, there is little point in attributing "authorship" (as a function of origin) to documents in which the writer, precisely in order to write, must recede as source. Toomer figures, in this sense, not as a modern-day Plato with Gurdjieff as his Socrates, but rather as a diligent scribe whose accounts of his teacher (and various disciples) are reproductions, almost verbatim, of other sources on the same material. But if there is nothing original about Toomer's Gurdjieffian notes, either in content or in form, why are they worth revisiting? Why look specifically at *notes* about Gurdjieff as opposed to texts, some now published, in which Toomer describes his experiences and study of the mystical system? Is attending to the notes *as notes* an implicit appeal to that "gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary" labor Foucault once ascribed to genealogy?[113] Or is it, rather, as I have begun arguing here, that taken precisely as they are, these notes raise the

[113] Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 2: Aesthetics, Method, Epistemology,* ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1998), 369.

problem of an archive whose internal divisions and ways of "being] apart internally" leave it without *arkhē* or *telos* (including the *telos* of communication)? Perhaps insofar as Toomer's Gurdjieffian notes prove *an-archic* in this manner, they open up not just a different mode of reading, but an alternative mode of subjectivation, one that appears only when the well-trod path from text to author, and from archive to *arkhē*, is blocked—and by no more imposing a figure than a minor copyist.

Jacques Derrida (*an-archivist* par excellence) famously assigns the traditional archive three functions: a "nomological" function that establishes and enforces a law in its name; a "domiciliatiory" function which houses and enables inhabitation of "this place of election where law and singularity intersect in *privilege*" (3, original emphasis); and a function he calls "consignation," whose aim is to "coordinate a single corpus, in a system or synchrony" (3) elements that are heterogeneous temporally, separated practically, and secretive semiotically. These three functions hinge upon evidence of a *signature* to which everything can be assigned *in the first place*. This initial, original, and singular impression—in Derrida's case, the impression of Freud—infects a reader with "archive fever" or *mal d'archive*, a concept for which, Derrida argues, we are also indebted to Freudian psychoanalysis. For this fever drives us "to run after the archive, even if there's too much of it, right where something in it anarchives itself. It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement."[114] Just as Freud tirelessly sought to sound the depths of the unconscious by assuming it had a bottom, the concept of signature *as* origin, as ground, engenders a desire *for*

[114] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression,* trans. Eric Prenowitz [Chicago & London: U of Chicago P, 1998], 91. Hereafter cited in the text.

origins, opening (or originating) with this desire a dimension of the archive's futurity, a future paradoxically guaranteed by so many failed, compulsive returns.

Without entering into the manifold dimensions of Derrida's argument about Freud, it is worth noting that a signal (and only apparently simple) distinction emerges between Derrida's reading of Freud's archive and the notes we are concerned with here: Toomer's papers on Gurdjieff, and the transcripts in particular, insist upon remaining unsigned. They remain "notes," in fact, only upon this basis. What desire, fever, or *mal d'* do they thereby mobilize? What is the "nomological" power of anonymity (or anomie), the "domiciliatory" force of displacement, the use of "consignation" without signature? What, in brief, is the standing of an archive copied out and consciously redoubled?

To the concept of archive, Derrida says, belongs a certain force; there exists an "archival violence" comparable to Walter Benjamin's notion of a law-making and law-conserving *Gewalt*. If this is true, what is the force of the archival *copy*? What happens when the nomological, domiciliatory, and consignatory *Gewalt* of the archive encounters the unsigned papers of a writer-turned-scrivener? Do these scraps still constitute an archive—albeit an-archivized, operative at a zero-degree and suspended, as it were, in an archival state of exception? Or do these papers, on the contrary, unseat the very conditions under which mechanisms of *nomos*, *domus*, and *consignment* normally operate? These are preliminary speculations, but this much is clear: Toomer's notes pose a different problem of the archive—which is also a different problem of the *an-archive*—than Derrida elaborates. For rather than a ceaseless self-deconstruction on the model of what he calls the "Freudian impression,"[115] Toomer's unimpressive archive—unimpressive in the sense of lacking both an identifiable author and a rigorous theme—evokes

[115] As Derrida writes, "when psychoanalysis formalizes the conditions of archive fever and of the archive itself, it repeats the very thing it resists or which it makes its object" (91).

what could be called, instead, a *malaise d'archive*: a sudden immobilization of the sense of archival *Gewalt*. This malaise leaves even the internal division Derrida calls "anarchivizing" to idle, and remits the force of signature with the peculiar passion of the scrivener.

Gewalt *and Privation*

As we've seen, Derrida calls "anarchivization" the functioning of *nomos, domus*, and (con)*signature* at their zero-degree. That is to say, the archive "anarchives" itself at precisely that moment when its force coincides only with the differential (or *différantial*) trace of a signature. In this perspective, Derrida's gesture of correlating archival "violence" (of which *mal d'archive* is the pre-eminent symptom) to Benjamin's law-making and law-conserving violence is both significant and ironic, since Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" [*Zur Kritik der Gewalt*] the essay from which these terms derive, theorizes violence, or *Gewalt*, precisely in hopes of severing its relation to law. For Benjamin, law harbors a mythic (and so fundamentally empty) nucleus which supplies its force. This nucleus consists in an unrivaled grasp upon (and of) the concept of *Gewalt*, which is secured through the secret solidarity between the historically opposed schools of jurisprudence: natural and positive law. Natural law views violence as an inevitable (natural) means to an end while positive law defines violence as the end archived through historical (positive) means. What both schools hold in common, however, is a symmetrical (and, when taken together, perfectly circular) concept of violence in view of its *justification*—that is, as an inherent modality of law. This presumption, Benjamin shows, precludes any critique of violence *as such*, for as long as the link between legality and violence is taken to be indissoluble, *Gewalt* will always already subtract itself from the horizon of sense.[116] As Kevin Attell has noted,

[116] Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings Volume 1: 1913-1926,* eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge & London: The Belknap Press of Harvard U P,

Derrida's interest in Benjamin's argument lies in the *temporality* of this legal-mythic subsumption of violence.[117] In a reading of "Critique of Violence" published as "Force of Law: the 'Mystical' Foundation of Authority," Derrida argues that the aporia Benjamin diagnoses intensifies at precisely those moments in which law-making violence is exerted in the patent absence of law. For instance, when force is used toward the ends of revolution, it can by definition only sustain a proleptic, and in truth, purely "mystical," relation to a legal order yet *to come*.[118]

At this point we can note that Derrida makes an analogous claim (and attributes an identical structure) to the temporality of the archive and the "'mystical' foundation" of its authority: *mal d'archive* is nothing more than a Freudian variant of the "force of law" wherein the mythic nucleus of power consists in the anticipatory trace not of a legal order, but in a law of *signature* that is both presupposed and still to come. Thus the impression after which the archive is named, like the justification in the name of which revolutionary violence is waged, bears a relation of *future anteriority* to the present: everything here and now *will have* been justified by a new *nomos*; everything *will have* been housed in the *domus* of this single source; everything *will have* been consigned to this impression. For this reason, the foundation of the authority of the

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2004). Hereafter cited in the text. Benjamin correlates the notion of "critique" with that of finding criteria; the mythic nucleus/void of law precludes the determination of criteria for violence beyond the means-end relation.

[117] See Attell's chapter on "Sovereignty, Law, and Violence" in *Giorgio Agamben: Beyond the Threshold of Deconstruction* (New York: Fordham U P, 2014), especially pp. 135-148.

[118] In "Force of Law" Derrida writes: "In these situations said to found law or state, the grammatical category of the future anterior all too well resembles a modification of the present to describe the violence in progress. It consists, precisely, in feigning the presence or simple modalization of presence. Those who say 'our time,' while thinking 'our present' in light of a future anterior present do not know very well, by definition, what they are saying. It is precisely in this nonknowledge that the eventness of the event consists, what one naively calls its presence" ("Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice,* eds. Drucilla Cornell, Michael Rosenfield, and David G. Carlson [London: Routledge, 1992], 269). For a reading of the circularity—or the logical groundlessness—of authority in democratic theory, and especially Rousseau, see Jason Frank's chapter on "Unauthorized Propositions" in *Publius and Political Imagination* (Summit, PA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), pp. 25-47.

signature, like that of any authority, is "mystical." Archive fever describes the peculiar force or *Gewalt* of a foundational "signature" that simultaneously obscures and secures the impossibility of its own presence.

What to make, then, of the radical absence of a signature in much of the archive held in Jean Toomer's name? Earlier we asked whether texts left *unsigned* still constitute archival materials in Derrida's sense. Given his reading of archival *Gewalt*, we can now say that they likely would: as a function of the "mystical"/mythic force of the (always already) operative signature of Jean Toomer, the domain of what he leaves unsigned would in fact constitute the preeminent site of archive fever, for the unsigned is where the archive "anarchives" itself, where the non-full, non-presence of authorization is unleashed with greatest force. In Derridean terms, the absence of Toomer's signatures would be equivalent in force to "revolutionary" violence, a power whose lack of current legitimacy is precisely what guarantees it as predicate of a name and *nomos* still to come. What unsigned documents confirm, for Derrida, is the irreducibility of archival *Gewalt* itself, a power which, to invoke the circular formula of future-anteriority par excellence, is *always already* operative.

But if law and signature bear an identical structure—or rather, if signature is only one modality of the force of law—how does the problem of archival *Gewalt* change if the archived text *signs itself as a copy*? What happens, that is, if rather than appealing to the original plenitude of a signatory, archival writing announces itself as—and exists only in adherence to—a renunciation of origin, a dispensation from the law of proper names? Here we return to another question asked above: what force, if any, can be attributed to the archival copy? Does it inspire a *mal d'archive,* a *malaise d'archive*, or does it indicate something that has afflicted the archive itself—rendering it sick or weak, *une archive malade*?

Forms of malady and weakness come to mind because their relation to plenitude—whether defined as presence or health—is, like the copied note's relation to the originality of signature, not negative but *privative*. This element of privation is what places an archival copy such as "G to the French Group" both in unmistakable proximity to the Derridean paradigm of archive fever (as an apparent instance of the archive's own internal division or "anarchivization") and at a critical remove from it: as consciously redoubled, the archival copy operates at the fringes of authorial law. Yet it cannot be included within this law, even (or precisely) as its exception, because it evidently withholds signature in order to model itself upon the speech of another. In other words, an unsigned copy written *in the hand of* Jean Toomer—that is, available for his use—takes place *under the signature* of Gurdjieff. When Toomer exclaims that "[n]ever before have had such a sense of force coming to me from any written material," he therefore does not simply credit the text of his notes to a transcript of Gurdjieff's lectures; he also marks an internal division within that text which distinguishes its mode of copy (as a partial reproduction of a transcript of a decade-old series of lectures) from the force issuing from the original itself. This latter force is singular, unrepeatable, and perhaps most importantly, *illegible*: far from taking shape upon the page, it requires a form of yielding, of passivity, on Toomer's part that remains unwritten in the copy as its condition of possibility.

Indeed, where the Gurdjieffian original impresses itself is not the page but the body. "I became aware of my sensing, feeling, that a definite <u>force</u> had entered me from that material." This is a strange formulation because the object of awareness is neither something external, nor a subjective idea, but an act of "sensing, feeling" one's own sensations and feelings. In turn, the notes made on the basis of this passivity—that is, which seek to attend to the capacity for auto-affection itself—neither "represent" this experience through biographical description, nor fall

into mystical silence. Rather, they *say the nothing they can say about it* by signing themselves as a copy (an illegible original). They precisely attest to the hiatus between passivity and language, between a pure impressionability and a scriptive, legible impression. When Toomer falls under Gurdjieff's "force" and consciously redoubles his words, he consequently heeds not one, but two *Gewalten*: first, there is the "authority" of Gurdjieff's signature that enables him to copy (making it so that "G to the French Group," for example, could easily constitute an addition to Gurdjieff's archive); second, there is the privative power of "sensing, feeling that a definite force had entered me." If the first is an exalted experience of the Master's words that borders on a *mal d'archive*, the second is the inverse, an in-fantile experience of being unable to speak. Together these two moments constitute a remove from Gurdjieff's text that marks Toomer's own capacity for language, a capacity that realizes itself only through its self-suspension.[119] Toomer figures within his notes, then, neither as Master (of himself or others), nor as a slave (to impulse or Gurdjieff), but rather as Gurdjieff's double, a figure whose self-mastery precisely corresponds to its ability to adhere to the existing model. This explains why at first, reading was "[t]oo much to

[119]This point draws upon a theory that cannot nearly be done justice to here: Giorgio Agamben's reading of Aristotelian *dunamis* or potentiality (*potenza*). Agamben's theory revolves around what Attell calls "the way potentiality passes (or does not pass) into *energeia* [actuality]" (87). It seeks both to affirm potentialities that do not "actualize," and also to see in the privation of a potentiality, in the potentiality-not-to, the very basis for potentiality as such. In this sense, actuality, rather than constituting the end of potentiality, is in fact coterminous with what Daniel Heller-Roazen calls the "full realization of the potential not to be (or do)" (see the Translator's Preface to Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Heller-Roazen [Stanford: Stanford U P, 2000], 17. Hereafter cited in the text as P.). Most significant for the current discussion is the way in which privation (*sterēsis*), rather than absence, names way in which a potentiality is negated. For privation, unlike modal negation, takes the form of "can not" rather than "cannot." Furthermore, privation as a form of self-suspension, defines, as Agamben notes, "the specific ambivalence of every human power that in its original structure maintains itself in relation with its own privation….In potentiality, sensation is constitutively anesthesia, thought non-thought, work worklessness" **(***Critical Inquiry* 40.2 [Winter 2014], 486). For more on the significance of privation in Agamben's theory of potentiality, see Kalpana Seshadri's "Agamben, the Thought of *Sterēsis*: An Introduction to Two Essays" (*Critical Inquiry* 40.2 [Winter 2014]: 470-479) and, in the same issue, her updated translation of Agamben's signal 1987 essay "La Potenza Del Pensiero" as "The Power of Thought" (480-491). For a brilliant account both of Agamben's theory and its implicit critique of the first principles of Derridean deconstruction, see "Potenza and Différance" in Attell (84-121).

be taken in, so," though there still arose a "definite force." It is with privative "force" that Toomer begins partially transcribing what was already written. He passes from inarticulacy to language—but a language that neither dissimulates nor overcomes its contingency but rather speaks its potential not to take place, speaks this non-event through the practice of saying something while also saying nothing: *copying*.

Copying as an *act* of privation or a writing of impotentiality[120] therefore not only complicates the archival schematic, but verges on parody of its law, and even on parody of the Master himself: for Toomer's papers, precisely insofar as they copy out the mystical authority of Gurdjieff, utterly demystify themselves. They are not inspired impressions of a star pupil, but profane scribbles of a form of writing that has expropriated the writer himself. The *Gewalt* of these pages thus bespeaks a fallible force—which is also a force of fallibility—that is able to take in "too much" and live to speak the inappropriability of what has entered it.

Playing with the inappropriable; or, ēthopoiesis

The archival copies we find in the Beinecke (estate laws notwithstanding) therefore do not constitute the "property" of Jean Toomer. They are, rather, implements of the double-consciousness by which Toomer subjects himself to his own desubjectivation. This process is

[120] This phrase, "the writing of impotentiality" is also the subtitle to Agamben's essay "Pardes" (*Potentialities*, 205-219) in which the philosopher draws upon the two forms of reference in medieval logic: an *intentio prima* in which a sign stands for an object or idea, and *intentio secunda* in which a sign stands for the very fact of "standing for" itself. My suggestion above is that inasmuch as Toomer's copies have suspended their function as an *intentio prima* and have, instead, exhibited their pure ability to signify, they exemplify a kind of *intentio secunda*, in which writing indexes at once the potentiality to be written and also not to have been written. In this way, they are the writing as much of impotentiality—of being able not to be written—as of potentiality. And this impotentiality corresponds, specifically, to Toomer's experience of Gurdjieff's discourse as a privation of his own capacity to write. As Agamben says in "Bartleby; or, On Contingency" about the story of copyists *par excellence*: "Potentiality, which turns back on itself, is an absolute writing that no one writes: a potential to be written, which is written by its own potential not to be written, a *tabula rasa* that suffers its own receptivity and can therefore *not not-write itself.* (P 216)

intimately involved in what Gurdjieff calls "the work," which never tires of repeating the need for self-observation, self-distancing, and the internal division he calls "disidentification" or "nonidentification." Just as important, however, is the fact that prescriptions such as these, when redoubled in Toomer's hand, are no better than goods in the hands of a monk: they "belong to" him only inasmuch as they are radically inappropriable —inasmuch, that is, as they expropriate *him*.[121] In this perspective, the copies neither violate, nor constitute an exception to the law of Toomer's signature, but realize his signature's self-suspension. They are the toys with which Toomer plays with the inappropriability of his own name. The *rule* of the archival copy hinges upon this passive anonymity—upon the habits of attention required for writing in the manner of another—and the moment either passivity or anonymity is breached, so too is the status of copy. (One might be tempted to cite as counterexample the 1954 addendum, which appears explicitly in the copyist's name. Yet the addendum is not an exception because copying is not a rule. Rather, the addendum simply suspends the self-suspension of the notes that precede it.) If archive fever consigns all text to a signature, including (especially) those left unsigned, the exemplarity of the archival copy as a form of writing—the privative potency of its *Gewalt*—emerges from its suspension of signature in the act of scrivening. Without signature, we are left only with evidence of a vital habit of writing—writing as a way of life. Gurdjieff often told his pupils: "Keep a little notebook. Write down, but do nothing." Insofar as the archival copy is a text that *can not have been unsigned*, it bears witness to the privative power of submitting

[121] While there is not space here, it would be worth pursuing the connections between Toomer's late Quakerism and certain monastic orders, especially that of the Franciscans whom Agamben looks to for a theory of use, or inappropriability, in *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-Of-Life,* trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford U P, 2013). Interestingly, work on the affinities between these two programs of faith has been distinctly feminist in focus, and has brought to the fore the relation between piety, passion, and political radicalism. See Phyllis Mack's "Feminine Behavior and Radical Action: Franciscans, Quakers, and the Followers of Gandhi" (*Signs* 11.3 [Spring, 1986]: 457-477) as well as Christina Cedillo, "Habitual Gender: Rhetorical Androgyny in Franciscan Texts" (*Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 31.1 [Spring 2015]: 65).

oneself, habitually, to writing without doing, to writing not-writing—in a word, to the "definite force" of copying.[122]

What, we might ask, are the formal dimensions of this play with the inappropriable? What poetics correspond to this way of life, or *ēthos*, of the copyist? It can appear that such a question, pertaining as it does only to the abdication of authorial name, is a contradiction in terms. How can there be a form without a maker, or a form for deforming? The preceding analysis has shown that far from nonsensical, these questions are essential to grasping the work of the copyist. For in the suspension of the force of his signature is neither a secret confirmation of his authority nor a definitive negation of his powers, but, rather, the gesture of a habitual practice in which the "self" constitutes itself in and as its inappropriability. The archival copy can thus be understood as a formal discipline that accustoms the writer to subjectivation without identity.

If the form at stake is one of discipline, modes of being and making, of *ēthos* and *poeisis*, enter into new proximity: writing now constitutes just as much a means of *producing* as of *being*—that is, of feeling oneself undergo—and being, as a power to suffer, is also shaped and, as it were, "made" to be, by writing. The 1954 addendum offers an exemplary description of the indeterminate space between making and being when it reveals that the "source" from which the

[122] In *The Highest Poverty*, Giorgio Agamben notes the signal distinction between priest and monk in analogous terms. The life of the priest is understood as an office or *officium*. Like the author, the effectivity of his works is judged solely *ex opera operato* or "from the work done" (and not, for example, by intention). The priest is also subject to the doctrine of the *character indelibile* of the priesthood, such that "the unworthy priest remains a priest despite his unworthiness" (117). In the writer's case, the indelible mark is the signature to which all he writes is subject, whether or not he signs it. Like an "unworthy" priest, a "failed" author thereby is able to remain an author. Contrary to the priestly paradigm of *officium* of the *Opus Dei* is the figure of the monk, "a being," Agamben says, "who is defined solely by his form of life, so that at the limit, the idea of an unworthy monk seems to imply a contradiction in terms" (117). Extending the implications of this figure to the writer—a writer similarly defined not by the property and identity but only by poverty/passivity and use—not only suggests an alternative paradigm to that of the archive and signature, but also limns a parallel sphere of writing itself as a form of life. It is this sphere that forms the locus of concern in this chapter.

preceding notes are "made" is not a text but a constellation of three experiences held in movable tension: the time and place of the Gurdjieff's lectures in France (1943-44); the time and place of Toomer's reading a transcript of this original (NY; July 22, 1954); and the time and place of "transcription" itself (between July 22 and August 16, 1954). This triangulation simultaneously forms the (unwritten) matrix out of which a text emerges, and also internally divides this text from itself (from the completed transcript it also is). What becomes clear, subsequently, is that the notes are both "made" of Gurdjieff's words and also "made" of a privative force Toomer grew "aware of sensing, feeling" within himself. This dual power informs the sense of *poiesis* implied in the remark: "Fred let me read, in N.Y., about July 22, 54, the material from which these notes were *made*."

So what is "making" if that which is made so strictly adheres to the rule of "writ[ing] down but do[ing] nothing" that its constitutive passivity yields not just a text but also a new mode of life?

We are concerned here with writing that requires a sort of indifference between modes of making and doing, *ēthos* and *poiesis*. Its function can therefore rightly be called *ēthopoietic*. This is a technical term that Foucault cites from Plutarch in a short essay called "Self Writing" (*L'Ecriture de Soi*) which forms a part of his larger genealogy of the modern subject. Foucault explains that a writerly discipline is *ēthopoietic* if its purpose is to transmute truth (*alētheia*) into a practical form of subjectivity. In the largely oral philosophical schools of late antiquity, he explains, writing did not serve a large role. But with the ascent of the Roman empire and its culture of traditionality, practices of keeping up notebooks and exchanging letters gradually emerged as a significant components of *askēsis* or self-discipline. Indeed, within a culture preoccupied with the transmissibility of culture, writing became a means for transmuting

accepted truths into human potentialities.[123] Finding its place among the arts of living (*tecknē tou biou*) characteristic of the Socratics, Pythagoreans, and Cynics, *ēthopoietic* writing consequently involved, but was not reducible to, the keeping of notebooks or memory-aids (*hupomnemata*) and letters. Primarily it constituted a philosophical attitude, one oriented not towards the expression of new truths but the gathering-in of existing ones into one's very mode of being. Metaphors of digestion were therefore prevalent, and the act of copying was modeled on chewing, so that a piece of writing was equivalent neither simply to what one read, nor to what one said and contributed to philosophizing but to a means (and, at times, a mere by-product) of the incorporation of truth. "Whatever the cycle of exercise in which it takes place," Foucault explains, "writing constitutes an essential stage in the process to which the whole *askēsis* leads: namely, the fashioning of accepted discourses, recognized as true, into rational principles of action. As an element of self-training, writing has, to use an expression that one finds in Plutarch, an *ēthopoietic* function: it is an agent of the transformation of truth into *ēthos*" (209). In a related essay, Foucault again refers to this transformation of "truth into ēthos" as the real desideratum of *askēsis* itself:

> *[A]skēsis* means not renunciation but the progressive consideration of self, or mastery over oneself, obtained not through the renunciation of reality but through the acquisition and assimilation of truth. It has as its final aim not preparation for another reality but access to the reality of this world. The Greek word for this is *paraskeuazō* ("to get prepared"). It is a set of practices by which one can acquire, assimilate, and transform truth into a permanent principle of action. *Alētheia* becomes *ēthos*. It is a process of the intensification of subjectivity. (239)[124]

Thus writing down the already-said—copying it—serves as a way of remaking subjectivity by fortifying it with known truths. This is a practice of ingesting, digesting, and assimilating such

[123] Michel Foucault, "Self Writing," *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth,* ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: The New Press, 1997)**,** 209.
[124] Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 3: Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth,* ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: The New Press, 1997).

truths into the elements—indeed, the aliments—of the soul's sustenance. The philosophical training implied here is premised less upon the acumen of the student than upon his powers of auto-affection and teachability.

The emphasis on susceptibility is of both historical and philosophical interest for Foucault, for on the one hand, it prefigures the model of Christian confession in "its close link with companionship, its application to the impulses of thought, its role as a truth test" (208); on the other, *ēthopoietic* writing also implies a type of soul decidedly at odds with the homonymous Christian concept. Indeed, Foucault takes pains, in this context, to show how self writing in late antiquity employs almost identical means to those the Church would turn toward the ends of confession and self-disclosure but with a very different aim. For the Church Fathers, a narrativization of the self would enable its purification. The logic of Christian self writing is undergirded by a dual analogy between writing and sociality: first, that "what others are to the ascetic in a community, the notebook is to the recluse," and, second, that "the constraint that the presence of others exerts in the domain of conduct, writing will exert in the domain of the inner impulses of the soul" (208). Self writing in the Christian context thus assumes "a role very close to that of confession to the director" (208) and its aim would be to "bring[] to the light of day the *arcana conscientiae*" (210). Self writing in Seneca, Plutarch, Epictetus and their contemporaries, by contrast, is a "means of establishing a relationship of oneself, a relationship as adequate and accomplished as possible" (211). Rather than purifying the self, writing serves to *intensify* (in the sense not only of rendering forceful but also of rendering *intensive*) the soul as the relay between truth, thought, and action. The impulses of one's thought, then, including the most unseemly, do not betray a secretive and constitutional flaw; rather they manifest the soul insofar as it is a

contingent and susceptible thing, capable of acting upon itself and thus of suffering its actions and inactions alike.

In the Christian context, too, these affective powers of thought upon itself would be affirmed in the notion of a fallible soul. But with a central difference: the presupposition of the Fall obliges the Christian soul to assume that the true text of conscience is *concealed* from understanding. Every text of Christian self writing would thus await deciphering on account of its sinful secret, leaving a drama of confession and revelation to ensue. In the Greco-Roman sphere, conversely, not only is there no doctrine of original sin, but the text of *ēthopoiesis* cannot, by definition, precede inscription; the soul depends upon its uses of writing (rather than on this or that text) to become manifest to itself and others. Writing cannot demonically elude its own interpretation, then, for it is not the content of what is written, but the practice of writing itself that molds and nourishes the soul into truthful, ethical being. The soul can acquire the writing of truths as a habit and means of self-examination and discernment, or abandon itself to whatever truths it happens to assimilate by chance. But by copying the writing of others and writing *to* others in a manner that occasions self-observation, the soul can bring itself to light for itself. The disciplined soul of late antiquity uses text to increase its *capacities* for truthful being in a way that Christian doctrine will retain but transform into a pursuit of knowledge that is always already hidden from the seeker.

As is well known, Foucault's studies on the Greco-Roman model of self-care constitute the pivot for the "ethical" turn of his late work. Insofar as this turn resituates the classical philosophical injunction *gnōthi seauton* ("know thyself") within the much larger tradition of

epimeleia heautou ("take care of the self")[125] the example of late antiquity offers a counter-paradigm of the subject, one whose emphasis upon self-cultivation illuminates an alternative to the hermeneutic tradition that would, from pastoral to psychoanalysis, gain ascendancy in the West. At the same time, this form of self-care also displaces the hermeneutic project by charting its derivation from ethical traditions that, for a time, coincided almost entirely with forms of *poiesis*. Indispensable to the genealogy of the modern subject is this longer history of techniques of subjectivation, a history, as it were, that encompasses not just knowledge, but the relation between knowledge, auto-affectivity, and facticity.

In the longer view of this history of subjectivity, it is clear that the confessing soul undergoes subjectivation on the basis of knowledge. It will prize knowing, will covet even the *mal d'arcana* that afflicts it in plumbing secrets it never ceases to tell. In a very different context and centuries removed, the Freudian soul will prize unknowing, will sound an unconscious realm whose ground is just as soon discovered as (re)repressed. Later still, Derrida, invoking Freud, will prize the impossible presence of the soul itself, will set the modern reader atremble with *mal d'archive* at a signature never full, nor fully insignificant. But the soul of late antiquity, employing what will one day be fashioned into the techniques of confession, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction, nevertheless exemplifies a mode in which the subject is neither known nor unknown, neither truthful nor deceitful, neither present nor absent. Rather, this soul realizes truth in a human form of life. It does not enter into a dialectic of (dis)concealment, but in hearing itself speak and reading itself write, undergoes truth without attempting to render this truth its own. Absent this appropriative gesture, the soul reactivates that part of the already-said which is *now* true in and for it. And so rather than blushing before thoughts taken for its own, this soul *uses* the

[125] Michel Foucault, "The Hermeneutic of the Subject," *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 3: Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth,* ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: The New Press, 1997), 93.

fundamental inappropriability of truth as the means of incorporating it into a form of existence. There is little deciphering to do in this case, as the soul of *ēthopoiesis*, without secrecy or signature, constitutes for itself not a text, but a *surface of writing*—a soft and opaque layer upon which, at the opportune time, the correct words will shape themselves.[126]

Gurdjieff

Such a paradigm of subjectivation—removed from the dialectics of knowledge and non-knowledge, presence and absence—corresponds to the forms of self-discipline that Toomer learns from Gurdjieff. This is less because Gurdjieff drew upon Greco-Roman principles (although he did, especially Platonism and Stoicism) and more because Gurdjieff's philosophical system explicitly presents itself as an integration, for the sake of modernized humanity, of techniques of self-cultivation and development.[127] There is very little emphasis, in this case, upon what one can decipher *in* the self, and far more importance placed upon the practices one engages *with* the self. Deriving from both Western and non-Western traditions, the practices Gurdjieff prescribed included but were far from limited to the schools of *epimeleia heautou* that Foucault discusses.

Aside from elaborating a modernized form of *ēthopoiesis*, then, Gurdjieff also exemplified something of a limit case to Western rationality that profoundly appealed to Jean Toomer. Born in 1866 in the Caucasus mountains near the Armenian border, fluent in Russian and a wide range of Turkish dialects, and widely traveled throughout Europe, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Tibet, Gurdjieff developed his spiritual program within a geographic zone that

[126] For more on this image of impotentiality (or the capacity for privation) recurrent in Agamben's work, see note 28 above.
[127] See J.G. Bennett, *Gurdjieff: A Very Great Enigma* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1973), esp. 10-16 and 21-23. While Bennett describes Gurdjieff's remarkable ability to syncretize disparate traditions, he also calls Gurdjieff a "divided character" (14) who "wanted to be altogether Western" (13).

a longtime pupil called "a kind of crucible in which different traditions were blended, and out of [which] have come the forms that we now see as so separate—and even opposed to one another—of the Christian, the Islamic, Assyrian, Zoraoastran traditions and so on" (21). Gurdjieff's philosophy was the theoretical counterpart to this "crucible." It syncretized techniques of self-transformation ranging from Platonism to Sufism to Zen Buddhism[128] and insisted that when viewed from the perspective of practice rather than dogma, a common problematic could be isolated within all of these schools. This problematic concerned a notion of the self as divided between the poles of "personality" and "essence." The source of suffering was identification with "personality" as the contingent circumstances into which one was born, at the expense of "essence" as that part of the self able to undergo transformation. Gurdjieff drew on practices both contemporary and ancient, Western and non-Western, to neutralize this division through the discipline of habitual self-alienation. Rather than suffer on account of the inappropriability of personality, one could devote oneself to a personal practice of the inappropriable.

We see all too clearly, then, why a young Jean Toomer, who had begun both before and in *Cane*, to dream of a miscegenated "new race" of Americans who could be neither black nor white, was very much struck by this school of thought. For on the one hand, Gurdjieff's system promised a means of turning the divisions of racialized double-consciousness into a practice of integral being; on the other hand, the very techniques by which this integration was achieved were themselves non-Western and non-white. Thus we might guess that by the time Toomer first encountered Gurdjieff dancing on stage at Manhattan's Leslie Hall and at the Neighborhood

[128] Bennett cites mystical Christian, Islamic, Assyrian, Zoroastrian, Egyptian, and Buddhist traditions as sources for Gurdjieff's philosophy, but emphasizes throughout his genealogy of this philosophy the character of "interpenetration" that was already evident in Gurdjieff's homeland (33). In other words, Gurdjieff did not combine traditions so much as attend to the ways they had already formed a spiritual conglomerate around him.

Playhouse stage in 1923, he was impressed not just by the exoticism on display, but by the hybridity that characterized both the geographical source of Gurdjieff's work and its method. For while Gurdjieff was billed as a "very great enigma,"[129] both his programme and his biography bespeak a practical integrity premised upon the potentialities of an internally divided and fundamentally miscegenated self. All Gurdjieffian "development" insists upon remaining apart from "personality" as a false unity, and upon using this self-alienation as the anonymous, inappropriable force-field in which the truth of one's life can be decided as happiness or unhappiness, harmony or dissonance. The model of self here unfolds in a dimension of impropriety that resembles racial double-consciousness, except that it has redefined this impropriety as a therapeutic principle.

How we consider Toomer's investment in Gurdjieff's system can be revised in this perspective. For rather than entailing his retreat from a larger (Negro or mulatto) community in order to cultivate and improve himself individually (and racelessly), Toomer's embrace of Gurdjieff's ideas should be regarded as an extension of the writer's belief that intermixture—both racial and philosophical—was paramount to achieving a more integral humanity, one that could accede to an "earthly" state that was not only post-Western, but also post-colonial, post-identitarian, and post-white. In this sense, Gurdjieff proved that such admixture was not only possible, but essential to the "neither-norism" that led to greater happiness.

In this way, too, Toomer's practice of modeling himself after Gurdjieff and copying out his lectures constituted an apprenticeship in the ēthopoietic task of rendering the self more and more divisible. Far from an isolating gesture, the aim in such a process is to become what

[129] This is Bennett's subtitle.

anthropologists call a "dividual," a being defined purely by its relations, a purely social being.[130] Thus Gurdjieffian practice—especially as Toomer interpreted it—was neither something to do, nor someone to be, but, rather, something to undergo in order to *not be* one self. The work of self-dividing and distancing—of conscious redoubling and double-consciousness—required that passivity known in Gurdjieffian parlance as "intentional suffering," which implies not masochism, but a cultivation of the self as an inappropriability. And the *askēsis* recommended in this work likewise demands that the practitioner surrender to relation until all egotism dissolves into the kinship of which it is already composed. Toomer called the effect of this dissolution "a profound and free and happy sense of utter anonymity…[an] anonymous-I" (JTR 59). And in an essay he would write and rewrite throughout the 1930s about his first "mystical experience" in April of 1926, he would elaborate on this sense of anonymity, on being "not but nothing other than" himself, as a higher sphere of consciousness:[131]

> Possession? To me it was on obvious fact that no one *can own* anything—not a pencil, not a fortune, not his "own" body, not even his "own" soul. The things of the earth are of the earth. The things of man are of man's commonwealth. All things are of God.
>
> All that we can do is to use or misuse. We can appreciate or take for granted or violate. The belief that things can be made "mine" and "yours" is an illusion of people who are neither completely asleep nor completely awake. What a ghastly illusion. Those in deep sleep are free of it. Those in high consciousness are free of it. Those in the so-called waking state are under its spell. (JTR 57)

In place of possession there is only use, and use not just in regard to things, but in regard to interiority and the self. Toomer's conversion to Gurdjieff's system is a capitulation to this

[130] The concept of the "dividual" originally appeared in Deleuze's 1992 essay "Postscript on the Society of Control" and then was taken up by Marshall Sahlins and others concerned with processes of kinship formation (see also Cecilia Busby. "Permeable and partible persons: a comparative analysis of gender and body in India and Melanesia" (*JRAI* 3.2 [1997]: 261- 278) and Tim Ingold, ed, *Key Debates in Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 1996), particularly the account on pp. 55-98 about the 1989 debate on the concept of society.

[131] Once again, this is Fred Moten's canny phrase, as cited in the introduction.

doctrine of the soul's inappropriability, and the copies we find in his archives are at once evidence and exercise of this egoic expropriation.

"Racial Composition"

It is also in this context that we can revisit what has become an infamous letter Toomer wrote to Horace Liveright, publisher of *Cane*, dated September 5, 1923—a few months after the book's publication and his first introduction to Gurdjieff. The letter is infamous because it is the *locus classicus* for those who accuse Toomer of being, in one way or another, a race-traitor:

> My racial composition and my position in the world are realities which I may alone determine. Just what these are, I sketched in for you the day I had lunch with you. As a unit in the social milieu, I expect and demand acceptance of myself on their basis. I do not expect to be told what I should consider myself to be. Nor do I expect you as my publisher, and I hope, as my friend, to either directly or indirectly state that this basis contains any element of dodging. In fact, if my relationship with you is to be what I'd like it to be, I must insist that you never use such word, such a thought, again. As a B[oni] and L[iveright] author, I make the distinction between my fundamental position and the position which your publicity department may wish to establish for me in order that *Cane* reach as large a public as possible. In this connection I have told you, I have told Mssrs Tobey and Schneider to make use of whatever racial factors you wish. Feature Negro if you wish, but do not expect me to feature it in advertisements for you. For myself, I have sufficiently featured Negro in *Cane*. […] It was my intention to give briefly those facts which I consider to be of importance, and then to allow your publicity department or the writers on the various papers and magazines to build up whatever copy seemed most suited to their purposes. (JTR 94-5)

Most commonly read as the first of many denials Toomer would make that he was "Negro," this letter has led many to want to prove, on the contrary, that Toomer really was black. The most categorical of these assertions has, in recent years, been the following remark, from Henry Louis Gates and Rudolph Byrd's 2011 afterword to the Norton Edition of *Cane*: "It is our carefully considered judgment, based upon an analysis of archival evidence previously overlooked by other scholars, that Jean Toomer—for all of his pioneering theorizing about what today we might

call a multicultural or mixed-race ancestry—was a Negro who decided to pass for white" (237). Of interest in the current discussion is not whether they are "right" but rather how Toomer's reference to "racial composition" might be read in light of the practices of inappropriability we have been considering and in which he would soon become so immersed. "Racial composition" is laced with an obvious double reference: to the composition of Toomer's background, but also to his gift, to what he might compose racially as a writer and what racial literature he might still produce. This punning is significant not only for how it enables "Negro" to be attributed equally to two heterogeneous "compositions," the writer and his text, but also because it names precisely those two "features" which go missing from Toomer's *oeuvre* after *Cane*: blackness and literariness (specifically, the modernist aesthetic "featured," like Negro, in *Cane*). Our question, then, is what it means that Toomer refers to "racial composition" as subject to his own *determination*. Is this a moment of self-delusion, shame, or self-preservation, as Byrd and Gates among so many others assume, or is it, rather, an index to the double illegibility that both race and art would assume in Toomer's post-*Cane* and post-Negro "scribbles"?

I would like to suggest that Toomer's assertion of self-determination with regard to "racial composition" is precisely not a declaration of his sovereignty over himself, but rather the inverse: Toomer claims to be able to determine "racial composition" because he situates his role as a *composer* of literature on par with his being a "dividual" made up of a *composite* of races; determination, in each case, pertains to facticity—that is, to a being-determined that the subject can relate to, but not own or appropriate. The relation Toomer assumes with regard to art or language is, consequently, no different from the one he enjoys to heredity: racial art is something of which he cannot take possession, but only use or misuse. ("Determination" therefore does not qualify his intention or property but the very manner in which an inappropriability is handled.) In

this sense, Toomer's objection targets precisely Liveright's gestures of appropriation and, in the local context, of marketing. Once *Cane,* as a "racial composition," assumes the status of *commodity*, so too is another "racial composition," Toomer's personality, rendered a brand to be bought and sold. Resisting this transmutation of a historical composite into a racial commodity, and of inappropriability into a fetish, Toomer's stance in the letter, as in *Cane* itself, is to treat the racial composition of a text exactly like the composition of a person: something to which one's relation is at once absolutely intimate and irreducibly improper. When he insists, then, that "I do not expect to be told what I should consider myself to be. Nor do I expect you as my publisher, and I hope, as my friend, to either directly or indirectly state that this basis contains any element of dodging," he does not so much evade the question as fundamentally revise the terms in which it can be posed.

Perhaps Toomer's "racial composition," then—in the sense both of a mode of writing and of being—is something to be determined only on the basis of the coordinated inappropriability of race and literature. And perhaps the preeminent concern in Toomer's post-*Cane* and ex-colored writing is precisely to develop techniques which do not break off the problematic of "racial composition" but assume its difficulty in full. Toomer's gestures of renouncing signature for scrivening and identity for a model—his decision, in brief, to copy Gurdjieff's example—may consequently be something other than ways of avoiding racial identification and the pressures of producing another *Cane*. They might, instead, constitute acts of self-suspension that are carried out in a conjoined practice of being and writing. The habit of copying radicalizes the pun in "racial composition" so that *poiesis* verges upon *ēthos*. If this is true, then the aesthetic and racial features missing from the archive do not conceal what Toomer might have been or done, but rather exhibit the double illegibility his copies never cease to scribble out.

II. The Case of Being a Problem

The previous discussion began by noting that the problem with Toomer's Gurdjieff archive—an archive equivalent, for critics, to non-literary and non-racial production—is that it exists at all. In the history of African American literature, something similar may be said of Jean Toomer himself. He is a problem insofar as he ever existed—and not because he was "Negro," but because he may have "decided," as Byrd and Gates put it, not to be; not because he was an artist, but because he may have similarly "determined," in the language of the Liveright letter, not to be. In the remaining pages, we will resume the analysis of double illegibility which Toomer's problematization of "racial composition" inaugurates. But we will undertake this analysis not in the context not of his archive, but the larger archive of African American letters. And we will proceed by asking a version of Du Bois's unasked question: How does it feel to be a problem?

The discussion is divided in two parts which, as we will see, never cease to cross over into one another: the court case and the upper case.

Plessy's heir

Paul Stasi, a modernist critic, has argued that among the formal innovations of *Cane* is a migrant or "passing" aesthetic in which tropes of contemporary life and a mythic past, North and South, syncrhony and diachrony, continually contaminate one another. Rather than constituting an elegy for "souls of slavery" in the antebellum South or a quest for personal roots, *Cane* is for Stasi a critique of early twentieth-century race relations at the level of its form. By means of its modernist techniques, Stasi writes,

> *Cane* calls into question the very search for racial origins it seems, on a first reading, to embody. And it does so not by demonstrating the failure of this search

> but rather by investigating the historical conditions that produce the motives for it in the first place, mobilizing modernist techniques that unseat the logic of visual racialization underlying the Jim Crow South.[132]

What Stasi calls here "the logic of visual racialization" refers us to the famous "separate but equal" ruling of *Plessy vs. Ferguson* in 1896, in which the avowal of formal equality of African Americans went hand in hand with a racial encoding of visuality. Elucidating what Saidiya Hartman calls "the legislation of blackness," Stasi explains that the court proceeded by "turning segregationist 'customs and traditions' into the naturalized result of irreconcilable racial difference," only to then redescribe these differences as hereditary physical characteristics whose survival depends upon banning intercourse—sexual and social—between the races. Stasi calls this double displacement of social custom into an ontologized (racial) difference, and of racial difference into a visual code, a "repression of history" through the "fetish of race" (151).

While Stasi himself does not elaborate on his choice of the term "fetish" to describe the operation of racism under Jim Crow, the term is both exact and important. For just as, according to Marx, commodities acquire a fetishistic character because they redescribe material relations between people as social relations between things, race assumes a fetishistic character insofar as it redescribes a social hierarchy, based in custom, as a natural fact, rooted in (visible/phenotypical) heredity. In other words, race turns a material relation between people into a social relation between the color of their bodies. It is for this reason that "postbellum society set about trying to preserve the visual legibility of race through a massive legislative effort against miscegenation" (150), for racial color plays an identical role in dissimulating social reality that *value* does in capitalist commodity exchange: color stabilizes power and property relations by appearing to represent an essential difference. Thus if value signifies a naturalized

[132] Paul Stasi, "A More Subtle and Synchronous Migration: Passing and Primitivism in Jean Toomer's *Cane*" (*Twentieth Century Literature* 55.2 [Summer 2009]), 149. Hereafter cited in the text.

difference between objects which is itself reflected in their price (their abstract commensurability to a money commodity), race appears as an ontological differential between people that is reflected in their color (their abstract commensurability with an ideal "whiteness").

From this perspective (which suggests the effective affinity between race and value, whiteness and money, in capitalist societies premised on white supremacy), we can grasp the singular importance of the Supreme Court's ruling on Homer Plessy's "passing." Plessy was condemned not for falsifying who he was, but for taking what didn't belong to him: in other words, for *theft*. As numerous scholars have noted, this logic was feasible only insofar as white identity was construed in the 1896 case as a modality of *possession*—that is, whiteness corresponded to a person's private ownership or property of himself.[133] Thus whiteness was not *analogous* to value, it simply *was* the metric of value for the legal person (what Cheryl Harris calls "status property"). The vehement enforcing of a visual difference between the races should be read in this perspective: the "color line" was never meant to reveal a social hierarchy in the South, but, on the contrary, to enable this hierarchy to *pass* for a natural one. This could happen if all notions of social value corresponded, in some degree, to phenotypical whiteness. Ironically, then, the color line constituted a powerful technology of "passing," for in establishing a visual

[133] Stasi notes that Albion Tourgée, Plessy's lawyer, had chosen this definition for identity as a defense of his actions, but that the court used this same logic to stipulate that Plessy had borne stolen property in passing for white. In "Whiteness as Property," Cheryl Harris considerably expands this point by arguing that, historically and socially, property and racial identity are kindred concepts and compatible technologies for legalizing forms of social exclusion. "whiteness and property share a common premise—a conceptual nucleus—of a right to exclude. This conceptual nucleus has proven to be a powerful center around which whiteness as property has taken shape. Following the period of slavery and conquest, white identity became the basis of racialized privilege that was ratified and legitimated in law as a type of status property. After legalized segregation was overturned, whiteness as property evolved into a more modern form through the law's ratification of the settled expectations of relative white privilege as a legitimate and natural baseline" (1714). "Whiteness as property has taken on more subtle forms, but retains its core characteristic—the legal legitimation of expectations of power and control that enshrine the status quo as a neutral baseline, while masking the maintenance of white privilege and domination." (1715) (*Harvard Law Review* 106.8 [Jun., 1993]: 1707-1791.)

regime that kept black apart form white, it enabled historical property relations to pass for natural relations of propriety. Securing racial visibility—making sure that "white is right"—was thus the decisive factor in conserving social relations, since it enabled one, just by looking, to differentiate proper persons from those whose only access to both propriety and its rights to propriety could come through stealing. Whiteness, then, was property made flesh, and blackness criminal by default, a kind of crime incarnate. Miscegenation, by extension, was the despoiling of property as well as a fall from grace, and racial passing was (legally and colloquially) an act of piracy, treachery, and sin.[134]

Such framing of this problematic makes clear the most radical implication of racial indeterminacy as a social phenomenon: insofar as the "passing" body occupies the threshold of the visual-racial order, it indexes a racial admixture, the existence of racially composite bodies, which *already exist*. Passing attests, in other words, to the obvious—but for the sake of the law, intolerable—persistence of miscegenation within the realm of visuality meant to proscribe it. In such a way, passing operates from within the naturo-visual lexicon of race (since it still appears as a question of a body's color), but uncannily *animates* it by bearing witness, as a fossil does, to the "natural history" of a naturalized social relation: race. Passing, in other words, confirms the human and temporal constitution of the color line by reminding that one cannot but cross the line in drawing it.

In a symmetrical inversion, then, of the fetishistic logic which redescribes social dynamics as ontological/racial differences and which renders the visible body their chromatic

[134] James Weldon Johnson's ex-colored man is a case in point: in his concluding lament—"I cannot repress the thought that, after all, I have…sold my birthright for a mess of pottage"—the narrator not only assimilates whiteness with property ("pottage") but also implicitly equates blackness with something incommensurable with property or monetary value (*The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* [New York: Hill and Wang, 1998], 211).

signature, the phenomenon of passing demands—as a condition for both its taking place and its potential discovery—that the racialized body present itself as an *archive* of differently colored bodies over time. A body can only "pass" insofar as it betrays this history of intermixture and appears as both living and fossil evidence of its taking place. In this way, the "natural" but disavowed history of race—its centuries-long tradition of bodily comingling and coercion—forms the precise criterion for "passing," and counts, in every instance of it, as its only incontrovertible datum. It is with a certain irony, then, that one recalls the ways that miscegenation, from *Plessy vs. Ferguson* to Rachel Dolezal,[135] is constructed as a catastrophic exception to the racial norm. For while the racial norm, or color line, is precisely what law seeks to uphold, every case of passing—in order, precisely, to *be* a case of passing—makes this "exception" the rule. The very danger of racial passing betrays the history of miscegenation, flaunts laws against it, and in fact confirms that mixing itself is the only "natural law" of race. As Du Bois, who was no stranger to such ironies, might have put it: the problem of the color line is the *line*, for there is no space between colors that is not colored itself.

A body, then, such as Homer Plessy's or Jean Toomer's, sufficiently composite to pass for pure and thus *incapable* of avoiding questions about the history of social relations, dialectically inverts the racial fetish so that its nature (the color of bodies) only appears historical, and its history (miscegenation) only appears natural. In this way, the "passable" body figures as the harbinger of a real—that is, a lasting and historical—state of racial exception. If inaugurating this new racial epoch constitutes Homer Plessy's secret bequeathal to the history of race, then Jean Toomer is Plessy's most important (if neglected) heir.

[135] Dolezal was the president of the Spokane, WA chapter of the NAACP, whose race became the center of controversy in the summer of 2015 when her parents claimed she is white: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/14/us/naacp-figure-rachel-dolezal-set-to-discuss-her-race.html?ref=us&_r=0

Not only did Toomer comprehend that Plessy's "transgression" was not equivalent to —and in fact, was at a critical remove from—what he *did*;[136] he also grasped that the "crime" implied in racial passing was not an act committed by a human being, but rather, an *act of human being*. Considering the political and philosophical stakes of this new sphere of human life—in which being was fundamentally activated (as a problem) and action fundamentally ontologized (as a being)—Toomer embraced the form of radicalism that could take shape only as a politics of embodiment.[137] Here the object of use—the history of one's being, or "racial composition"—was as personally inappropriable as it was socially improper. And so just as Homer Plessy made history irrupt in a space—the white train car—legislated to exclude (and naturalize) it, Toomer conceived of his body as an act of being (of nature) that could interrupt the petrified landscape of contemporary politics, and break the paralytic spell of the racial fetish. This broken link, between history and nature, was precisely the pretext that Plessy's prosecution had both to draw upon and disavow: the legislation of the color line depends upon eliminating the threat of a blackness that could become indistinguishable form whiteness. What would it take, Toomer mused, to show that Plessy's embodiment had not "broken" a rule so much as shown it was already broken? What was an improper act that did not violate the law but exhibited its nullity? What mode of embodied exhibition and exhibitive embodiment—what poetics and what ethics—could one

[136] In fact, not only did he do nothing out of the ordinary by taking a seat in a white section of a Louisiana train, but, as Stasi notes, any construal of passing as a voluntary act committed by a self-legislating subject also "depends on the existence of the very binary structure it attempts to undermine. The passing subject, in fact, reifies the very divide that is his or her enabling condition of possibility" (151).

[137] The political significance of racial indeterminacy is not that it violates the visual rules of race, but rather that exposes the visual code itself—the code of color read upon the living body—as the primary mode in which race dissimulates the history of social inequality. As we have seen, race fulfills its function as a stabilizer of power relations in the South only to the extent that it appears hereditary and "natural." Thus, Marxist critiques of power and property relations can only go so far if they leave the color line (and the fact that color, like a face, is an "act" of the body not a subject) unexamined. This is a significant point, for the traditional logic of "passing" precisely reinforces racialism as a naturalization of social inequality. Above, conversely, passing is proof that the (mythic) logic of naturalization has reached its end, as miscegenation, a putative exception, is now the rule.

develop to *prove* that the "natural" law of race was already inoperative, and that the secret nucleus of racist power consisted only in this void, in the fiction of its applicability? What was in order, perhaps, was a work of fiction like *Cane*, a "racial composition" about this fiction, which suspended the color line's own suspension of history, and fetishized its very fetish of color. And yet this fiction could only be the precursor to a fashioning of another "racial composition," a racialized life that, belonging to no one, was itself a radical act.

Court Case to Upper Case: or, Black/Type/Face

The problem with Homer Plessy is that he disappeared as a person the moment he appeared as a problem. His black face committed the crime; it acted by showing its features, and would have to be held accountable. In the criminalization of his black face, there was no need for a black soul, only a white train car, a color line to cross. The problem with Jean Toomer, conversely, is that he appeared as a person the moment he disappeared as a problem. His retraction of "Negro," his refusal to feature it or to have it be his feature, made his black soul the preeminent source of speculation and questioning. Why would this soul betray its blackness, its touch of art? What mystical illusions could have made him give up his birthright and gift? Perhaps voting and medical records, a good look at genealogy, could recover a black face. In any case the concealing of Toomer's black face became a secret to decipher, whereas the appearance of Plessy's black face became a criminal act.

In both instances, the black face and black soul are connected only by virtue of a prior separation: a black soul, like Jean Toomer, can hide its black face, just as a black face, like Homer Plessy, can hide its black soul. Blackness is thus simultaneously presupposed and in need of confirmation. When Du Bois theorized double-consciousness as a "peculiar sensation…of

two-ness," and even called it a "veil," he not only identified this ruse of separation—based as it is only upon an equally fictive reuniting—but also articulated its counter: a conception of black being in which soul and face were distinct only on account of being radically inseparable. They were not *in relation*, then, but were two poles of a single threshold comprising racialized existence as such. To the notion of a black soul, whose reality was only ever identified by the color of its face, Du Bois responded with the idea of the souls of black folk.

The institution of blackface minstrelsy ironically elaborates Du Bois's insight, since it also abolishes the distinction between racial interiority and exteriority by displacing both into the sphere of performance. The blackface performer, as a speaking mask, does not say anything *about* blackness or its soul but rather speaks in a black manner. "Black" thereby constitutes a standardized, stereotyped discourse in which certain utterances become possible between an ex-white performer and a white audience. Blackface in this way becomes the medium of what whiteness can hear but not say about itself.[138]

Whiteface in the black tradition is, for this reason, a similarly complex phenomenon, for what it hides is not a black soul but the manner of speaking by which it would otherwise be identified. For instance, David, the white, sexually-conflicted protagonist in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* was confirmation, for many readers, of Baldwin's sexuality. It never made anyone think, however, that James was secretly white.[139] Referring to Toomer's post-*Cane*

[138] For more on blackface as a historical form of white self-parody and self-critique see John Strausbaugh, *Black like You: Blackface, Whiteface, Insult, & Imitation in American Popular Culture* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

[139] Marlon B. Ross makes precisely this point when he discusses Baldwin's "deviation from [racial] identification" in *Giovanni's Room*: "Everyone assumed that Baldwin was homosexual because he had chosen to write a novel about same-gender love. This is ironic, considering that as a black man, he was also writing about "white" characters in which whiteness itself—or Baldwin's own blackness—was apparently not an issue. Fortunately, no one could accuse Baldwin of secretly being white simply because he had written a novel with all European characters" (16). See Marlon B. Ross, "White Fantasies of Desire: Baldwin and the Racial Identities of Sexuality" in *James Baldwin Now*, Dwight A. McBride, ed.

writing as "whiteface" is similarly a way of confirming its blackness. Blackness permits a sort of proof by denial, a version of what Freud long ago problematized as the paradox of *Verneinung* in psychoanalysis, where "no" never means no.[140]

Hence we should not be surprised to find that the problematic of blackness as a language whose proof is in the proofs, and whose message is its medium, has transitioned seamlessly from questions of blackface to typeface. The intertwined histories of "speaking black" and blackface minstrelsy reanimate the drama of confirming the authenticity of the black soul, though in the case of writing, this authenticity cannot be sought anywhere beyond the realm of the text itself. In fact, nowhere beyond the letter. A recent New York Times editorial, for instance, makes "The Case for Black With a Capital B," for capitalizing "Black" in order to distinguish it from other, purely homonymous uses of this word:

> Ever since African people arrived in this country, we have had to fight for the right to a proper name. Upon arrival in the "New World" we were all collectively deemed Africans, even though we came from different countries, cultures and tribes. Very soon after, British colonists borrowed the Spanish term for black, and we became negros, negars, nigras and blacks — anything oppositional to the supposed purity of whiteness.
>
> After emancipation, as many individuals replaced their slave surnames with ones of their own devising, like Freedman or Freeman, they still bore the painful legacy of the labels they'd been given: black, negro and colored. […]If we've traded Negro for Black, why was that first letter demoted back to lowercase, when the argument had already been won? Publications like *Essence* and *Ebony* push back, proudly capitalizing the B. But claiming the uppercase as a choice, rather than the rule, feels inadequate. Black should always be written with a capital B. We are indeed a people, a race, a tribe. It's only correct.[141]

(New York: NYU Press, 1999), pp. 13-55. Elsewhere I intend to explore at length the divergent criteria for racial and erotic belonging (and suspicion) in relation to Baldwin's fiction.

[140] Sigmund Freud, "Negation," in *On Metapsychology*, The Pelican Freud Library, vol.11 (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), 435–442. For an insightful reading of Freud's essay and its relevance for contemporary philosophical practice, also see Alenka Zupančič, "Not-Mother: On Freud's *Verneinung*" (e-flux 33 [March 2012]): http://www.e-flux.com/journal/not-mother-on-freuds-verneinung/

[141] Lori L. Tharps, "The Case for Black With a Capital B" (*The New York Times* [November 18, 2014]), A25. Also available at http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/19/opinion/the-case-for-black-with-a-capital-b.html?_r=0.

The author identifies three central symptoms. First the way in which cases of racialization continue to be decided in acts of writing—that is, not just in what or how something is said, but in the very manner in which a word like "black" itself is spelled out, enunciated on the page. Second, the extent to which blackness remains drawn or otherwise assimilated to question of *case* (literal/ signifying, legal/ criminal, medical/ pathological). Finally, the "argument…won" about capitalizing "Negro" refers us precisely to the early twentieth-century "case" where "black" remained adjectival, but "Negro" became a proper noun.

Much of this polemic turns on a legal pun. "The *Case* for Blackness" puts orthography on trial as the Supreme Court did Homer Plessy, entrusting typographers to carry out the same decision on a black soul. Thus, the "case" calls on precedent, as the pride expressed in being "a people, a race, a tribe" dating to Pan-African and Black Power lineages, as well as to the orthographic prototype of the New Negro Renaissance. Throughout the 1920s, a campaign for the "New Negro" pled its case for the uppercase in the uppercase. Indeed, the two capital "N"'s of New Negro itself exemplified a perfect comprehension of the paradox of blackness as a performance of speech, not content, through its use of the silent, inappropriable power of orthography: cases *for* uplift were already provocative cases *of* uplift. In an inversion, then, of our usual identification of literality with proper dictionary definitions, the term "New Negro" gained effectiveness by oscillating between denotation and a radical deactivation of meaning. It operates, in other words, by means of an entirely literal form of self-suspension. Punning on literality enables "New Negro" to be significant precisely insofar as it has withdrawn from signification, to make a double case for itself that both can and cannot be heard. It is as if the

"New Negro" encodes a plan to vex any decision on its historical fate by appealing not to the judge, but the stenographer.[142]

This editorial is a peculiar inversion of the "New Negro" strategy, since it precisely wishes significance upon an insignificant mark. It revisits a certain historical anecdote in which W.E.B. Du Bois, toward the end of the New Negro Renaissance, received galley proofs of an article he had submitted with "negro" spelled in the lowercase:

> In 1929, when the editor for the Encyclopedia Britannica informed Du Bois that Negro would be lowercased in the article he had submitted for publication, Du Bois quickly wrote a heated retort that called "the use of a small letter for the name of twelve million Americans and two hundred million human beings a personal insult." The editor changed his mind and conceded to the capital N, as did many other mainstream publications including The Atlantic Monthly and, eventually, The New York Times.

Du Bois's sense of "personal insult" here asserts the right of a (New) Negro to speak in his own name, almost as if the capital "N" were also a capital "I." At the same time, the very need for such assertions sheds light on the potential pitfalls of the vacillating, always ambivalent function of the kind of black spoken in New Negro literality. The problem grows acute in the context of Du Bois's exchange with the Encyclopedia Britannica: as arguably the foremost American Negro authority on the topic of American Negroes, Du Bois had been commissioned for an entry on the "The Negro in the United States." This does not appear out of the ordinary until one considers how it affected his usage of "Negro" in the entry. For it meant that in the entry, there would be not one two Negroes: the one speaking and the one spoken about. "Negro" thus had to work in two ways: as a proper name (including Du Bois's own) that would enable knowledge without

[142] A similar impetus informs the formation of independent black publishing houses and newspapers. Dovetailing with the argument above would be a reading of this history as subversive to a white monopoly upon means of mass communication. For more see Armistead S. Pride and Clint C. Wilson II, *A History of the Black Press* (Washington, D.C.: Howard U P, 1997). For the significance of the independent black in framing discourses of black history in the 1960s and 1970s, see Khuram Hussain, "'Against the Primers of White Supremacy'": The Radical Black Press in the Cause of Multicultural History" (*American Educational History Journal* 41.1/2 [2014]): 163-181.

supplying it, and as a common word that would supply knowledge without enabling it. Of course the genre of the encyclopedia itself consigned the legibility of "Negro" only to its denotative function, erasing any sense of the first person and thus of propriety or respect. The publisher's proofs only confirmed what Du Bois already knew: that he could no longer avoid the trap—indeed, that he had already accepted invitation into the trap—of treating "Negro" in a context where it displayed no obvious need of capitalization. His hand was forced when the editors opted for printing "negro" in the lowercase, and he rescinded the article (even with the publisher's eventual concession to capitalize Negro) shortly after this exchange.[143]

Such an anecdote crystallizes one way in which the turn to typeface, and especially capitalization, proves an imperfect strategy for those who spoke both *as* and *for* the New Negro. Indeed, to the extent that Du Bois's majuscule attempted to mark the Negro as a "problem" that could simultaneously know and represent itself, it ended up only fortifying the degrading components of racial discourse already at work. To the extent that the Negro (old or new) denoted some*thing*, its other literal function—as a written name—would only ever fall silent. Capitalizing may have brokered this silence by making it literal and visible, but this did less to solve than to bring the quandary of black discourse once again fully to light.[144]

Curiously, only five years before Du Bois's letter, another black luminary had managed to avoid both "personal insult," and the impasse regarding the doublings of (New) Negro

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[143] *The Correspondence of W.E.B. Du Bois, 1877-1934. Volume 1*, (Amherst, MA: U of Massachusetts P, 1997) see esp. 390-399.

[144] Interestingly, Du Bois's publisher granted his request about spelling, while ignoring his desired revisions to content, but made the following retort: "As far as I personally am concerned," he writes, "it seems to me that to capitalize Negro when we do not capitalize 'white' is a mistake" (*Correspondence*, 392). More than orthographical asymmetry, what the publisher, wittingly or not, points to here is the difficulty of making a pure name of a word, including one as fraught as "N/negro." One may capitalize the word, but it is a "mistake" to think that this capital letter will render the word a pure index of itself. Instead, as a signifier among others, "Negro" will inevitably draws upon another lowercase word: "white."

orthography. This other figure seems, in fact, to have perfected Du Bois's otherwise imperfect strategy, making a successful enough case for capitalizing the (New) Negro to mark the inception of the movement named after it. I am referring, of course, to Alain Locke, the thinker responsible for adapting "New Negro" from a quasi-militant term advocating armed black self-defense into the artistic protagonist of a literary movement.[145] For Locke, the New Negro would be a spell cast in spelling. As he famously wrote in his 1925 essay, "The New Negro," in the eponymous anthology: a "*cultural* recognition…should in turn prove the key to that revaluation of the Negro which must precede or accompany any considerable further betterment of race relationships" (15)[146]. While apparently shying back from political ends, he endorsed the means of capitalization in a way that uses it on the basis of leaving its meaning fundamentally undecidable.

In this way, however, Locke also reversed the terms of Du Bois's difficulty: the meaning of "Negro," rather than oscillating between some*one* and some*thing*, would now be bound up with its non-meaning, its spelling. Both the necessity and the ambiguity of its capital letter are thus evident in what he calls the "revaluation of the Negro." For while this aesthetic focus has long led both critics and sympathizers to regard his pleas for "cultural recognition" as the domestication of race politics, a "hibernation" (as Ralph Ellison's invisible man would have it

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[145] See Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "The Trope of the New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black" (*Representations, 24* [Autumn,1988]): 129-155, to which I will return. Gates offers valuable source material on the history of "New Negro" as a term and explains that "At least since its usages after 1895, the name has implied a tension between strictly political concerns and strictly artistic concerns. Alain Locke's appropriation of the name in 1925 for his literary movement represents a measured co-opting of the term from its fairly radical political connotations, as defined in the *Messenger*, the *Crusader*, the *Kansas City Call*, and the *Chicago Whip*, in bold essays and editorials printed during the post-World War I race riots in which Afro-Americans rather ably defended themselves from fascist mob aggression" (135). Gates explicitly aligns Locke's aesthetically inclined New Negro with a set of compliant figures known in the black press as "Old Crowd Negroes"; "New Crowd Negroes," by contrast, were not artists but armed men capable of defending themselves against racist violence (see pp. 133-136).

[146] "The New Negro," *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997).

almost three decades later) "a covert preparation for overt action" (IM 13),[147] Locke complicates any sense of this hibernation-as-deferral by insisting upon gaining entry *now* past the gate-keepers—and publishers—of white America. This could be done by turning the "key" of value—that is, of culture. Thus, the "New Negro" is Locke's cipher for what can take place if a segment of black America picks the lock to white consciousness. "New Negro" is, we might say, a Trojan Horse in the shape of Uncle Tom, a Trojan Tom or Tom-Tom, beating out its pseudo-primitive message in order to plunge into the belly of the beast and go undetected as a beast in that belly. Locke's term "revaluation" is paramount to this strategy. Having written his doctoral thesis decades earlier precisely on the question of value attribution, Locke had become convinced that the realm of value maintained a crucial separateness from politics, and that it was possible to make changes in value only in venues that had not yet, or not entirely been incorporated into power's official channels. The lag between culture and politics is desirable, then, precisely because it opens a space underground, buying time for subterranean shifts. "Revaluation" is Locke's word for a modification in structures of knowledge that elude their immediate policing by revising the types of object surveilled. Cultural revaluation is a way of being apart internally.

It is in this spirit that Locke informs readers of *The New Negro* that that black life—and with it, black value—has already undergone a seachange, but that we, on the political surface, do

[147] A useful, if surprising, comparison might be made here between Locke's coinage and that of LeRoi Jones, forty years later, when the name "Black Arts": "The name Black Arts had come in one of our meetings downtown where we gave each other military rank and made a commitment to any means, even armed revolution. We said what should we call this, then, secret Black organization of artists and intellectuals. I remember Larry Neal, Max Stanford, Cornelius Suares, Clarence Franklin, Askia Touré, William White, Charles and William Patterson…. And it came to me out of the black hole, I said, the Black Arts!" (14). Here Jones/Baraka, like Locke before him, repeats but inverts the myths associated with blackness, so that, as he says, "to turn their Evil backwards was to live!" (14). Whatever Jones's avowed stance towards the New Negro Movement, his inaugural gesture remains in keeping with it. Or in other words, the naming of Black Arts has its (uneasy) logical precedent in the New Negro. See Amiri Baraka, "The Black Arts Movement" in *SOS—Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader*, eds. John H. Bracey Jr., Sonia Sanchez, and James Smethurst (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2014).

not yet have the means for recognizing it. Such recognition, however, cannot come from above, but must be obtained from the enigmatic "New Negro" itself:

> In the last decade something beyond the watch and guard of statistics has happened in the life of the American Negro and the three norns who have traditionally presided over the Negro problem have a changeling in their laps. The Sociologist, the Philanthropist, the Race-leader are not unaware of the New Negro, but they are at a loss to account for him. He simply cannot be swathed in their formulae. For the younger generation is vibrant with a new psychology; the new spirit is awake in the masses, and under very eyes of the professional observers is transforming what has been a perennial problem into the progressive phases of contemporary Negro life. (3)

The setting here is part fairy-tale, part mystery. The three "norns" entrusted to midwife the destiny of American Negroes—"the Sociologist, the Philanthropist, and the Race-leader"—all too recently have come upon a "New Negro," a "changeling" emerged from beneath "the watch and guard of statistics." The nature of this figure, Locke says, is not yet fully known and has already eluded a scientific understanding that was meant, precisely, to be destinal. Furthermore, to the degree that these social-scientific prophecies have traditionally been effective, both appearing, as Locke says on the following page, "more real to [the Negro] than his personality," and rendering him "a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be 'kept down,' or 'in his place,' or 'helped up,' to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden" (3), the arrival of a transforming (and transformative) "younger generation" comes not just as news, but as a shock. For this "New Negro" has not only grown as opaque to expert theorization as the "Old Negro" was transparent as a "perennial problem"; more disturbingly for the experts, the newness of this figure consists in the way it mutates from *within* the formulae that would seek to "swathe" it. Retaining the old moniker "Negro" this new figure throws the racial apparatus—the so-called "Negro problem" itself—into crisis, exhibiting the Negro's "stock figure" as visibly distorted and outmoded. Black life has thus gone from "a

something" unfit for a proper name to a positive mystery, a "changeling"; the "Negro" has transfigured enough to afflict not only theories about it, but also the instruments that enable such theorizing. The formulaic findings of the experts now find them "at a loss."

From the outset, Locke's double-edged rhetoric—including its typeface—seeks a number of reversals: it portends "cultural recognition" for the American Negro while also obliquely maintaining that the real precipitate of recognition, the real "New" thing to see, is not some hidden black soul, but the subtle schemes, including statistics and other specialized knowledges, used by experts to define (and divine) it. Notably, too, Locke capitalizes the name of his scientific "norns" before even mentioning the Negro, setting an allegorical tone for the passage as a whole. This makes it difficult to distinguish the ends of social science (including Locke's own) from those of myth, which enables Locke, a page later, for instance, to recast his "norns" yet again, now into historical observers with whom an apostrophized "we," the readers, are said to identify: "we ["the minds of most of us, black and white"]," writes Locke, "have not been watching in the right direction; set North and South on a sectional axis, we have not noticed the East till the sun has us blinking…." (4). What requires renewing, in this account of the (New) Negro problem, is not any one concept but the hermeneutic gaze itself, the one reading the destiny of the black soul. This way of looking at blackness has been a "sectional axis," Locke says, which has only ever interpreted Negro life longitudinally across the Mason-Dixon line. This gaze must now rotate towards the eastern horizon if it is to understand the change that is already underfoot.

This latitudinalization of science contains a second, even more powerful reversal as it implies not just a spatial realignment for thinking blackness, but also an unprecedented shift towards temporality. Indeed, nothing could have existed less, for the "norns" of nineteenth-

century social science, than a future. The East, likewise, is not the site of the immemorial, even primitive, past, but the very future of the West. Thus the irony of his narrative thus becomes clear: in referring to a newly-oldly enigmatic New Negro, Locke exposes the social experts (including the "Race-leader") in the state they assume to find the Negro: "backward[ness]." It is not black folk who are, as Hegel once prophesied, consigned to a mythic futurelessness, but the "watch and guard of statistics" that are so constrained. Having inverted the philosophical paradigm which places black life on the wrong side of historical development (while also making retroactively evident how the vector of Western teleology itself conceals a color line), Locke shows that *revaluing* the Negro is no different from—and indeed announces a project of—revaluing *science*. Thus the New Negro is neither someone nor something, but rather a *countermyth* for exposing the racial mythology that presides over the present. If we might put it this way, the "New Negro" is a new formula for black *objectification*, a shift from hyperlegibility to invisibility.

Pairing Locke's preface to his anthology with Du Bois's exchange with the Encyclopedia Britannica illustrates that black literality and its "cases" are never "only correct" as they intersect the color line. Indeed, the concept of case, as Fred Moten might say, "interarticulates" the color line.[148] Case leads us, in fact, beyond "the watch and guard of" meaning, whether this implies defending names against encyclopedic taxonomy like Du Bois, or prophesying, with Locke, a black science that has finally done away with prophecy.

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[148] The concept of interarticulation is part of Moten's attempts to avoid the conflating of black subjection and pathology by insisting on blackness as "testament to the fact that objects can and do resist" (*In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* [Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003], 1). By transposing blackness fully into the realm of objects with which, as commodities, African slaves were identified, his problematic is the "scene of [racial] *objection*." Comparing "the resistance of the object with Marx's subjunctive [that is, unreal or virtual or otherwise dubious] figure of the commodity who speaks" (5) to the slave as a human commodity, Moten argues that the slave destabilizes a Marxian model of what Moten calls "sociality-in-exchange" with the "essential impropriety of the (exchange-)value that precedes exchange" (12).

From Case to Face

In a 1989 article entitled "The Trope of the New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black," Henry Louis Gates Jr. historicizes the concept of a "New Negro" from its first eighteenth-century usage (to describe newly arrived African Slaves in America) to Locke's intent to "reconstruct the very *idea* of who and what a Negro was or could be" (148, original emphasis) in 1925. While the article diligently presents research from archival materials to restore the term's forgotten political undertones, Gates begins with a bit of anecdotal evidence: it is said that Frederick Douglass quite enjoyed being known as "the representative colored man of the United States" (128). This title pleased Douglass, Gates says, because it meant that he had become "presentable," and hence that he had begun reconstructing "public, reproducible images" (129) of blackness. Why Douglass would have cause to become attached to the reproducibility of his image—that is, to a form of alienation from his actual person—is Gates's unstated theme in the essay. For in offering a history of the New Negro concept, what the critic brings into focus (intentionally or not) is the historical centrality of strategies of self-estrangement within reconstructions of black self-representation. Douglass is exemplary in this regard because as a fugitive and, later, freed slave, the specific novelty of his image—his status as a prototype of the "New Negro"— consists in its modalities of cancellation and dis-appearance. That is to say, Douglass's social visibility, especially among the abolitionists that brought him into the nation's consciousness, depended upon sustaining a tension between a past of bondage and a present of (quasi-)freedom. He could accede to political relevance, in other words, only to the extent that he *crystallized in a single, reproducible image* both the worst parts of his race's history and its revolutionary energies.

This negotiation of cancellations both within Douglass's image and in the circulation of that image reveals a fundamental irony in the trope of the "New Negro" as what Gates calls "a sign of plenitude, of regeneration, of a truly reconstructed *presence*" (130, Gates's emphasis). Indeed, this presence comes at the cost of a number of temporal and personal negations: Douglass is representative of the colored race because of what he *no longer* is and in light of what he has *not yet* become; he is the definite negation of what Gates calls "the white figure of the black as Sambo…a sign of lack, of degeneration, of a truly negated *absence*" (130). Thus Sambo (who also bears the Lockean alias, "Old Negro") at once spectrally confirms, and structurally informs, any claims to Douglass's "truly reconstructed presence." As "the representative colored man in the United States," Douglass can be both "new" and "old," but never fully actualized.

In the deconstructive terminology informing Gates' approach, this representativeness makes Douglass's image akin to a Derridean *différantial*—that is, to a non-concept and non-word that differ-defers its own meaning. He acts as trope for a race whose locus is in migration, and whose name is always changing. Sustaining the tension between a *no longer* and a *not yet*, Douglass holds open potentiality of a New Negro aside and apart from the achievement of any political goal; he spaces blackness against both past and future by dividing blackness itself, internally, from the present. In this way, he gives the race time.[149]

And yet how exactly Douglass as a New Negro manages to determine and inhabit this interstice—that is, how he comes to signify (and contain the force between) past and present—is

[149] I do not mean to suggest, of course, that Douglass is only a signifier and not himself signifying. Rather, I mean to draw attention to the parallel between a post-structural understanding of signification—which involves an irreducible deferral of meaning on account of necessary difference from other signs—and Douglass's strategic positioning within the re-construction of the "image of the black," and its *de-construction* alike. This point follows up on a statement Gates makes early in his essay: "We [African Americans] commenced our cultural lives in this hemisphere as veritable deconstructions, if I may, of all that Western culture so ardently wished itself to be" (131).

of particular interest for defining in historical and racially-specific terms what Gates, borrowing a phrase from Foucault, calls the "non-place of language" (132). In the context of black history, this "non-place" is found anywhere racial oppression is made visible precisely by means of its negation. In Douglass's case, reconstructing the race configures itself as the overcoming or *Aufhebung* of prior negations of the Negro. It is precisely here, however, that the project of black reconstruction announces certain problems philosophically: for while the New Negro can read as a peculiar case of negative dialectics in which a zero-degree relation is upheld to the "set of racist representations of the black as the ultimate negated "Other"—as all that white culture feared about its 'nether' side" (148), we are left to ask: what *is* the negation of a "truly negated absence"? Can it *be* at all?

Gates briefly makes a turn in his argument that sheds some light on the problem. He identifies what he calls a "paradox" in the history of African American letters, one which happens to coincide, roughly, with the period of Douglass's adulthood:

> While the historical period known as Reconstruction seems to have been characterized by a dramatic upsurge of energy in the American body politic, the corpus of *black* literature and art, on the other hand, enjoyed no such apparent vitalization. On the contrary, blacks published more novels between 1853 and 1865 (six), when they were fighting slavery, than they did when they were nominally free, the freest that blacks had been in this country since the day before they set sail for Virginia in 1619. It is as if the great and terrible subject of black literature—slavery—found no immediate counterpart when blacks were freed. Once Redemption had established itself as a new form of enslavement for blacks, blacks regained a public voice, louder and more strident than it had been even during slavery. This stands for me as a paradox of our intellectual history, which I hope to explore at length elsewhere. (131, original emphasis)

The "paradox of our intellectual history" that Gates unearths (but defers as a project) is the patterned, even predictable, disjunction between black aesthetics and politics—that is, between two ways of negating blackness as "the ultimate negated Other." The "paradox" he identifies—that these two forms are out of joint—poses the problem of why and how aesthetic and political

assertions of black power are incommensurable. The incommenusrability manifests as a matter of timing, or more specifically, as a non-synchronicity between art and politics comparable to musical counterpoint. Indeed, if counterpoint can be defined as "the relationship between voices that are interdependent harmonically (polyphony) yet independent in rhythm and contour," the interdependence of the two contrapuntal "voices" of black history are perceived as distinctly off-set in their "rhythm and contour."[150] Hence black letters enjoy a "vitalization" between 1853 and 1865, at the very height of legalized bondage; conversely, black politics, operating with what Gates calls a "nominal" freedom, finds voice during Reconstruction, when black letters stall.[151] The trend is reversed again during that ill-named, ill-fated period known as "Redemption" (in which pro-business Democrats reversed Reconstruction policy, ousting the last radical Republicans from the South) when the "great and terrible theme" of slavery, which had "found no immediate counterpart when blacks were freed," is resurrected under the sign of Jim Crow.[152] Gates's "paradox" of black intellectual history can be defined as the curious fact that overt political gains against racism seem to force racial aesthetics underground, at least until these gains themselves are sufficiently reversed or negated to allow literary questions to surface anew.

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[150] Steven G. Laitz, *The Complete Musician* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 2008), 96.

[151] Gates's rather cursory dismissal of the political gains of Reconstruction find their own counterpoint in Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction*, discussed in a previous chapter. This is a text whose purpose is precisely to demonstrate Reconstruction's thwarted place in democratic history and to establish the role of "black folk" therein. As Du Bois puts it in his note to the reader: "Particularly interesting for students of human culture is the sudden freeing of these black folk in the Nineteenth Century and the attempt, *through them*, to reconstruct the basis of American democracy (1).

[152] Larry Neal, one of the founders of the Black Arts movement, also compares the political climate of Black Arts to the post-bellum period Gates describes, and specifies the debate between Booker T. Washington and Du Bois over African American education, as well as the conflict between Du Bois and Marcus Garvey, as pretext to the debates of the 1960s over the global significance of African Americans' struggles. Amid the lastingness of what, in a misquote of Du Bois, he calls, "the double consciousness," Neal insists that "the rebirth of the concept of Black Power opens old wounds," and that the medicine to heal these wounds is in Black Power as "a synthesis of all of the nationalistic ideas embedded within the double consciousness of black America" ("And Shine Swam On," *Dreams of a Liberated Future* [New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1989], 10 & 14). Malcolm X is, for Neal, examplar of a desired " 'New Breed'" capable of "defining itself through actions, be they artistic or political" (14).

And yet Gates's "paradox" need not announce this sort of ultimatum between black politics and art. Rather, taking Douglass's representative and reproducible image as a clue (and recalling even *Cane*'s enjambment of racial theme and modernist technique), we can also approach this contrapuntal structure between politics and culture as a dialectical relation of *mutual exposure* (rather than mutual exclusion). That is to say, art and politics depend upon an alternating illegibility. This, indeed, is the formula for Douglass's inhabitation of the "non-place" of his exemplarity as a New Negro. Douglass's speech resounds precisely insofar as it has been silenced, his freedom is celebrated (and haunted) for having been enslaved. What we might call this spectral aesthetic consists in polarizing—and in this way, exhibiting—the political past. Put in slightly different terms, what determines Douglass's political function is the *image* of a past which has not been made perceptible until *now* in the form of his highly stylized and reproducible image. Douglass's style or aesthetic—like that of Du Bois and Locke after him—assumes a spectacular character by indexing a spectral oppression.[153] But in just this way, his blackness does not delay political action; rather, it *halts* the very process by which one "case" for blackness would be seen to take place by means of the other's suppression. Gates's "paradox" can be, if not resolved, then at least illuminated by this logic of double-consciousness in which the unitary appearance of race is shown to be drawn between two poles: the aesthetic and the political. Like the relation of black face and black soul, however, the two are not separate and awaiting reuniting, but distinct precisely insofar as inseparable.

[153] If, as Giorgio Agamben has written, "the perfect comprehension of a phenomenon is its parody," George Schuyler gets this paradox just right when, in his send-up of the NAACP in *Black No More* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2011), he writes that "While the large staff of officials was eager to end all oppression and persecution of the Negro, they were never so happy and excited as when a Negro was barred from a theater or fried to a crisp. Then they would leap for telephones, grab telegraph pads and yell for stenographers; smiling through their simulated indignation at the spectacle of another reason for their continued existence and appeal for funds" (53).

Gates remains trapped within the paradox he identifies, nevertheless, because he insists on the opinion that a choice between art and politics is necessary, that politics should come first, and that a decision on this matter pertains, in particular, to appropriating "the black voice." At a critical moment in his essay, he mentions two treatises by a black artist, John Henry Adams, on the physiognomy of the "New Negro," published more than twenty years before Locke's anthology. In 1902, a "Study of the Features of the New Negro Woman" appeared in the *Voice of the Negro*, complete with "images of seven ideal New Negro women so that other women might pattern themselves after the prototype" (142); two years later, an equally idealized counterpart followed on the Negro male, complete with another seven portraits "so that all might be able to recognize him" (143). Gates argues that Adams's studies posit "a correlation between the specific *characteristics* of the individuals depicted and the larger *character* of the race" (143). We might equally note that the "case" of blackness, here, operates according to a logic of exemplarity: the portraits are neither literal, nor legal cases, but visual "case studies." Thus, racial "character" and physical "characteristics"—black soul and black face—announce themselves in the portraits as polarities of *the same thing*. Not unlike those *Pathosformeln* that Aby Warburg was compiling around the same time, these images are crystallizations of an ensemble of features that, in combination, become iconic of a tradition.[154] No sooner does Gates touch upon this iconic quality of racial exemplarity, however, than he translates it back into the problematic of racial voice and signification: "While this concern with features would imply a visual or facial priority of concern," he writes, "it was, rather, the precise structure and resonance of the black *voice* by which the very *face* of the race would be known and fundamentally reconstructed" (143, Gates's emphasis). This is an abrupt and rather remarkable statement, for it

[154] For more on Warburg's significance to the construction of "tradition" in a number of disciplinary fields, see Colleen Becker, "Aby Warburg's Pathosformel as Methodological Paradigm" (*Journal of Art Historiography* 9 [Dec. 2013]): 1-25.

renders the racial "face" secondary to the signifying—and for Gates, reconstructive—powers of the black *voice*. The complexity of this figure leads us back to the problem of blackface and minstrelsy, wherein the black voice speaks in a black tongue, but mostly about (and to) whites. It also recapitulates the double-bind regarding the capitalization of "Negro" in which Du Bois found himself enmeshed with the editors of the Encyclopedia Britannica: here again, the representation of blackness must, to remain a representation, mute its voice, while the voice of blackness, to remain a voice, must say nothing but show its black face.

The lasting power of Frederick Douglass consists in suspending both of these alternatives by mobilizing the reproducibility of his *image*, by rendering his face typical and, as it were, a typeface. At the limit, then, Douglass is not unlike one of Adams's seven portraits—eminently recognizable, but for the same reason, starkly anonymous. Gates appears either hesitant or uninterested in this affinity, though it raises its own version of Du Bois's unasked question, Locke's "changeling," and Toomer's labor in anonymity as a copyist: in what ways is a black face or typeface, as inverse or obverse to the black voice, able *not to speak*? And what kind of power or *Gewalt* does this face constitute, which shows itself but says nothing?[155]

[155] Fred Moten's "Case of Blackness" is a reconceptualization not of blackness itself but, *with* blackness, of case. Moten's article attempts to situate "case" in the break between two categories named – or rather mistranslated—from Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*: the fact of blackness and its lived experience. Moten is interested in their disjuncture insofar as facticity is aligned, for Fanon, with objecthood, and lived experience with the phenomenology of modern subjectivity. If the modern subject "is," as Moten puts it, "in that he knows, regulates, but cannot be black" the problem of a black phenomenology grows acute. What is the status of the fact/experience of blackness, and what is the bar between these terms but an announcement of the "case" of blackness itself? Moten opens the case by reopening one that the philosophical discourse of objects, from Kant to Fanon, has closed: namely, the difference between things and objects. Reconstructing Heidegger's distinction of *Dinge* from *Sache*, Moten emphasizes the extent to which "things" are not equivalent to "objects" (as always already known and within the field of representation), but rather constitute the "contested matter" that warrant a gathering. Things are not what is gathered, then, but are themselves the prompting and peculiar calling out for a hearing of matter. Heidegger's exemplary "thing" is a jug, whose madeness as a container, as that which might pour forth from itself, is a fullness without presence. Thus wherever there is a privative sense of beings without their absence, and wherever there is what Heidegger calls "presencing"—as opposed to presence—there is a thing. In a similar space, Moten wishes to reinscribe—or indeed, to shift

The double illegibility of race and literature in Toomer's archival copies of Gurdjieff, like the double illegibility of slavery and style in Douglass, or the illegibility of the two capital "N"s in Locke's "New Negro," are, I have been suggesting, indexes of a racialized use of language without appropriation, an exhibition of the power of "racial composition"—in the senses both of *poiesis* and *ēthos*—in the act of self-suspension. The question now is whether this suspension of blackness as a property is also an abrogation of black radicalism or if, rather, its most fundamental and urgent task.

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the case—of the ontological difference between Being and beings so that it might correspond with the difference between black objectification and the thing of blackness, its case. I will not attempt here to recapture the subtleties, boldness, and scope of Moten's essay, but only draw attention to Moten' precise conceptualization of fugitivity as an extreme, if volatile, proximity to "case" (in both its pathological and legal senses). Fugitivity and case are kith and kin to the double illegibilities that I theorize above as non-signifying forms of black resistance.

CONCLUSION: AFTER-THOUGHT

"We must desediment the dissimulation of a war."

– Nahum Dimitri Chandler, *X—The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought*[156]

"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

--King James translation, Mark 12:17.

1.

Esoteric black radicalism has not always appeared under its own name in the preceding pages, and perhaps that is only right. Yet it has emerged under a specific, recurring alias: in Du Bois's work as the formulation of a counterphenomenology of Spirit, in Ellison's thought as the production of counterinvisibility, and in Toomer's archive as the labor of countersignature. Thus the notion of "countering" has announced itself as a problem for thought, one that we can now situate with regard to blackness, radicalism, and the esoteric principle by which I have been claiming they are linked in their modernist articulation.[157]

[156] Nahum Dimitri Chandler, *X – The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* (New York: Fordham U P, 2013), 1. Hereafter cited in the text as X.

[157] One ongoing question is how an esoteric black radical tradition relates to other articulations of the African American tradition, from Henry Louis Gates, Jr. to Houston Baker, to detractors of such a tradition such as Kenneth Warren. The esoteric—as a function of immanence, and indeed of excessive intimacy, as I will describe it above—is hardly limited to the early twentieth century, though it may be that modernist techniques enact it most emphatically. While beyond the scope of the current project, it is worth investigating further, first, how a modernist preoccupation with obscurity and fragmentation themselves become the object of a political rearticulation, by black authors; and second, how a rearticulation of (and relation to) the unsaid, in various guises, can constitute a new basis upon which to imagine the African American tradition.

To "counter"—or *a* counter, in its nominalized form—is, by definition, a form of agonism or antagonism, derived from the Latin "contra," meaning to oppose, to come from the opposite side. The OED's explanation of the term's etymology also remarks that as a "living element of the language, capable of entering into combinations even with words of Germanic origin," the word "counter" "may be prefixed, when required, to almost any substantive expressing action…or even to any word in which action or incidence is imputed…. Hence it is often viewed as an independent element, written separately, and practically treated as an adjective…." (OED). This adjectival function, entailing its own discursive manner of en-counter, remains a prefix to the extent that it remains unfixed as such, subject to fugitive formations and unforeseen couplings. Wherever the "counter" lands, then, it does so in a dimension of discursive historicity as a "living element of the language," not unlike a pronoun or deictic. The function of countering is, therefore, to reveal the density and texture of a historical enunciation, to indicate the threshold of its facticity without thereby stabilizing its limit.

Having implied that one task, perhaps the primary task, of esoteric black radicalism is that of countering, I have wished to suggest that the historico-discursive threshold it reaches, marks, exposes; that it frustrates or opposes; that it touches and diverts, (and, as a prefix, always too early) is that of *whiteness*. James Baldwin begins his late essay "On Being White…and Other Lies" with the axiom: "the crisis of leadership in the white community is remarkable—and terrifying—because there is, in fact, no white community."[158] Well aware of his "enormous statement," and "willing to be challenged" (167), Baldwin nevertheless states that it has been the very condition of black life to know whiteness in and as this crisis—that is, to know whiteness in

[158] James Baldwin, "On Being White…and Other Lies," *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings,* ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage International, 2010), 167. Hereafter cited in the text.

and as the very negativity that it imagines blackness to be.[159] "The country became white," Baldwin says of the United States, "because of the necessity of denying the black presence, and justifying the black subjugation. No community can be based on such a principle—or, in other words, no community can be established on so genocidal a lie" (167). While nothing of the history Baldwin repeats here is new, the difference he marks is this: a white *community* is impossible in just that proportion that it has wanted, regarded, and required the black community to be. Hence whiteness is a "lie" because its pretext of commonality—its reference to a group of people called "white"—is grounded only upon this historical legacy of *dissolving* social bonds. Conversely, the "truth" of whiteness—its historical legacy—manifests, in properly dialectical fashion, in the crisis that visibly, materially, befalls "blackness." And this, perhaps, is Baldwin's point: that to be "white" is to presuppose, indeed to *require*, that community itself not be. To mobilize such a genocidal assumption requires historical powers of erasure that are rendered all the more catastrophic for being disavowed as such.

Perhaps in this insight about whiteness can be glimpsed what, like countering itself, has been only implicit in the preceding discussion: that the position of blackness—philosophically, historically, and poetically—mirrors that of a whiteness whose very being is constituted within an economy of mutually compounding, and reciprocally effacing, forms of violence. Heeding Baldwin's suggestion, we can identify these forms of violence as follows: the physical violence of subjugating *others* and the metaphysical violence of *othering* itself. The former presupposes the latter inasmuch as othering reduces difference to *negativity*, and thereby relegates the other to

[159] More recently, Claudia Rankine has written that the "condition of black life is one of mourning." This is sentiment, with its emphasis upon the work of memory in grief, echoes and mirrors the condition of white life as one of dissimulated, self-forgetting warfare ("'The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning'" [*The New York Times Magazine* (June 22, 2015)]: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/22/magazine/the-condition-of-black-life-is-one-of-mourning.html.

a dimension of either thinghood or danger, "Nature" or evil, animality or criminality.[160] The result of this presupposition, in turn, is that any physical violence perpetrated against such an other is always already justified in the name of historical action or morality.

Yet this redoubling of invisible violence in white self-fabrication also implies, in illuminating relation to the analyses of the preceding dissertation, that the structure of whiteness, as an "identity" and lie, bears a symmetrically inverse structure to the "non-being" and truth of blackness. Indeed if, as we saw in chapter 1, double-consciousness is the "peculiar sensation" of witnessing the racialized self as always already *othered* (that is, as functioning under the sign of its erasure *as* a subject), this is because white subjectivity is structured around an experience of itself as always and everywhere the *same*, abiding in universal and apparently immemorial antithesis to what is *not* itself. And if the black self is privy to the "peculiar sensation" of "two-ness," this is as and because its white counterpart, in order to become white, has erected "peculiar institutions" that foreclose its violence from ever appearing *as violence* (for what can count as violence towards that which is always already negated?)[161]. Furthermore, such

[160] The racialization of crime and criminalization of race has most recently become a preoccupation for advocates of prison reform and abolition. The issue becomes unavoidable inasmuch as violence against those already condemned is legally defined as the "justice" part of "criminal-justice" policy. See Angela Davis's *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003) and more recently still, Ta-Nehisi Coates's "The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration" (*The Atlantic* [October 2015]): http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/10/the-black-family-in-the-age-of-mass-incarceration/403246/.

[161] While there is hardly space here, it is worth noting that the argument here regarding blackness as that which is always already negated, and hence disqualified from suffering the very violence of negation both recalls and complicates the structure of Marxian primitive accumulation. Marx famously writes that "primitive accumulation plays in Political Economy about the same part as original sin in theology," even while "in actual history it is notorious that conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, briefly force, play the great part" (Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1,* trans Ben Fowkes[New York: Penguin, 1990], 873). In this way, the original sin of primitive accumulation as the basis of private property is an allegory—a counterimage—of concrete historical violence. The transformation of money and commodities into capital itself historically depends, Marx says, upon free laborers. Yet, in the case of the black laborer who, as a slave, forms "part and parcel of the means of production," still another negation is presupposed: not that "complete separation of the labourers from all property in the means by which they can realize their labour"(874) but the separation of the laborer from the very status of laborer.

institutions—primary among which is the color-line itself—categorically define violence (define its *legibility*, that is) as something originating *from* the other as a threat to the same. Hence we grasp not only why Du Bois insists upon distinguishing double-consciousness from the Hegelian ideal of "true self-consciousness," but also why the latter has never pertained to white folk. For to the double-*consciousness* of the black world—a consciousness divided between the experience of *negation* (of "being a problem") and the experience of being *other than* negation (being *other than* this problem)—there historically corresponds not white plenitude but a white *double-unconscious*: an experience of *negating* (of doing violence) that undergoes its own cancellation in order to become the non-experience (and non-event) of encountering the other as always already negated. The history of modern race—which embeds the "genocidal lie" of white self-sameness or, in Nahum Chandler's words, the "self-repleteness…[of] an historical and social being supposedly arising of its own initiative, unmarked by any sign of difference"—is none other than the history of this double reduction of otherness to negativity and of violence to exteriority (X 121).

Here too, we glean an important vantage upon the preceding argument about black esotericism: to the extent that the country became "white" through the double tactic of subjecting African captives to the physical violence of forced labor and the metaphysical violence of being-effaced as the very subject of violence; and to the extent that African captives themselves became "Negro" on the very basis of this doubly-denied destruction, a powerful counter to the doctrine of whiteness announces itself in the almost simple fact that white and black "souls" are not opposed *substances*, but symmetrically inverse *relations* to the historical violence of slavery. In other words, slavery is truly a "peculiar institution," for it is not only the foundation of the transatlantic Cotton Kingdom and the modern global economy erected upon it; slavery is also the

basis, at every level of concreteness, for the structure of modern (racial) self-consciousness. Forged in the crucible of slavery's terror, the intimacy of white soul to black is that of metal to ore: both are the historical *precipitates* of a violent and intense trial of separation. But only whiteness—through a fictive strategy whose double erasure we've already described, but whose importance cannot be overstated—posits itself as having both *pre-existed* the procedure and *authored* the separation itself.

Baldwin's essay, almost simply, counters this double-effacement at the heart of whiteness by explaining that a history of the Western world which exposes the "genocidal lie" of whiteness would have also to make plain both the "bait" of self-repleteness and the "switch" of calling whiteness author and agent of the history of which it is, in truth, the effect. But this means, in turn, that a history of whiteness can only be penned by one who, like Baldwin, has been imperfectly annihilated by its lie. Which means, in turn and most importantly, that actually writing this history is less urgent a task than making very clear why and how the "white" world is categorically unfit to do so: because *whiteness, like any lie, cannot confess and remain itself*.

Thus we understand why Baldwin's statement about whiteness is indeed so "enormous": first, because it cites the modern world as one purchased in black blood (because it has also reduced blood to currency); second, because it affirms that an altogether *different* history of the present has yet to be written in the voices of those "many thousands gone"; third, and most explosively, because it proves that *for "white" people to avow the truth of this history would be to undergo their death as "white."*[162] Nothing is more fatal to the lie of whiteness than acknowledging the truth of historical blackness, since historical blackness reveals whiteness *as* a

[162] Chandler's argument about Du Bois's biography of John Brown runs somewhat parallel to my suggestions above. He claims that Du Bois, in redoubling Brown's historical death in the form of a narrative of his life, must also redouble the death of Brown as a white man, which was itself cause and precursor of his actual death. See *X*, pp. 112-128.

lie. And yet the inverse is also true: nothing but this blackness offers whiteness a chance for being and truth in the world, albeit one that can only be assumed under the sign of historical contradiction. For like any lie told as a lie, whiteness would have to be regarded as a myth, and thus as an allegory, not a representation, of history.

The modern world, in order no longer to lie, would have no longer to be "white." To become truth, whiteness would have to be read, to present itself, as an allegory and the abstract inversion, as a *counterimage*, of the concrete history of the modern globe.

And yet as long as whiteness remains in tact and efficacious as a lie, the mode of history and thought that Baldwin describes remains *radically illegible*, sworn to a secrecy exactly as profound as whiteness itself is insubstantial. Put more crudely, so long as there is whiteness, historical blackness remains the secret truth at its root: *esoteric, black*, and *radical.*

In operating from such an uncanny, heterotopic space, and doing so strategically, Baldwin's essay joins the other writers discussed in these pages as both practitioner and exemplar of esoteric black radicalism. Indeed, his essay elucidates a fundamental principle of this radicalism insofar as its concern is less to articulate *what* has been struck from the historical record than to show *why* and *how* it has been erased, unwritten, and why such erasure is neither simple (because, as we have seen, it is always already double) nor simply remediated (because calling it out only enables it to be negated, as an object, in turn). Baldwin's task, like that of Du Bois, Ellison, and Toomer before him, is rather to describe and enact the force-field that structures, but remains invisible within, modern consciousness. Much of this task, in other words, has involved demonstrating how whiteness's *double-unconscious* is more essential, more primordial, and more fundamental to the record of Western modernity than any accounts of

origins and foundations found within its own discourses (including, as I have suggested, the accounts of Hegel, Heidegger, and to a lesser extent, Freud).

It is here that the work of Giorgio Agamben emerges in its singular affinity both to the mode of thought that I have sought to identify in Du Bois, Ellison, and Toomer, and to the critical method that I have attempted, throughout this discussion, to practice. For I have been suggesting that the role of blackness in modernity, which is at once fundamental and invisible, must rigorously be thought of in relation to Hegel's dialectical construction of negativity on the one hand and Heidegger's question of Being on the other. Both of these philosophical formulations, as Agamben points out as early as *Language and Death*, attest to the grounding of Western metaphysics in a fundamental negativity. Agamben's invaluable suggestion in that 1978 work, however, is that negativity itself need not be understood as the ineffable presupposition of all being and all phenomena; indeed, it need not be understood as negativity at all, but rather as an eminently historical thing: the taking-place of language (for the taking-place of language is not presupposed in every utterance, but rather exposed by it). Thus within the unsublated negativity with which Hegel aligns the Negro, and the immemorial invisibility of Being to which Heidegger consigns all phenomena of difference, the illegibility of blackness is not concealed, but exhibitively takes place. Furthermore, if the negative construction of blackness in the West replicates the presuppositional logic of metaphysics that Agamben's work abidingly critiques, perhaps the historicity of blackness and its immanent illegibility to metaphysics also take place in and as a luminous elision. I have thus sought to elaborate and extend Agamben's gesture of transposing negativity into a problem of the historicity of language and Being by looking at a specific history and a specific being: that of white modernity. White modernity assumes that blackness is the condition of modern knowledge, being, and presence because it has *always*

already been there as an absence, as the *gramma* of which white *logos* is made. Metaphysics thus becomes, like the lie of whiteness it underwrites, a nihilistic and genocidal system. On the contrary, an esoteric reading of blackness understands negativity to be countered in the historicity of negation itself; for, in contrast to an immemorial *letheia*, blackness announces itself as the very event of modern thought and language. The nihilism of philosophy thus becomes the esotericism of history. By affirming the place of blackness as a constitutive esotericism within modernity, I have wished to suggest that blackness turns the key of historicity, that it is not merely erased in and by "white" modernity, but that it also shapes, plots, and defines the modern world *as and because* it is unreadable. Mutinously mute, the techniques of illegibility discussed in the previous chapters exemplify responses from *within* the space of negativity, which render it other than itself: which render it *counternegativity*.

Counternegativity, indeed, is a way of telling the lie of whiteness as a lie. But what is a lie told as such? This is a question of and for literature. Specifically, it is a question for literary language as a language that shows itself as such, and so shows language such as it is. The virtue of Du Bois's, or Ellison's, or Baldwin's turn to the essay form, in particular, is the manner in which the latter can play the part of philosophy and adhere to its dictates, but only in a masquerade of servility. Hence the literary simultaneously recapitulates philosophy and suspends its autonomy, or separateness, from language as a medium; it cites the sayability of philosophy, thereby revealing *in* philosophy a potentiality that is neither exhausted in, nor reducible to any of its particular or actualized enunciations. Philosophy, as an exploration of truth and consciousness of the world thus finds its counter, its counter-alternative, in the mirror held up to its language by literature. Literary language, in other words, shows philosophy the secret or esoteric radical of its historicity, proving language excessively intimate to any assertion *about* language. But this is

just another way of saying that to traffick, as the works here have, in literary language, is to tell lies as lies, *systematically*—that is, to see the emptiness of a lie's truth as the fullness of its langauge. Esoteric black radicalism, especially in its modernist iteration, operates by filling white language and the white mind to the brim with the emptiness of white philosophy.

Hence the philosophical focus of the preceding dissertation has attempted to demonstrate where and how revisiting the white world in its various modes of *self-reflexivity* from a black perspective reveals how it is structured by a double-unconscious, and how this metaphysical double-unconscious involves the cancellation of negation—including the negation of linguistic reference itself—as a historical act. And what I have sought to show through the lens of esoteric black radicalism is this: that modern, philosophical self-reflexivity sustains at its root and as its radical a historical violence that it not only disavows, but in whose black hands it has already been overturned.

2.

Thus esoteric black radicalism counters both the construction of blackness as negativity—as the *object* of historical action—and the reduction of black *objections* to such negation as appeals to white sameness. It counters the construction of whiteness with the history of the very logic that Europeans, in order to become white, have had to posit as immemorial, ultra- or pre-historical—in a word, as *metaphysical*. Indeed, insofar as the principle of negating otherness has, at least from Hegel onward, furnished the groundwork of Western metaphysics and provided the white world with a concept both of its self *and* of the *other* upon whose negation are staked historical progress and becoming, the argument of esoteric black radicalism can be seen to call metaphysics what it is: a "genocidal lie" intimately bound to the historical fabrication called “whiteness”—and just as impermanent. Its double-counter can be seen not

only to utter the secret name of modern philosophical thought—"whiteness"—but also, in doing so, to halt the metaphysical machine by which it spins the straw of difference into the gold of becoming.

I would like to propose, then, that a second level of significance associated with the problematic of esoteric black radicalism is that it constitutes a distinctly African American "dialectic of modernity" whose historical movement, like Baldwin's counter-fairytale of the white world, is one of *counter-alterity*. By counter-alterity, I mean a positionality, both politically and philosophically, that is *neither other nor not other*, and *neither the same nor not the same* as the West or the white world. And this is because counter-alterity, to invoke Ellison, is "never quite on the beat" of world-history, and hence does not settle into the dichotomous, limited and limiting framework of self and other, past and present. Instead, counter-alterity steps into the *chronometry* of white consciousness, that is, into the very time it takes whiteness to represent and appropriate history as its *own*. Such syncopation is possible (again, almost simply) because counter-alterity transposes dualistic concepts of self and other, identity and difference, Being and nothingness, whiteness and blackness, onto a plane of immanence. In a manner once again reminiscent of Fred Moten's syntagm, "not but nothing other than," counter-alterity confounds historically produced (and institutionally sanctioned) contraries by identifying the violent history of which they are each the effect. Thus as an analytic, counter-alterity identifies the insubstantiality of the white world with the very negativity to which it has reduced "Africa" and "the Negro," while simultaneously asserting blackness as something other than a placeholder for negation. Negativity, in the context of counter-alterity and esoteric black radicalism, is transposed into an altogether novel region: that of historical *potentiality*. Again, this is why Giorgio Agamben's work has proven indispensable to this project.

In any case, we might pause here to note that esoteric black radicalism has served (or perhaps more honestly, morphed) in these pages into an implicit heading for numerous gestures of counter-alterity. These gestures, in turn, have traced a philosophical problematic and raised with varying degrees of explicitness a post-, or perhaps, counter-Hegelian question: What can otherness be when it is other than the negativity of historical becoming? And what, indeed, *has* otherness, in the midst of its nihilistic reduction, already *been*?

Having traced double-consciousness in its dialectical, ontological, and ethopoietic modalities in the preceding pages, I would like to suggest, now, that Du Bois's notion of double-consciousness responds to the question—what *other than* negativity is modern blackness?—by configuring the very discourse in which such a question can be posed. Indeed, if we now reflect upon double-consciousness as a counter to the white double-unconscious, we can see that its primary intervention is to redefine negation from what metaphysics calls the *ground* of history to an *event* within it. Thus, for instance, Du Bois will openly muse that "the discovery of personal whiteness among the world's peoples is a very modern thing—a nineteenth and twentieth century matter, indeed" (*Darkwater* 15), and not stop there—adding (in terms that recall the first framing of double-consciousness in *Souls*): "here is a civilization that has boasted much. Neither the Roman nor Arab, Greek nor Egyptian, Persian nor Mongol ever took himself and his own perfectness with such disconcerting seriousness as the modern white man" (17). Likewise, Jean Toomer, in a manner as implicit as Du Bois's remark is explicit, will claim to "determine" his own "racial composition" to the chagrin of both publishers and later critics. And yet Toomer's gesture, like Du Bois's statement, does nothing but dispute the white monopoly upon self-determination, as if self-determination as anything *but* white were both logically impossible and politically irresponsible. Double-consciousness, in both cases, counters the reduction of non-

whiteness to the negative poles of nature and danger. And Du Bois's evocation of whiteness as "a very modern thing," like Toomer's consigning of race to the discretion of autobiography, does not attempt to reconcile otherness with negativity, but rather to affirm the incongruity and tension between these two categories as the source of a specifically racial potentiality.

This tension between difference and negation, I have suggested, (rather than the spatiality of the color-line, which mystifies it, or the logico-legal technology of compromise, which defers its moment of effectiveness) makes double-consciousness a powerful epistemic and poetic paradigm. Indeed, it is this paradigm that I have sought to trace through Du Bois's systematic development of a new historiography and counterphenomenology of spirit. It is the specifically philosophical potency of such a paradigm that I've sought to elaborate in Ellison's racial redefinition of ontological invisibility. And it is the poetic potentiality to *not* write that I have woven through an analysis of Toomer's illegibility, from his punning upon "racial composition" to his archival turn as a scrivener. Like Du Bois's transformation of the hyphen of double-consciousness—a diacritical mark that exhibits a disavowed and unavowable form of the dialectic—illegibility or esotericism in the previous pages has been a counter to the structures of negativity by which blackness is otherwise overdetermined, destined to the underground of being where it is both overseen and overlooked.

An insistence upon the incommensurability between difference and negation is also evident in chapter 2's hypothesis that double-consciousness constitutes the blueprint for a new practice of theory at every level of generality, including the most primordial. Indeed, double-consciousness as a difference internal to *thinking* allows Ellison's to take Heidegger's "fundamental ground" *underground*, and to parody its clearing [*Lichtung*] of Being until transparency gains the density of invisibility and illumination that of glare. The attrition of

ontological logic implied in Ellison's work, in the overt secrecy of his plot and narrative, puts the negative ground of metaphysics—including Heidegger's "post-metaphysical" concept of Being—to the test of a new discursive (and novelistic) use. In a very concrete sense, Ellison produces a counter to the negative ground of Being, which he exemplifies in the very *event* of his narrative, and in its *transmissibility* upon the "lower frequencies."

In chapter 3, the guises of counter-alterity varied from *Cane*'s insistence upon the incommensurability of aesthetics and history—through forms of narrative enjambment—to the fundamentally conjoined illegibilities of race and literature in the archive. Most significant to the theory of esoteric black radicalism elaborated here is Toomer's manner of reoccupying the site of the negated—which in his case is that of the negated *Negro poet*—and yet to reclaim this position as one of ethical practice and study.

3.

Articulating a "counter-altern" mode of theory, as well as insisting upon a certain irreducibility of the esoteric, promises to place works of the African American canon, especially black modernism, in fruitful dialogue with other discourses seeking to contest the hegemony of whiteness. Counter-alterity betrays, most immediately, its affinity and kinship with the concept of "subalternity" or "subalterity" that has preoccupied much of postcolonial theory. And while it is beyond the scope of this project to fully elaborate what history "from below" has to do with an "underground" history and poetics in the context of African America, it is nevertheless worth asking how each field imagines the possibilities of insurgency, including the ways rising up must always take place, also, "from within."

In this sense, esoteric black radicalism can be seen, from a number of disciplinary and theoretical vantage points, to be a rethinking of the relation between immanent critique and the

ethics of alterity. A philosopher such as Mari Ruti, for instance, has recently posited the need for an ethics that can both navigate and inhabit the space "between Levinas and Lacan." This is because, as she writes in the preface to her book by that name, "If Levinas views the other as a site of unconditional ethical accountability, Lacan is interested in the subject's capacity to dissociate itself from the (often coercive) desire of the other—whether the big Other of symbolic law or more particular others who, for the subject, embody this law."[163] Now, the Lacanian approach has, in the context of histories of the oppressed, whether feminist, post-colonial, or Marxist, been a sort of default for critique, simply because any violence done against the oppressor is understood, rightly, to be a counter to and an exhibition of oppression itself. It is also the case that a dialectical history of violence will affirm that violence at the hands of the oppressed makes visible the invisible violence already in the hands of the oppressor. (This is why it is indispensable, to any critique of white supremacy, for instance, to revisit the hegemony of the *norm* of whiteness, or what earlier, citing Chandler, I referred to as its bait of "self-repleteness.") Yet to stop here—to stop with contestation, with a counter, and not to ask, in turn, what forms of alterity are being constructed anew in the very work of retaliating or resisting—is to obscure, and miss, an opportunity for ethics and even what someone like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick might call the "reparative." And it is also to entirely elide and ignore what Levinas was trying to tell us.

This raises the pressing, but often elusive question: what is the relationship between alterity, an ethics of repair, and (especially resonant to black history) the case for reparations? One answer—which is less an answer than a reframing of the question—is that reparation looks very different depending on which side of historical violence you are standing on. If you are—or have believed yourself to be—"white," this means admitting your complicity in a genocidal lie

[163] Mari Ruti, *Between Levinas and Lacan: Self, Other, Ethics* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 3.

still very much with us, and one upon which the livelihood of many still actively depends. It also means reading the existing world, as mentioned before, allegorically and dialectically—that is, as a counterimage to its constitutive violence. To begin any gesture of reparation, the "white" world—those in power—must acknowledge the extent to which, in both the past and the present, the coherence of this power depends upon actively, institutionally *impairing* that which ought to be *repaired*. And yet, as I have been suggesting, and as becomes astonishingly clear in Baldwin's essay, for whiteness to avow its lie is to cease to *be* what it is. An admission is a performative of the highest order, for it amounts, in this case, to an *abolition* of whiteness.[164]

But if an admission to whiteness as a lie liquidates its claims to truth, blackness, too, must be redefined. The virtue of double-consciousness as a conceptuality is the way it enables an equipoise between occupying the position of the other-qua-negated and the position of an other to this other—the position of counter-alterity. This resource of counter-alterity is the one I have meant to recover and foreground, to position as a way of rejecting the negation of the other without doing so in turn. For if only the Lacanian model is embraced—or, to be more specific, if resisting or dissociating from the Other is not conceived dialectically as an action affecting both sides—it is easy to fall into the trap of a double-unconscious, wherein violence is consigned to exteriority and thus always already justified as a response. We might view Du Boisian double-consciousness, then, as a way of keeping in tact the Levinasian critique of ontology as "egology," or worship of the Same, while also refining what "infinite accountability" means in the context of an Other who has been violent, coercive, and a liar.

For this reason, I have suggested that we regard "double-consciousness" neither as psychology, nor history, nor yet as philosophy, but rather as an *esoteric* gesture within each; that

[164] For an illuminating account on the racial aporias of working class history, see David R. Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness* (New York: Verso, 1994).

we glimpse its function, consequently, as that of marking an *internal difference* within the metaphysics in which it already moves. "Woven of the very warp and woof" of metaphysical thought, as Du Bois might say,[165] black thought is no less inextricable from the thinking of modernity than black life is from modernity. "Of them I am singularly clairvoyant," Du Bois says of whites in "The Souls of White Folks"; "I see in and through them. I view them from unusual points of vantage. Not as a foreigner do I come, for I am native, not foreign, bone of their thought and flesh of their language."[166] To begin to think from the "flesh of their language" and the "bone of their thought" is not merely the political, but also the ethical task of counter-alterity.

4.

As with "counter," a glimpse into the etymology and function of "esoteric" can also shed light on the current problematic. The word "esoteric" derives from the Greek *ἐσωτερικός*, which has been translated as "belonging to an inner circle." However, the prefix, "eso," means "within," and "esoteros," which bears the addition of the comparative adverb, means "*more* within." Esoteric, then, is the knowledge of an *excessive intimacy*. This is the kind of knowledge Du Bois avows when he says of white folk: "I see these souls undressed and from the back and side. I see the working of their entrails. I know their thoughts and they know that I know. This knowledge makes them now embarrassed, now furious! They deny my right to live and be and call me misbirth!...And yet as they preach and strut and shout and threaten, crouching as they

[165] As Du Bois writes in the final chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk,* "Nor has our gift of the Spirit been merely passive. Actively we have woven ourselves with the very warp and woof of this nation,—we fought their battles, shared their sorrow, mingled our blood with theirs, and generation after generation have pleaded with a headstrong, careless people to despise not Justice, Mercy, and Truth, lest the nation be smitten with a curse. Our song, our toil, our cheer, and warning have been given to this nation in blood-brotherhood. Are not these gifts worth the giving? Is not this work and striving? Would America have been America without her Negro people?″ (545).

[166] W.E.B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil, The Oxford W.E.B. Du Bois,* ed. Henry Louis Gates. Jr. (Oxford: Oxford U P, 2007), 15.

clutch at rags of facts and fancies to hide their nakedness, they go twisting, flying by my tired eyes, and I see them ever stripped—ugly, human" (15). This knowledge is "more within" than any assertion of closeness, or even of what Johannes Fabian calls the "co-eval," can avow. For it is a knowledge not only of the tremendous violence the oppressors do, but also of the profound fear and frailty, the "rags of fact and fancy," with which they try, in vain and with blood, to "hide their nakedness."

What remains esoteric about double-consciousness is this *interiority to* and *indissolubility from* the double-unconscious of whiteness. It has the singular virtue of enabling us to glimpse the violence of othering while also making it possible to experience, the transformation that attends being negated, being "known," as a phenomenon, or perhaps, a counter-phenomenon to negation itself. In this way, double-consciousness equips the black soul with knowledge of whiteness as a lie, and thereby allows it become doubly-attuned to its fate, *dividing itself from itself* in a gesture that alienates what can never be other, and integrates what can never be the same. Du Bois's hyphen is the diacritical signature of this act, a line drawn in the sand not to impede white violence so much as to prefix it, to give whiteness its crisis back. Hence a final aim of the preceding has been to clarify and elaborate upon this return—which, to be clear, is not a return *of* the repressed, but a return *by* the oppressed, *to* the oppressor, of phantoms belonging properly to him.

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