

*Code Switch: Distributing Blackness, Reprogramming Internet Art*  
May 2–August 10, 2025 @ Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD)  
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July 29, 1979

# If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?

By JAMES BALDWIN

**S**t. Paul de Vence, France--The argument concerning the use, or the status, or the reality, of black English is rooted in American history and has absolutely nothing to do with the question the argument supposes itself to be posing. The argument has nothing to do with language itself but with the *role* of language. Language, incontestably, reveals the speaker. Language, also, far more dubiously, is meant to define the other--and, in this case, the other is refusing to be defined by a language that has never been able to recognize him.

People evolve a language in order to describe and thus control their circumstances, or in order not to be submerged by a reality that they cannot articulate. (And, if they cannot articulate it, they *are* submerged.) A Frenchman living in Paris speaks a subtly and crucially different language from that of the man living in Marseilles; neither sounds very much like a man living in Quebec; and they would all have great difficulty in apprehending what the man from Guadeloupe, or Martinique, is saying, to say nothing of the man from Senegal--although the "common" language of all these areas is French. But each has paid, and is paying, a different price for this "common" language, in which, as it turns out, they are not saying, and cannot be saying, the same things: They each have very different realities to articulate, or control.

What joins all languages, and all men, is the necessity to confront life, in order, not inconceivably, to outwit death: The price for this is the acceptance, and achievement, of one's temporal identity. So that, for example, thought it is not taught in the schools (and this has the potential of becoming a political issue) the south of France still clings to its ancient and musical Provençal, which resists being described as a "dialect." And much of the tension in the Basque countries, and in Wales, is due to the Basque and Welsh determination not to allow their languages to be destroyed. This determination also feeds the flames in Ireland for many indignities the Irish have been forced to undergo at English hands is the English contempt for their language.

It goes without saying, then, that language is also a political instrument, means, and proof of power. It is the most vivid and crucial key to identity: It reveals the private identity, and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger, public, or communal identity. There have been, and are, times, and places, when to speak a certain language could be dangerous, even fatal. Or, one may speak the same language, but in such a way that one's antecedents are revealed, or (one hopes) hidden. This is true in France, and is absolutely true in England: The range (and reign) of accents on that damp little island make England coherent for the English and totally incomprehensible for everyone else. To open your mouth in England is (if I may use black English) to "put your business in the street": You have confessed your parents, your youth, your school, your salary, your self-esteem, and, alas, your future.

Now, I do not know what white Americans would sound like if there had never been any black people in the United States, but they would not sound the way they sound. *Jazz*, for example, is a very specific sexual term, as in *jazz me, baby*, but white people purified it into the Jazz Age. *Sock it to me*, which means, roughly, the same thing, has been adopted by Nathaniel Hawthorne's descendants with no qualms or hesitations at all, along with *let it all hang out* and *right on! Beat to his socks* which was once the black's most total and despairing image of poverty, was transformed into a thing called the Beat Generation, which phenomenon was, largely, composed of *uptight*, middle-class white people, imitating poverty, trying to *get down*, to get *with it*, doing their *thing*, doing their despairing best to be *funky*, which we, the blacks, never dreamed of doing--we *were* funky, baby, like *funk* was going out of style.

Now, no one can eat his cake, and have it, too, and it is late in the day to attempt to penalize black people for having created a language that permits the nation its only glimpse of reality, a language without which the nation would be even more *whipped* than it is.

I say that the present skirmish is rooted in American history, and it is. Black English is the creation of the black diaspora. Blacks came to the United States chained to each other, but from different tribes: Neither could speak the other's language. If two black people, at that bitter hour of the world's history, had been able to speak to each other, the institution of chattel slavery could never have lasted as long as it did. Subsequently, the slave was given, under the eye, and the gun, of his master, Congo Square, and the Bible--or in other words, and under these conditions, the slave began the formation of the black church, and it is within this unprecedented tabernacle that black English began to be formed. This was not, merely, as in the European example, the adoption of a foreign tongue, but an alchemy that transformed ancient elements into a new language: *A language comes into existence by means of brutal necessity, and the rules of the language are dictated by what the language must convey.*

There was a moment, in time, and in this place, when my brother, or my mother, or my father, or my sister, had to convey to me, for example, the danger in which I was standing from the white man standing just behind me, and to convey this with a speed, and in a language, that the white man could not possibly understand, and that, indeed, he cannot understand, until today. He cannot afford to understand it. This understanding would reveal to him too much about himself, and smash that mirror before which he has been frozen for so long.

Now, if this passion, this skill, this (to quote Toni Morrison) "sheer intelligence," this incredible music, the mighty achievement of having brought a people utterly unknown to, or despised by "history"--to have brought this people to their present, troubled, troubling, and unassailable and unanswerable place--if this absolutely unprecedented journey does not indicate that black English is a language, I am curious to know what definition of language is to be trusted.

A people at the center of the Western world, and in the midst of so hostile a population, has not endured and transcended by means of what is patronizingly called a "dialect." We, the blacks, are in trouble, certainly, but we are not doomed, and we are not inarticulate because we are not compelled to defend a morality that we know to be a lie.

The brutal truth is that the bulk of white people in American never had any interest in educating black people, except as this could serve white purposes. It is not the black child's language that is in question, it is not his language that is despised: It is his experience. A child cannot be taught by anyone who despises him, and a child cannot afford to be fooled. A child cannot be taught by anyone whose demand, essentially, is that the child repudiate his experience, and all that gives him sustenance, and enter a limbo in which he will no longer be black, and in which he knows that he can never become white. Black people have lost too many black children that way.

And, after all, finally, in a country with standards so untrustworthy, a country that makes heroes of so many criminal mediocrities, a country unable to face why so many of the nonwhite are in prison, or on the needle, or standing, futureless, in the streets--it may very well be that both the child, and his elder, have concluded that they have nothing whatever to learn from the people of a country that has managed to learn so little.

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ECHOES OF A TUMBLING THRONE (ODAS AL FIN DE LOS TIEMPOS) LIVEL #8:  
**COOERPOH A COOERPOH**

SCRIPT~GUIÓN  
**SOFÍA CÓRDOVA**

**BARRIGAN AYUNO:**  
00:00:20:01 - 00:00:22:09

I am Barrigan Ayuno  
The year is 3616.  
A thousand years since the end of la epoca crema  
the saiborg 8ge and the beginning of WEN OVEUN.

Humans of wealth became one with the cyborg  
becoming in turn spiritual machines and  
making the Singularity fact.

After reigning as gods for five centuries following this event  
while the trench between these cyber gods  
and the poor of the world grew even larger  
the deeloovio of 2616  
came and washed it all  
away, went and left the earth dry.

No digital infrastructure,  
no net of belonging,  
no reaching out across the Wi-Fi airwaves.

To touch somebody.

Once a man, RayKay\_16, is now machine  
immortal in data, immortal in body but decaying.

Soon, he will stop being able to move.  
His core nuclear reactor mini model,  
the one that kept away the wasteland  
scavengers who feared scrapping him  
should this result in their irradiation,  
will meltdown soon  
fixing him to a single point  
on the face of LA TIERRA. Forever,

The prince of the Singularity.

He searches endlessly for ways to garner the prize  
to be able to buy a NuBodi  
Those who can pay can transfer bodies  
again to those impoverished

irradiated laborers in La Joongla  
who give up their bodies as a tribute  
to the northern gods in the hopes  
to buy freedom for their families.

Abandoning their cybernetic shells  
and transmitting a return to flesh.  
Irradiated mutant flesh,  
but still flesh nonetheless.

His chances are slim, nothing but junk  
left out in The Wastes,  
but human hope is, even in the face  
of certain demise,  
idiotically and impressively  
inextinguishable.

Us gods of metal and magic  
watch and urge them on.  
After all, what good is a world  
without entertainment?

**MAGMAD3M1S:**

00:03:06:03 - 00:03:09:05

500 years ago,  
the white man left on a journey.  
A journey to leave his body.  
He succeeded only to be lost again.

**CORO/CHORUS:** 00:03:16:00 - 00:03:20:14

La tierra era nuestra antes de ser de ellos  
The earth was ours before being theirs

00:04:12:15 - 00:04:15:14

*RayKay\_16 atraviesa el baldío*  
*RayKay\_16 wanders the wastes*  
*(Electronic Angeles (LA))*

**THE AMBIENT SOUND OF THE WASTES,  
LIKE WIND BLOWING BY:**

00:04:39:12 - 00:04:42:12

*all finish of the world,  
along with God.*

*Exactly 14 minutes left.  
And I'm afraid of the old places.*

*World War three about to start  
Hot and cold.*

*Some last hurrah.*

*Holy Spirit of the Night.*

*Female*

*backgammon, 125 yards*

*I saw on the windshield moving, 75 yards*

*Now it may  
    well be in this area.*

*Dreams be it in the new era  
born of the age of man.  
That sign before it is more important.*

*We recognize.*

*Oh oh.  
One more.  
They are about to produce  
a perfect human being and...*

**CORO/CHORUS:** 00:06:11:11 - 00:06:14:10  
what kooky कर्म karma oh

*(THE WASTES CONTINUE THEIR WHISPERS)*

*Can't you feel our bodies merging?  
and we shall be the new*

*is still constantly overreacting.*

*I have absolutely no idea how I've managed  
to keep you alive so long...for humanity.*

**CORO/ CHORUS:** 00:06:30:20 - 00:06:50:18

RayKay\_16 simplemente quería estar  
en los brazos de su madre  
bueno, no su madre exactamente  
pero una mujer más grande que el  
una que oliese al amanecer y a la mar  
no esas cosas precisamente, pero las cuales que se sintieran como esas cosas

(in un Nubodi preferiblemente)

RayKay\_16 simply wanted to be  
In the arms of his mother  
well, not his mother exactly  
but a woman bigger than him  
one who would smell like dawn and the sea  
not those things exactly, but things which felt like those things

(in a Nubodi preferably )

**MAGMAD3M1S:**

00:06:56:10 - 00:06:59:12

RayKay\_16 travels to The Temple of Last Trade.

Envoys of ours, priestesses both, await  
those who need our favor  
in exchange for material goods.

00:07:22:18 - 00:07:25:17

*(sound transmits action reality exists in the invisible)*

**MAGMAD3M1S:**

00:10:04:13 - 00:10:07:00

And now for the transfer:

We are the mitochondria.  
We are the altars for invocation.  
We are the detriment of the essence.  
We speak the unknown language of volcanoes.

*(RAYKAY\_16 BEGINS HIS TRANSFER - DIES IRAE)*

*(ROBERT WYATT'S "AGE OF SELF" IS SUNG AS IRRADIATED LABORER IN LA JOONGLA  
RECEIVES THE TRANSFER, RAY\_KAY BECOMES THEM)*

00:17:58:21 - 00:18:01:17

They say the working class is dead  
we're all consumers now

They say that we have moved ahead  
we're all just people now.

There's people doing frightfully well  
there's other's on the shelf shelf shelf

But never mind the second kind this is the age of self self self

Seems to me if we forget our roots are where we stand  
the whole world will disintegrate like castles build on sand

castles built on sand.

It's easiest to start from the impulse to problematize the position of the *flâneur*. The ugly word *privilege* hovers around it, and we turn to questions that we know the answer to, "Who, exactly, is allowed to wander, like so?" As Doreen St. Felix suggests: streetside, the would-be black flâneur is always out of place. Black wandering is always already an escape, an *a priori* wildness. To be discovered outside of the bounds of captivity, bounds which shift easily under the prosecuting gaze, can be three strikes all bundled together. However, it's no fun to accept that the black would-be flâneur's body is utterly scarred beyond repair. Certainly this does not mean that tomorrow I will take my notebook, grab a jacket, and wander the streets to assert my right-to-flânerie. I won't be so actively irresponsible. However, my preference here is to throw caution to the wind and be wildly irresponsible when it comes to the ideas that follow.

We might speak of the flâneur as necessarily enjoying the privilege of having a body which calls no excess attention to itself, casts no shadow. What we wish were only recent events have revealed a more complicated history, showing that the black body is not permitted to wander. In the United States, we have an ever-growing list of recent victims of not just aberrant instances of "police brutality," but a longer story of the excessive force that white civil society continually applies to blackness/black (non)subjects/bodies. Likewise, here—in the very neighborhood where this exhibition is staged and where you might be reading this essay, just five years ago, Mark Duggan was murdered by the [London Police]. Duggan's criminal activity is still debated, but the fact remains that on that day no gun was found on his person. Instances such as these—although instance is a word that obscures the structural and ongoing nature of the problem—might serve as a cautionary tale to the would-be black flâneur. The *flâneur*, an exemplary modernist subject, by way of Baudelaire and Poe by way of Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, must float leisurely through public space.

In order to properly indulge in flânerie, one must be free to move about. It feels silly to explain this any further. If any more clarification is needed, take out your phone now and Google 'stop and frisk'.

The flâneur's loneliness seems of the utmost importance. According to Benjamin's analysis of Poe, the flâneur is alone by choice. He chooses to drift about, some embodiment of (white, male) modernist detachment, always *among* the crowd but never *with* or in it—apart *from* rather than a part *of*. If we were to skip a few steps and imagine a black flâneur, she would never follow Poe's flâneur in his choice to be alone. She might still be lonely, maybe even lonelier than Poe, maybe even the *loneliest*. But rather, I think that she is haunted. Ontologically speaking, she can never be a true flâneur, lost alone in the city, because she bears the image and the history of all the other black wanderers who took to the streets (or the fields, the forest, the sea) before her. Further, she buzzes with the presence of all other black flâneurs whose space-time is approximately her own—that is to say, those she might pass on the street, those to whom she gives the nod that my parents encouraged me to give upon seeing another black person in public.

What happens in that moment when blackness encounters itself, introduced by two or more bodies who bear its mark? It's certainly something beyond any sort of Althusserian recognition of subjectivity. The poet Anne Carson writes, "words have edges and so do you."<sup>1</sup> Maybe this is true for Carson, maybe this is true for some and not for others. I feel quite certain that this notion of the 'edge,' the *edge of oneself* requires reconsideration when it comes to the black subject. Perhaps what I am getting at here is that, the would-be black flâneur can never exist as such, apart from the crowd, because she is always a crowd herself.

It is quite the same as Moten's invocation of Glissant's "consent not to be a single being."<sup>2</sup> Her edges bleed.

Carson obsesses over the edges of the self as the playground of Eros; in her view, the erotic is all about boundaries. She writes that "the boundaries of time and glance and I love you are only aftershocks of the main, inevitable boundary that creates Eros: the boundary of flesh and self between you and me." I suppose this is all very related to psychoanalysis; Carson appears rather lost in a Freudian haze, wrapped around lack's finger.

Yet Frantz Fanon quips, in "The Fact of Blackness": "My Negro consciousness does not hold itself out as a lack." The work of Fanon and countless others, as well as my own experience—let us think of it as the gap between The Nod and that Althusserian acknowledgement of the subject—cast Carson in comparison as bland, stodgy and altogether some white people shit. A better erotic, a more apt Eros, might be Audre Lorde's erotic, rather "a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feeling." I like Lorde's focus on the space *between*, between self and this strongest feeling, but also seemingly on the *space between selves*, cast not as lack, some dead space, but as electric. She writes: "The very word erotic comes from the Greek word eros, the personification of love in all its aspects—born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony."

Somewhere in all of this, is an inkling of what I'd like to over-determine as an erotic of the black crowd. This crowd, as noted, need not be physically manifest as a grounded group of black bodies in space. It is rather the ontological totality that Cedric Robinson writes of. But what happens when the crowd is doubled over, when my crowd meets up with your crowd? Here, in *Wandering/WILDING*, I think that we watch this happen.

We also watch this happen on the internet—a fact that all of the artists here seem aware of and interested in—perhaps the one place where black wandering is permitted. The lame liberatory myths of the Internet should still be approached with caution, but it does seem to be the case that the internet has yet been unable to achieve the same transformation of black wandering into wildness, escape—into wilding. The black crowd congregates safely online, free to express itself in its full complexity and zeal.

I am thinking a lot about the Jukebox Challenge as I write this, which is a meme—or if not quite a meme it's a viral video phenomenon—where you and a group of friends, one of you holding a large speaker overhead, mob in public space, dancing to T-LO's "All Day" (again—Google it). Like most memes, the challenge originated among black teens and young adults. The Jukebox Challenge, to me, is a template for an aggressive manifestation of blackness in public space. It could be a false equivalency, but the same wildness that embroiled the Central Park Five in decades-long legal battles and still ongoing trauma presents itself here, unchecked. The videos always open with the subjects running directly at the camera, often at full speed. Black teens take to the street, the beach, the quad, with unbridled energy. Within the public space that these video frame, throughout digital networks, and here in the gallery, the black crowd manifests. In our chaos, our strongest feeling, our crowdedness, we are wilding.

Aria Dean

<sup>1</sup> Anne Carson, "Eros the Bittersweet," 1986, (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 52

<sup>2</sup> Édouard Glissant, 2011, "One World in Relation: Édouard Glissant in Conversation with Manthia Diawara." Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art, no. 28: 4–19

## ***immortal work - non-exhaustive work***

fields harrington

### ***Lab Work***

The work of the HeLa cell is uncontested: HeLa cells have made possible a connection between HPV and cervical cancer, as well as the role of telomerase in preventing chromosome degradation; in 1953 HeLa cells were the first human cells to be successfully cloned by Theodore Puck and Philip I. Marcus;<sup>1</sup> in 1953 a cell culture factory was established at Tuskegee University to supply Jonas Salk and other labs with HeLa cells<sup>2</sup>; in 1960 HeLa cells brought forth the birth of space cell biology and the cells were grown in zero gravity; in 1972 HeLa cells were actively used in the international cancer control program with the participation of physicians around the world<sup>3</sup>, and in 2019 a team of virologists found that the Zika virus could not multiply in HeLa cells.<sup>4</sup> But understanding the HeLa cell's activity and behavior as a social formation of labor obfuscates as much as it illustrates the constitutive elements of observation and discovery (as modes of power, violence, accumulation, and dispossession), and the forms of uninformed consent that enable these processes.<sup>5</sup> How does the ongoing afterlife of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and its conditions of captivity, predate and prefigure the containment and capture of the HeLa cells? To follow Hortense Spillers: what enables the breach of Henrietta Lacks' biological jurisdiction is an antecedent "hieroglyphics of the flesh," a violent capture and containment that allowed for the cell to ever be treated as a specimen in the "first" place, to be collected and *put* to work on and beyond the floors of the laboratory at John Hopkins University. The HeLa cell demonstrates how the hieroglyphics of the flesh control and contain all black matter, and not only the racialized surface of flesh. Lacks' cells become *raw material*, treated as a biological substance, and the instruments used by cell biology research reinscribe the markings of political violence projected onto the epidermal surface of captive bodies. In this instance, the removal of Lacks' cellular body demonstrates the figuration of a sentient, alien, expandable, and

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<sup>1</sup> Puck, T T, and P I Marcus. "A Rapid Method For Viable Cell Titration And Clone Production With Hela Cells In Tissue Culture: The Use Of X-Irradiated Cells To Supply Conditioning Factors." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* vol. 41,7 (1955): 432-7. doi:10.1073/pnas.41.7.432

<sup>2</sup> K. A. Brownlee (1955) *Statistics of the 1954 Polio Vaccine Trials*, *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 50:272, 1005-1013, DOI: 10.1080/01621459.1955.10501286

<sup>3</sup> Lyapun, I. & Andrukov, B. & Bynina, M.. (2019). HeLa Cell Culture: Immortal Heritage of Henrietta Lacks. *Molecular Genetics, Microbiology and Virology*. 34. 195-200. 10.3103/S0891416819040050.

<sup>4</sup> Li, Li et al. "Attenuation of Zika Virus by Passage in Human HeLa Cells." *Vaccines* vol. 7,3 93. 20 Aug. 2019, doi:10.3390/vaccines7030093

<sup>5</sup> Saidiya Hartman (2016) *The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors, Souls*, 18:1, 166-173, DOI: 10.1080/10999949.2016.1162596

non-human substance as a profitable and intensified “atomizing” of the captive body.<sup>6</sup> However, my reading of the HeLa cell is not just an example of *hieroglyphics of the flesh*, but an intensification of it.

Despite the fact that the HeLa cell’s social activity and endless capture are perpetually transforming material in a “determinate fashion” which is *indispensable* for the *reproduction of human society*, it is inadequate to determine the activity and behavior of the HeLa cell as “labor” or “work” from a Marxist position.<sup>7</sup> If we were to consider the HeLa cell as a commodity from a Marxian standpoint, a formulation of the measurement of the cell’s “labor time”, a quantitative analysis of its social necessity, and a historically specific determination of the cell’s “magnitude of value” would be met with an incalculable aggregate due to the cruel reality of Henrietta Lacks arriving at John Hopkins hospital in severe pain. The condition of Lacks’ suffering and the coercive measures that are taken to remove her cells from her cervix without consent exceed any figuration and attachment of how “labor” is constituted from a Marxist framework. A different approach would follow Hartman and suggest *fungibility, rather than labor*, as a framework to constitute the social activity, relations, and reproductive force of the HeLa cell. It’s the fungibility of the commodity that permits a continuation of colonial expansion concealed as scientific discovery. Suppose we imagine the HeLa cell’s activity and behavior as fungible, interchangeable, divisible, and endlessly calculable. In that case, it may be rendered within a sociopolitical order that thinks with and against a Marxian analysis of labor. A fungible scientific object has no limits to the ways it can be controlled; whereas a laboring object promises, even if it does not deliver, the limit of the contract, a working day, and a wage.

Reproductive labor on the slave ship, as Hartman notes, “captive women were accounted for as quantities of greater and lesser mass, and the language of units and complete cargo eclipsed that of the subject, the person or individual.”<sup>8</sup> According to Spillers, the labor of Black women was not only “culturally unmade” according to Hortense Spillers, “Under these conditions one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into account as quantities.”<sup>9</sup>

If the *work* of the HeLa cell must not be divorced from its cellular captivity, neither should the fantasy of its infinitely inexhaustible *in vitro* reproductive behavior be separated from the structures of *abstract domination* of scientific inquiry. Perhaps, this cellular captivity that I want

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<sup>6</sup> Spillers, Hortense J. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65–81. <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>, Weheliye, Alexander G. 2014. *Habeas viscus: racializing assemblages, biopolitics, and black feminist theories of the human*.

<sup>7</sup> Postone, Moishe. 1996. *Time, labor, and social domination: a reinterpretation of Marx’s critical theory*. Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>8</sup> Saidiya Hartman (2016) *The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women’s Labors, Souls*, 18:1, 166–173, DOI: 10.1080/10999949.2016.1162596

<sup>9</sup> Spillers, Hortense J. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65–81. <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>,

to address moves with and beyond the notion of fungibility. Henrietta Lacks' HeLa cells, and their cellular body, are used for producing value, scientific knowledge, and sharing vulnerabilities of the commodity. The cellular body here is harnessed as an instrument for social, analytical, and physical reproduction.<sup>10</sup> For the moment, I want to experiment with engaging the production of scientific research, the desires of scientific knowledge, and the role of social values in the scientific community as forms of what Moishe Postone calls "abstract domination."<sup>11</sup> This particular form of "abstract domination" that I'm framing exceeds the grammar of the contract and how it's structurally tied to labor. Rather, I want to address a *two-step* process in which "abstract domination" is an accretion of *gratuitous violence* and the collaborative activity of scientific inquiry. The accumulation of the HeLa cell is ruled by a system of 'abstractions'; Lacks' disembodied cellular self is not solely dominated by Science with a capital S but instead governed by the collaborative activity and production of cell biology research, cryogenic engineers supported by MIT and Harvard Medicine, John Hopkins University, NASA, and others. The figurative seizure and occupation of the Black cellular body and the myriad of its uses are reimagined through the protocols of cell biology and the collection, observation, and discovery of biospecimens that are extracted without consent. The practices of scientific protocols like sampling, cloning, necrosis, and freezing of cells are the continuation of *gratuitous violence*.<sup>12</sup> They may, in fact, be the perfection of this violence that emanates from the protocols of scientific techniques. Mundane scientific routines, procedures, and tasks that are shaped by political patronization, *perfect/improve/cultivate* the arrangement of slavery and captivity.

By all means, cervical cancer research remains an important program for the sciences and absolutely necessary as a form of knowledge production in the field of medicine and cell biology. The discoveries from human biospecimen research are critical to medical advances and the reduction of future diseases. However, the measures of extraction that accomplish this knowledge for this particular research program at Johns Hopkins University were dictated by uninformed consent. More specifically, uninformed consent describes instances in which a patient has been advised, briefed, or educated about biospecimens (or in this case, tissue samples) that will be taken from their body during diagnosis or treatment for the purpose of scientific research. When Henrietta went back to the hospital for a follow-up visit after she received her biopsy report back from the lab, she was under the impression that it was a standard procedure of testing and receiving some medicine from the doctor. However, this was not the case. Upon her arrival, she informed the receptionist that she was there for treatment and signed a form with the words OPERATION PERMIT at the top of the page. It said:

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<sup>10</sup> Saidiya Hartman (2016) *The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors, Souls*, 18:1, 166-173, DOI: 10.1080/10999949.2016.1162596

<sup>11</sup> Postone, Moishe. 1996. *Time, labor, and social domination: a reinterpretation of Marx's critical theory*. Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>12</sup> Hartman, Saidiya V. 1997. *Scenes of subjection: terror, slavery, and self-making in nineteenth-century America*.

*I hereby give consent to the staff of The Johns Hopkins Hospital to perform any operative procedure res and under any anesthetic either local or general that they may deem necessary in the proper surgical care and treatment of\_\_\_\_\_.*

A nurse guided Henrietta to a section of the ward that was specifically for colored women, and she was met by a team of white physicians who ran tubes down her throat and performed tests on her urine, lungs, and blood. After this procedural bodily analysis, an unconscious Henrietta lay bare on the operating table, while Dr. Lawrence Wharton Jr. prepared to treat the tumor in her cervix. Before he proceeded with the surgery, Wharton Jr. severed two small pieces of tissue from Henrietta's cervix without her consent and without her knowledge. These samples were placed in a glass dish and were delivered to George Otto Gey's cell biology lab on behalf of the chair of Johns Hopkins' gynecology department Richard Wesley Te Linde.

What social and cultural values allow for the minds of George Otto Gey, Richard Wesley Te Linde, and Margaret Gey to arrive at this site of extraction in the name of scientific inquiry? What are the forces and relations of production and reproduction that constitute scientific inquiry as a means of an ongoing project of extraction, containment, and colonial expansion within the Black body? The social determination of scientific inquiry is dependent on internal and external factors in the production of its inquiry.<sup>13</sup> Observing the patterns of funding within the scope of inquiry, what we discover is that the values and interests of scientific research, observation, and inquiry are contingent on corporate and/or government funding. This reliance on external patronage locates the comportment of science in a highly vulnerable position in relation to the origin of its funding. Helen Longino suggests that scientific inquiry is a "collaborative human activity" when addressing the fascination of individual theories, and how these inquiries are shaped within historical, political, and social contexts that have specific goals in its rational mind.<sup>14</sup> A cell biologist like George Otto Gey does not participate in scientific observations of tissue cell cultures in isolation. Gey's collection of cervical cancer cells commenced with the sponsorship of Richard Wesley Te Linde, the chairman of John Hopkins University's gynecology department and president of the American Gynecological Society. Te Linde's participation in the uninformed extractive measures of Lacks' cells is significant here because Te Linde understands the excess of visitors to the public ward at John Hopkins Hospital as a site of potential research subjects. In other words, Te Linde and Gey believed that free

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<sup>13</sup> Science In Society, Science As Social Knowledge: Values And Objectivity In Scientific Inquiry, Helen E. Longino, Princeton University Press

<sup>14</sup> Science In Society, Science As Social Knowledge: Values And Objectivity In Scientific Inquiry, Helen E. Longino, Princeton University Press

health care for the public meant that those people were an endless supply of research and clinical material.

### ***Immortal work - non-exhaustive work***

Is it possible to rethink how immortality is constituted when considering the HeLa cell line? How has the ongoing life of the HeLa cell (which is to say, the living force beyond what is observed) complicated or proposed the idea of immortal work or non-exhaustive work? What if we understood the HeLa cell as both captive and fugitive to the conditions of a disembodied imperishable labor time? The etymology of immortality begins around the late 14th century; words that rub around its root are “deathless,” from the Latin *immortalis*, which means “undying” (of gods), “imperishable, endless.”<sup>15</sup> Henrietta Lacks’ disembodied self could be understood as imperishable and as such an entity that leans into a state of foreverness. It’s not that Henrietta Lacks, the person, is literally “undying” nor are the HeLa cells.

However, the reproductive labor, behavior, and activity of the cell line are not only perpetually divisible but additionally uncontrollable, fungible, adaptable, ubiquitous, and deviate from capture. Using air as a vehicle, the HeLa cell contaminated other cellular cultures across the globe.<sup>16</sup> For instance, to demonstrate how “rugged” the HeLa cells are, George Gey and his co-workers at the University of Minnesota sent twenty-nine live cultures on a 2,500 mile trip by air, truck, and rail from Minneapolis to New York. This display of the cell’s resilience would eventually backfire since the HeLa cell was ubiquitous and took advantage of technicians’ carelessness, making victims of nearby cultures in the lab. Neighboring cellular cultures in shared labs that were thought to be going through “transformations” were actually being taken over by the HeLa cell. The abrupt “transformations” altered the normal cells’ biological clocks and doubled their lifetime. In 1968, the HeLa cell took over twenty-four out the thirty-four cell lines at the American Type Culture Collection, and in 1973, a group of German scientists discovered that a HeLa culture permeated a culture of monkey cells, eradicating the monkey cells but inheriting a colony of viruses that had infected them. Perhaps, we can understand the activity of the HeLa cell as a demonstration of deathlessness or undying disembodied labor and survival. The disembodied labor and survival of the HeLa cell infinitely rearranges, barter, and propagates the value of blackness.

Yet it’s precisely this narrative of propagation, of the HeLa cell as triumphant, productive, and inexhaustible, that invites a critical interrogation. The figure of the cell’s “immortality” often circulates as a victory story in popular science, a moment where Henrietta Lacks’ contribution is

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<sup>15</sup> “Immortal (Adj.).” Etymology Online, 2017. <https://www.etymonline.com/word/immortal>.

<sup>16</sup> Gold, Michael. 1986. *A conspiracy of cells: one woman’s immortal legacy and the medical scandal it caused*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

“recognized” posthumously, but such recognition risks reinscribing a liberal humanist resolution that undermines the violence of the cell’s origin. The affective uplift of “immortal work” depoliticizes the forms of racial and scientific violence necessary for its emergence. The question is not only what knowledge is produced through the HeLa cell, but what ideological labor is performed in framing that knowledge as a kind of reparative justice or social good. If the cell is said to “live on,” then whose death, and whose exploitation, is being metabolized in that fantasy of the non-exhaustive?

However, as an endless worker and commodity, the HeLa cell must not be divorced from the wageless, inexhaustible, accumulative, and captive labor that precedes Capitalism. To draw out what I mean by disembodied labor and survival, I will begin with a brief definition of an immortalized cell line. Essentially, immortalized cell lines are unique due to their deviation from conventional cellular senescence and mutation. The cells can grow for an extensive amount of time outside of their normal biological context (in vitro). Before the removal of tissue samples from Henrietta Lacks’ cervix, George Otto Gey and his wife Margaret experimented with growing malignant cells outside of the body for over thirty years. The couple was determined to grow human cells outside the body to better grasp how cancerous cells behave. Once Richard Te Linde collects tissue samples from the Lacks’ cervix and passes them along to Gey, we can say that this is the beginning of the “working day” of the HeLa cell line, and that this day never ends. At the moment of the discovery that Lacks’ cells were “immortal,” or that they have the capacity to reproduce themselves on the brink of their death, Gey begins to ship the cells on planes all over the world, thus granting them as raw material to perform on the playground of scientific research. Henrietta Lacks’ HeLa cells are the embodiments of her ongoing dispossessive labor, rendered as the concupiscent interaction between harvested flesh and the laboratory.<sup>17</sup>

Cryogenic engineers in the 60s reveled in excitement with the discovery of being able to suspend the time and states of being of the HeLa cell.<sup>18</sup>

Not only was the cellular body divested from the constraints of the linearity of time, but now the cell was subjected to live within a corporeal existence of foreverness. The time scale of death of the HeLa could be determined with freeze-thaw protocols developed by MIT engineers. It was observed that the HeLa cells most often necrosed during the process of thawing rather than freezing. The method of this observation of disembodied survival by way of

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<sup>17</sup> Sarah Jane Cervenak & J. Kameron Carter (2017) *Untitled and Outdoors: Thinking with Saidiya Hartman, Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, 27:1, 45-55, DOI: 10.1080/0740770X.2017.1282116

<sup>18</sup> Response of HeLa Cells to Freezing and Thawing at Constant Cooling Rates. J. J. MoGRATH, E. G. CRAVALHO, K. R. DILLER, AND C. E. HUGGINS ( Cryogenic Engineering Laboratory, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139; and Dept. of Surgery, Harvard Medical School, Surgical Low-Temperature Unit and Blood Bank Transfusion Service, Massachusetts General Hospital 02114).

freeze-thaw techniques was a fitting prescription for the shipment of the HeLa cell to other researchers around the world.

The non-exhaustive work of the HeLa cell is not bound to how it is known by Science. The protocols of evolutionary biology became a force of dispossession when Leigh Van Valen, an evolutionary biologist from Chicago, proposed that the HeLa cell should not be considered a human cell and that, instead, it was a separate species. According to Van Valen, the HeLa cells were evolving separately from humans. Therefore, he proposed that the HeLa cell species be called *Helacyton Gartleri*, which combined HeLa with *cyton*, Greek for “cell,” and *gartleri*, in honor of Stanley Gartler, who’d dropped the “HeLa Bomb” twenty-five years earlier. The HeLa cell is a means for permissible dispossession because it is an unlimited resource for the scientific community that extends and reifies the insidious symbolic order, which situates black enslaved workers as an entity that is perpetually replenishable, and endlessly dispensable by the addition of another Black body as a component to the whole. This reclassification of the HeLa cell line as no longer human or non-human is no new gesture directed at Black women when considering the history of anti-blackness. In the production of accumulative colonial knowledge, systems like evolutionary biology attempt to constitute what it means to be human through the separation of Henrietta Lacks from her body/flesh, thus granting the mutation(s) of the HeLa cell more agency than the person from which it came. Again, this is why calling the activity and behavior of the HeLa “work” and “labor” is a disservice. Instead, we should situate this work *within* the framework of fungibility.

The HeLa cell’s *work* is not exhausted through the methods, practices, and goals of scientific research. For example, during the Cold War, the HeLa cells were exposed to immense doses of radiation to observe how nuclear bombs destroyed living human cells, and they were also subjected to rapid rotations that exceeded the pressures of spaceflight or deep-sea diving.<sup>19</sup> Sending the HeLa cells to space in 1960 with the Discoverer XVIII satellite was yet another test of endurance and the opportunity to observe the endless possibilities of exposing insurmountable pressure to the cell. The field of space biology also wanted to know what measures could be taken to exhaust the HeLa cells. The cells divided themselves even faster in response to these extreme orbital conditions.

For the actors in cell biology research, the beauty and terror of the cell’s behavior is that it can float in the air and travel from lab to lab on its own terms. The endless reproducibility of the HeLa cell solicited infinite desirability and continues to generate exorbitant revenue for the cell biology discipline. However, the cell’s ubiquity caused a rupture in the procedures of containment and sterility in the laboratory. The HeLa cells live with and in excess. The aliveness

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<sup>19</sup> Skloot, Rebecca. 2018. *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. London, England: Picador.

of the HeLa brought on damage reports of contamination. The non-exhaustive work of immortality was propagated within the thinness of the air. In 1961 a cell culturist from New Jersey named Lewis Coriell discovered that simply administering liquid containing HeLa cells from a dropper could propel the cells into the air. Once the airborne cells reached any open petri dish containing live cultures, they were immediately vulnerable to the rapid growth of HeLa cells.<sup>20</sup>

To name the HeLa cell's function as "immortal work" is to confront the deep entanglement between racialized life, scientific inquiry, and capital, not to resolve it, but to hold it in contradiction. It is to recognize that immortality here is not divine but manufactured through regimes of surveillance, extraction, and abstraction. And yet, this immortality is not fully possessed. It drifts, proliferates, and infects. The HeLa cell endures not simply as a resource but as a residue, a reminder, and a rupture. Still, to call this labor "work" risks doing a disservice. It risks granting coherence to a system that is, at its core, incoherent in its violence. What if work and fungibility are not opposed but imbricated, what if their entanglement is precisely what undoes the fantasy of gratuitousness? The HeLa cell is conscripted into a purposive economy that renders Blackness both indispensable and disposable, individuated and infinitely replicable. Its labor is not outside fungibility but folded into it, animated by it, and yet never fully collapsed into it.

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<sup>20</sup>Gold, Michael. 1986. *A conspiracy of cells: one woman's immortal legacy and the medical scandal it caused*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

TRANSITIONS.

THE TOTALITY OF RECENT HISTORY IS SWALLOWED BY A SINGLE  
OBTUSE COMPARISON

RETROSPECTIVE VALUE GENERATED IN THE ACCUMULATED  
RESISTANCE TO

A RAPID SUCCESSION OF TECHNOLOGY

AIR OVER THE FLESHY VESSEL OF A YOUNG DREAMER PROPELLING  
HER FORWARD HOPING TO CRASH INTO STAINS TO WEAR PRIDEFULLY

*I'M*

LOOKING FOR

ALTERNATE SOURCES OF ENERGY

IMAGES OF FOSSILS THAT FUEL

THE CREATORS OF WORLDBOOK, ENCARTA

THE PAINTERS AND ILLUSTRATORS THEY CONSULTED

*[SCIENTISTS REALLY]*

THE IMMACULATE IN-VITRO FERTILIZATION &&BIRTH OF THE INFO-  
GRAPHIC COMES FROM THIS PROGENY

A MUSE-MOTHER

TRACING OUT

STROKES AND GESTURES

CERTAIN IMAGE-TROPES BESTOW THE HONOR OF NEUTRALITY

ORIGAMI STRUCTURES FLATTEN TO QUADRANGLES PINCHED AT 90°  
ANGLES

SPREAD ACROSS FOUND PAPER

ARCHEAN  
PROTEROZOIC  
PHANEROZOIC  
PALEOZOIC  
MESOZOIC  
CENOZOIC

FIGURES EMERGE IN PROFILE

MICROFOSSILS FROM 3500 MILLION YEARS B.P. PREFIGURE TRILOBITES

PLACODERMS AND LAND PLANTS POPULATE AN EARTH-ON-THE-VERGE OF EXTINCTION AND

AMPHIBIANS GIVE RISE TO REPTILES, WINGED INSECTS

THE MIND OF A BRIGHT YOUNG ILLUSTRATOR FROM RISD PAINTS

*THE*

*MY*

LOFTIER HOPES AND CURIOSITIES

GRIMMACING TRICERATOPS PROMENADE WITH MUTANT BIRDS

DOCILE MASTADONS RECLINE AMONGST HORNEY CARNIVEROUS FLOWERS

'SHE' *CAME FROM THE WATERS.*

FROM TALL TALES OF SHALLOW LAND AS IT RUPTURES ABOVE WATER LINE

MASS EXTINCTION WEDS REBIRTH

ERASURES THAT HAVE SOMEHOW COME UNDONE

THE WATER PROTECTED ITS OWN INACCESSIBLE DEPTHS

TECTONIC PLATES SHIFT, HEAT SWELTERS, AND THE RESPONSIBILITY TO DEPICT IS IN THE HAND OF *LARRY*, WHO IS OTHERWISE READING MARVEL COMICS

LINES EXTEND, THE WEIGHT OF PASSAGE PLAYS OUT IN THICKNESS AND NUMBERS EMERGE AT THEIR BREAK POINTS

COLORS SHIFT AND STATIC POSES IN PROFILE RESEMBLE INSTALLATIONS IN

*MUSEUM(S) OF NATURAL HISTORY*

... POPULATING THE WESTERN WORLD

GRANDEUR ON LOOP

AN EQUALIZING FORCE

THE PAST 500 YEARS DISSAPPEAR INTO MICRO-METERS THAT ECLIPSE SIGHT. THE GODS OF TRANSFORMATION SHOW ME THAT I AM BUT A PRODUCT OF DARWIN'S TRUTHFUL REVELATIONS ABOUT THE LEVELING FORCE OF A FLASH IN INFINITY

# **Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity\***

© Lorraine O'Grady  
1992, 1994

This first-ever article of cultural criticism on the black female body was to prove germinal and continues to be widely referenced in scholarly and other works. Occasionally controversial, it has been frequently anthologized, most recently in Amelia Jones, ed, *The Feminism and Cultural Reader*, Routledge.

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The female body in the West is not a unitary sign. Rather, like a coin, it has an obverse and a reverse: on the one side, it is white; on the other, non-white or, prototypically, black. The two bodies cannot be separated, nor can one body be understood in isolation from the other in the West's metaphoric construction of "woman." White is what woman is; not-white (and the stereotypes not-white gathers in) is what she had better not be. Even in an allegedly postmodern era, the not-white woman as well as the not-white man are symbolically and even theoretically excluded from sexual difference.<sup>1</sup> Their function continues to be, by their chiaroscuro, to cast the difference of white men and white women into sharper relief.

A kaleidoscope of not-white females, Asian, Native American, Latina, and African, have played distinct parts in the

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\* The first part of this article was published in *Afterimage* 20, no. 1 (Summer 1992). The revised version, including "Postscript," originally appeared in *New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action*, ed. Joanna Frueh, Cassandra L. Langer, and Arlene Raven (New York: Icon, 1994). The article has subsequently been reprinted in: *Art, Activism, and Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage*, ed. Grant Kester (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998) and *The Feminism and Visual Cultural Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (London and New York: Routledge Press, 2003).

West's theater of sexual hierarchy. But it is the African female who, by virtue of color and feature and the extreme metaphors of enslavement, is at the outermost reaches of "otherness." Thus she subsumes all the roles of the not-white body.

The smiling, bare-breasted African maid, pictured so often in Victorian travel books and *National Geographic* magazine, got something more than a change of climate and scenery when she came here.

Sylvia Arden Boone, in her book *Radiance from the Waters* (1986), on the physical and metaphysical aspects of Mende feminine beauty, says of contemporary Mende: "Mende girls go topless in the village and farmhouse. Even in urban areas, girls are bare-breasted in the house: schoolgirls take off their dresses when they come home, and boarding students are most comfortable around the dormitories wearing only a wrapped skirt."<sup>2</sup>

What happened to the girl who was abducted from her village, then shipped here in chains? What happened to her descendents? Male-fantasy images on rap videos to the contrary, as a swimmer, in communal showers at public pools around the country, I have witnessed black girls and women of all classes showering and shampooing with their bathing suits on, while beside them their white sisters stand unabashedly stripped. Perhaps the progeny of that African maiden feel they must still protect themselves from the centuries-long assault that characterizes them, in the words of the *New York Times* ad placed by a group of African American women to protest the Clarence Thomas–Anita Hill hearings, as "immoral, insatiable, perverse; the initiators in all sexual contacts—abusive or otherwise."<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps they have internalized and are cooperating with the West's construction of not-white women as not-to-be-seen. How could they/we not be affected by that lingering structure of invisibility, enacted in the myriad codicils of daily life and still enforced by the images of both popular and high culture? How not get the message of what Judith Wilson calls "the legions of black servants who loom in the shadows of European and

European-American aristocratic portraiture,"<sup>4</sup> of whom Laura, the professional model that Edouard Manet used for Olympia's maid, is in an odd way only the most famous example? Forget "tonal contrast." We know what she is meant for: she is Jezebel *and* Mammy, prostitute and female eunuch, the two-in-one. When we're through with her inexhaustibly comforting breast, we can use her ceaselessly open cunt. And best of all, she is not a real person, only a robotic servant who is not permitted to make us feel guilty, to accuse us as does the slave in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). After she escapes from the room where she was imprisoned by a father and son, that outraged woman says: "You couldn't think up what them two done to me."<sup>5</sup> Olympia's maid, like all the other "peripheral Negroes,"<sup>6</sup> is a robot conveniently made to disappear into the background drapery.

To repeat: castrata and whore, not madonna and whore. Laura's place is outside what can be conceived of as woman. She is the chaos that must be excised, and it is her excision that stabilizes the West's construct of the female body, for the "femininity" of the white female body is ensured by assigning the not-white to a chaos safely removed from sight. Thus only the white body remains as the object of a voyeuristic, fetishizing male gaze. The not-white body has been made opaque by a blank stare, misperceived in the nether regions of TV.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the imagery of white female artists, including that of the feminist avant-garde, should surround the not-white female body with its own brand of erasure. Much work has been done by black feminist cultural critics (Hazel Carby and bell hooks come immediately to mind) that examines two successive white women's movements, built on the successes of two black revolutions, which clearly shows white women's inability to surrender white skin privilege even to form basic alliances.<sup>7</sup> But more than politics is at stake. A major structure of psychic definition would appear threatened were white women to acknowledge and embrace the sexuality of their not-white "others." How else explain the treatment by that women's movement icon, Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* (1973-78) of Sojourner Truth, the lone black guest at the table? When thirty-six of thirty-nine places are set with versions of Chicago's famous "vagina" and recognizable slits have been given to such

sex bombs as Queen Elizabeth I, Emily Dickinson, and Susan B. Anthony, what is one to think when Truth, the mother of four, receives the only plate inscribed with a face?<sup>8</sup> Certainly Hortense Spillers is justified in stating that "the excision of the genitalia here is a symbolic castration. By effacing the genitals, Chicago not only abrogates the disturbing sexuality of her subject, but also hopes to suggest that her sexual being did not exist to be denied in the first place."<sup>9</sup>

And yet Michele Wallace is right to say, even as she laments further instances of the disempowerment of not-white women in her essay on *Privilege* (1990), Yvonne Rainer's latest film, that the left-feminist avant-garde, "in foregrounding a political discourse on art and culture," has fostered a climate that makes it "hypothetically possible to publicly review and interrogate that very history of exclusion and racism."<sup>10</sup>

What alternative is there really—in creating a world sensitive to difference, a world where margins can become centers—to a cooperative effort between white women and women and men of color? But cooperation is predicated on sensitivity to differences among ourselves. As Nancy Hartsock has said, "We need to dissolve the false 'we' into its true multiplicity."<sup>11</sup> We must be willing to hear each other and to call each other by our "true-true name."<sup>12</sup>

To name ourselves rather than be named we must first see ourselves. For some of us this will not be easy. So long unmirrored in our true selves, we may have forgotten how we look. Nevertheless, we can't theorize in a void, we must have evidence. And we—I speak only for black women here—have barely begun to articulate our life experience. The heroic recuperative effort by our fiction and nonfiction writers sometimes feel stuck at the moment before the Emancipation Proclamation.<sup>13</sup> It is slow and it is painful. For at the end of every path we take, we find a body that is always already colonized. A body that has been raped, maimed, murdered—that is what we must give a healthy present.

It is no wonder that when Judith Wilson went in search of nineteenth-century nudes by black artists, she found only three

statues of non-black children— Edmonia Lewis's *Poor Cupid* (1876); her *Asleep* (1871); and one of the two children in her *Awake* (1872)<sup>14</sup>—though Wilson cautions that, given the limits of current scholarship, more nudes by nineteenth-century blacks may yet surface.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, according to Wilson, the nude, one of high art's favorite categories, has been avoided during most of "the 200-year history of fine art production by North American blacks."<sup>16</sup> Noting exceptions that only prove the rule, that is, individual works by William H. Johnson and Francisco Lord in the thirties and Eldzier Cortor's series of Sea Island nudes in the forties, she calls "the paucity of black nudes in U.S. black artistic production prior to 1960. . . an unexamined problem in the history of Afro-American art."<sup>17</sup> And why use 1960 as a marker of change? Because, says Wilson, after that date there was a confluence of two different streams: the presence of more, and more aggressive, black fine artists such as Bob Thompson and Romare Bearden, and the political use of the nude as a symbol of "Black Is Beautiful," the sixties slogan of a programmatic effort to establish black ethnicity and achieve psychic transformation.<sup>18</sup>

Neither of these streams, however, begins to deal with what I am concerned with here: the reclamation of the body as a site of black female subjectivity. Wilson hints at part of the problem by titling a recent unpublished essay "Bearden's Use of Pornography." An exterior, pornographic view, however loving, will not do any more than will the emblematic "Queen of the Revolution." But though Wilson raises provisional questions about Bearden's montaging of the pornographic image, her concerns are those of the art historian, while mine must be those of the practitioner.<sup>19</sup> When, I ask, do we start to see images of the black female body by black women made as acts of auto-expression, the discrete stage that must immediately precede or occur simultaneously with acts of auto-critique? When, in other words, does the present begin?

Wilson and I agree that, in retrospect, the catalytic moment for the subjective black nude might well be Adrian Piper's *Food for the Spirit* (1971), a private loft performance in which Piper photographed her physical and metaphysical changes during a prolonged period of fasting and reading of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.<sup>20</sup> Piper's performance, unpublished and

unanalyzed at the time (we did not have the access then that we do now), now seems a paradigm for the willingness to look, to get past embarrassment and retrieve the mutilated body, as Spillers warns we must if we are to gain the clear-sightedness needed to overthrow hierarchical binaries: "Neither the shameface of the embarrassed, nor the not-looking-back of the self-assured is of much interest to us," Spillers writes, "and will not help at all if rigor is our dream."<sup>21</sup>

It is cruelly ironic, of course, that just as the need to establish our subjectivity in preface to theorizing our view of the world becomes most dire, the idea of subjectivity itself has become "problematized." But when we look to see just whose subjectivity has had the ground shifted out from under it in the tremors of postmodernism, we find (who else?) the one to whom Hartsock refers as "the transcendental voice of the Enlightenment" or, better yet, "He Who Theorizes."<sup>22</sup> Well, good riddance to him. We who are inching our way from the margins to the center cannot afford to take his problems or his truths for our own.

Although time may be running out for such seemingly marginal agendas as the establishment of black female subjectivity (the headlines remind us of this every day) and we may feel pressured to move fast, we must not be too conceptually hasty. This is a slow business, as our writers have found out. The work of recuperation continues. In a piece called *Seen* (1990) by the conceptual artist Renee Greene, two of our ancestresses most in need, Saartjie Baartman ("the Hottentot Venus") and Josephine Baker, have been "taken back." Each in her day (early nineteenth and twentieth century, respectively) was the most celebrated European exhibit of exotic flesh. Greene's piece invited the viewer to stand on a stage inscribed with information about the two and, through a "winkie" of eyes in the floor and a shadow screen mounted on the side, to experience how the originals must have felt, pinned and wriggling on the wall. The piece has important attributes: it is above all cool and smart. But from the perspective being discussed here—the establishment of subjectivity—because it is addressed more to the other than to the self and seems to

deconstruct the subject just before it expresses it, it may not unearth enough new information.

The question of to whom work is addressed cannot be emphasized too strongly. In the 1970s, African American women novelists showed how great a leap in artistic maturity could be made simply by turning from their male peers' pattern of "explaining *it* to *them*," as Morrison once put it, to showing how it feels to *us*.<sup>23</sup>

Besides, pleading contains a special trap, as Gayatri Spivak noted in her discussion of the character Christophine in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*: "No perspective *critical* of imperialism can turn the Other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self."<sup>24</sup> Critiquing *them* does not show who *you* are: it cannot turn you from an object into a subject of history.

The idea bears repeating: self-expression is not a stage that can be bypassed. It is a discrete moment that must precede or occur simultaneously with the deconstructive act. An example may be seen in the work of the painter Sandra Payne. In 1986, at the last show of the now legendary black avant-garde gallery Just Above Midtown in Soho, Payne presented untitled drawings of joyously sexual and sublimely spiritual nudes. The opening reception was one of those where people speak of everything but what is on the walls. We do not yet have the courage to look.

Understandably, Payne went into retreat. Three years later, she produced attenuated mask drawings that, without the hard edge of postmodernism, are a postmodern speech act in the dialogue of mask and masquerade. Without the earlier subjective nudes, she may not have arrived at them.

A year ago, as a performance artist in a crisis of the body (how to keep performing without making aging itself the subject of the work?), I opted for the safety of the wall with a show of photomontages. My choice of the nude was innocent and far from erotic; I wanted to employ a black self stripped of as many layers of acculturation as possible. The one piece in the show with

explicitly represented sexuality, *The Clearing* (1991), a diptych in which a black female engaged with a white male, was to me less about sex than it was about culture. It was not possible to remain innocent for long, however. I soon encountered an encyclopedia of problematics concerning the black body: age, weight, condition, not to mention hair texture, features, and skin tone. Especially skin tone. Any male and female side by side on the wall are technically married. How to arrange a quadriptych such as *Gaze* (1991), composed of head-and-shoulder shots of differently hued black men and women? Should I marry the fair woman to the dark man? The dark woman to the fair man? What statements will I be making about difference if I give them mates matching in shade? What will I be saying about the history of class?

There was another problematic, as personal as it was cultural. Which maimed body would be best retrieved as the ground of my biographic experience? Young or middle-aged? Jezebel or Mammy? The woman I was or the woman I am now? And which body hue should I use to generalize my upper-middle-class West Indian–American experience? A black-skinned "ancestress," or the fairer-skinned product of rape? I hedged. In the end, I chose an African-British high-fashion model, London-born but with parents from Sierra Leone. For me, she conveyed important ambiguities: she was black-skinned, but her nude body retained the aura of years of preparation for runway work in Europe. In *The Strange Taxi: From Africa to Jamaica to Boston in 200 Years*, where the subject was hybridism itself, my literal ancestresses, who to some may have looked white, sprouted from a European mansion rolling on wheels down the African woman's back. Although they may have been controversial, I liked the questions those beautifully dressed, proudly erect, ca. World War I women raised, not least of which was how the products of rape could be so self-confident, so poised.

As I wrestled with ever shifting issues regarding which black woman to shoot, I came to understand and sympathize with Lorna Simpson's choice of a unified response in such montages as *Guarded Conditions* (1989), in which a brown-skinned woman in a shapeless white shift is shot from behind—with every aspect of subjectivity both bodily and facial occluded, except the need to

cover up itself—and then multiplied. No doubt about it. This multiple woman showers and shampoos in her shift.

But, I tell myself, this cannot be the end. First we must acknowledge the complexity, and then we must surrender to it. Of course, there isn't any final answering of the question, "What happened to that maid when she was brought here?" There is only the process of answering it and the complementary process of allowing each answer to come to the dinner party on its own terms. Each of these processes is just beginning, but perhaps if both continue, the nature of the answers will begin to change and we will all be better off. For if the female body in the West is obverse and reverse, it will not be seen in its integrity—neither side will know itself—until the not-white body has mirrored herself fully.

## **Postscript**

The paragraphs above were drafted for delivery before a panel of the College Art Association early in 1992.<sup>25</sup> Rereading them, I can see to how great an extent they were limited by the panel's narrowly feminist brief. The topic assigned was "Can the naked female body effectively represent women's subjectivity in contemporary North American media culture, which regularly presents women's bodies as objects for a voyeuristic and fetishizing male gaze?"

I think I was invited because I was the only black female artist employing the nude anyone on the panel had heard of. I felt like the extra guest who's just spilled soup on the tablecloth when I had to reject the panel's premise. The black female's body needs less to be rescued from the masculine "gaze" than to be sprung from a historic script surrounding her with signification while at the same time, and not paradoxically, it erases her completely.

Still, I could perhaps have done a better job of clarifying "what it is I think I am doing anyway."<sup>26</sup> Whether I will it or not,

as a black female artist my work is at the nexus of aggravated psychic and social forces as yet mostly uncharted. I could have explained my view, and shown the implications for my work, of the multiple tensions between contemporary art and critical theory, subjectivity and culture, modernism and postmodernism, and, especially for a black female, the problematic of psychoanalysis as a leitmotif through all of these.

I don't want to leave the impression that I am privileging representation of the body. On the contrary: though I agree, to alter a phrase of Merleau-Ponty, that every theory of subjectivity is ultimately a theory of the body,<sup>27</sup> for me the body is just one artistic question to which it is not necessarily the artistic answer.

My work in progress deals with what Gayatri Spivak has called the "'winning back' of the position of the questioning subject."<sup>28</sup> To win back that position for the African American female will require balancing in mental solution a subversion of two objects that may appear superficially distinct: on the one hand, phallogocentric theory; and on the other, the lived realities of Western imperialist history, for which all forms of that theory, including the most recent, function as willing or unwilling instruments.

It is no overstatement to say that the greatest barrier I/we face in winning back the questioning subject position is the West's continuing tradition of binary, "either:or" logic, a philosophic system that defines the body in opposition to the mind. Binaristic thought persists even in those contemporary disciplines to which black artists and theoreticians must look for allies. Whatever the theory of the moment, before we have had a chance to speak, we have always already been spoken and our bodies placed at the binary extreme, that is to say, on the "other" side of the colon. Whether the theory is Christianity or modernism, each of which scripts the body as all-nature, *our* bodies will be the most natural. If it is poststructuralism/postmodernism, which through a theoretical sleight of hand gives the illusion of having conquered binaries, by joining the once separated body and mind and then taking this "unified" subject, perversely called "fragmented," and designating it as all-culture, we can be sure it is *our* subjectivities that will be the most culturally determined. Of course, it is like

whispering about the emperor's new clothes to remark that nature, the other half of the West's founding binary, is all the more powerfully present for having fallen through a theoretical trapdoor.

Almost as maddening as the theories themselves is the time lag that causes them to overlap in a crazy quilt of imbrication. There is never a moment when new theory definitively drives out old. Successive, contradictory ideas continue to exist synchronistically, and we never know where an attack will be coming from, or where to strike preemptively. Unless one understands that the only constant of these imbricated theories is the black body's location at the extreme, the following statements by some of our more interesting cultural theorists might appear inconsistent.

Not long ago, Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien felt obliged to argue against the definition of the body as all-nature. After noting that "European culture has privileged sexuality as the essence of the self, the innermost core of one's 'personality,'" they went on to say: "This 'essentialist' view of sexuality. . . *already contains racism*. Historically, the European construction of sexuality coincides with the epoch of imperialism and the two interconnect. [It] is based on the idea that sex is the most basic form of naturalness which is therefore related to being *uncivilized* or *against* civilization" (my emphasis).<sup>29</sup>

Michele Wallace, on the other hand, recently found herself required to defend the black body against a hermeneutics of all-culture. "It is not often recognized," she commented, "that bodies and psyches of color have trajectories in excess of their socially and/or culturally constructed identities."<sup>30</sup> Her statement is another way of saying: now that we have "proved" the personal is the political, it is time for us to reassert that the personal is not *just* political.

Wallace and Mercer and Julien are all forced to declare that subjectivity belongs to *both* nature *and* culture. It's true, "both:and" thinking is alien to the West. Not only is it considered primitive, but it is now further tarred with the brush of a perceived connection to essentialism. For any argument that

subjectivity is partly natural is assumed to be essentialist. But despite the currency of anti-essentialist arguments, white feminists and theorists of color have no choice: they must develop critiques of white masculinist "either:or-ism," even if this puts them in the position of appearing to set essentialism up against anti-essentialism. This inherent dilemma of the critique of binarism may be seen in Spivak's often amusing ducking and feinting. To justify apparent theoretical inconsistencies, Spivak once explained her position to an interviewer as follows: "Rather than define myself as specific rather than universal, I should see what in the universalizing discourse could be useful and then go on to see where that discourse meets its limits and its challenge within that field. I think we have to choose again strategically, not universal discourse but essentialist discourse. I think that since s a deconstructivist—see, I just took a label upon myself—I cannot in fact clean my hands and say, 'I'm specific.' In fact I must say I am an essentialist from time to time. There is, for example, the strategic choice of a genitalist essentialism in antisexist work today. How it relates to all of this other work I am talking about, I don't know, but *my search is not a search for coherence* (my emphasis)."<sup>31</sup> Somebody say Amen.

If artists and theorists of color were to develop and sustain our critical flexibility, we could cause a permanent interruption in Western "either:or-ism." And we might find our project aided by that same problematic imbrication of theory, whose disjunctive layers could signal the persistence of an unsuspected "both:and-ism," hidden, yet alive at the subterranean levels of the West's constructs. Since we are forced to argue both that the body is more than nature, and *at the same time* to remonstrate that there is knowledge beyond language/culture, why not seize and elaborate the anomaly? In doing so, we might uncover tools of our own with which to dismantle the house of the master.<sup>32</sup>

Our project could begin with psychoanalysis, the often unacknowledged linchpin of Western (male) cultural theory. The contradictions currently surrounding this foundational theory indicate its shaky position. To a lay person, postmodernism seems to persist in language that opposes psychoanalysis to other forms of theoretical activity, making it a science or "truth" that is not culturally determined. Psychoanalysis's self-

questioning often appears obtuse and self-justifying. The field is probably in trouble if Jacqueline Rose, a Lacanian psychologist of vision not unsympathetic to third-world issues, can answer the question of psychoanalysis's universality as follows: "To say that psychoanalysis does not, or cannot, refer to non-European cultures is to constitute those cultures in total 'otherness' or 'difference': to say, or to try to demonstrate, that it can is to constitute them as the 'same.' This is not to say that the question shouldn't be asked."<sup>33</sup>

The implication of such a statement is that no matter how many times you ask the question of the universality of psychoanalysis or how you pose it, you will not arrive at an answer. But the problem is not the concept of "the unanswerable question," which I find quite normal. The problem is the terms in which Rose frames the question in the first place: her continuing use of the totalizing opposition of "otherness" and "sameness" is the sign of an "either:or" logic that does not yet know its own name.

If the unconscious may be compared to that common reservoir of human sound from which different peoples have created differing languages, all of which are translated more or less easily, then how can any of the psyche's analogous products be said to constitute total "otherness" or "difference"? It's at this point that one wants, without being *too* petulant, to grab psychoanalysis by the shoulders and slap it back to a moment before Freud's Eros separated from Adler's "will-to-power," though such a moment may never have existed even theoretically. We need to send this field back to basics. The issue is not whether the unconscious is universal, or whether it has the meanings psychoanalysis attributes to it (it is, and it does), but rather that, in addition, it contains contradictory meanings, as well as some that are unforeseen by its current theory.

Meanwhile, psychoanalysis and its subdisciplines, including film criticism, continue having to work overtime to avoid the "others" of the West. Wallace has referred to "such superficially progressive discourses as feminist psychoanalytic film criticism which one can read for days on end without coming across any lucid reference to, or critique of, 'race.'"<sup>34</sup>

But that omission will soon be redressed. We are coming after them. In her most brilliant theoretical essay to date, "The Oppositional Gaze," bell hooks takes on white feminist film criticism directly.<sup>35</sup> And Gayatri Spivak brooks no quarter. She has declared that non-Western female subject constitution is the main challenge to psychoanalysis and counterpsychoanalysis and has said: "The limits of their theories are disclosed by an encounter with the materiality of that other of the West."<sup>36</sup>

For an artist of color, the problem is less the limits of psychoanalysis than its seeming binarial *rigidity*. Despite the field's seeming inability to emancipate itself from "either:or-ism," I hope its percepts are salvageable for the non-West. Psychoanalysis, after anthropology, will surely be the next great Western discipline to unravel, but I wouldn't want it to destruct completely. We don't have to reinvent that wheel. But to use it in our auto-expression and auto-critique, we will have to dislodge it from its narrow base in sexuality. One wonders if, even for Europeans, sexuality as the center or core of "personality" is an adequate dictum. Why does there have to be a "center:not-center" in the first place? Are we back at that old Freud-Adler crossroad? In Western ontology, why does somebody always have to win?

"Nature:culture," "body:mind," "sexuality:intellect," these binaries don't begin to cover what we "sense" our ourselves. If the world comes to us through our senses—and however qualified those are by culture, no one say culture determines *everything*—then even they may be more complicated than their psychoanalytic description. What about the sense of balance, of equilibrium? Of my personal *cogito*'s, a favorite is "I dance, therefore I think." I'm convinced that important, perhaps even the deepest, knowledge comes to me through movement, and that the opposition of materialism to idealism is just another of the West's binarial theorems.

I have not taken a scientific survey, but I suspect most African Americans who are not in the academy would laugh at the idea that their subjective lives were organized around the sex drive and would feel that "sexuality," a conceptual category that

includes thinking about it as well as doing it, is something black people just don't have time for. This "common sense" is neatly appropriated for theory by Spillers in her statement: "Sexuality describes another type of discourse that splits the world between the 'West and the Rest of Us.'"<sup>37</sup>

Not that sex isn't important to these folks; it's just one center among many. For African American folk wisdom, the "self" revolves about a series of variable "centers," such as sex and food; family and community; and a spiritual life composed sometimes of God or the gods, at others of aesthetics or style. And it's not only the folk who reject the concept of a unitary center of the "self." Black artists and theorists frequently refer to African Americans as "the first postmoderns." They have in mind a now agreed understanding that our inheritance from the motherland of pragmatic, "both:and" philosophic systems, combined with the historic discontinuities of our experience as black slaves in a white world, have caused us to construct subjectivities able to negotiate between "centers" that, at the least, are double.<sup>38</sup>

It is no wonder that the viability of psychoanalytic conventions has come into crisis. There is a gulf between Western and non-Western quotidian perceptions of sexual valence, and the question of how psychic differences come into effect when "cultural differences" are accompanied by real differences in power. These are matters for theoretical and clinical study. But for artists exploring and mapping black subjectivity, having to track the not-yet-known, an interesting question remains: Can psychoanalysis be made to triangulate nature and culture with "spirituality" (for lack of a better word) and thus incorporate a sense of its own limits? The discipline of art requires that we distinguish between the unconscious and the limits of its current theory, and that we remain alive to what may escape the net of theoretical description.

While we await an answer to the question, we must continue asserting the obvious. For example, when Elizabeth Hess, a white art critic, writes of Jean-Michel Basquiat's "dark, frantic figures" as follows, she misses the point: "There is never any one who is quite human, realized; the central figures are

masks, hollow men. . . . It can be difficult to separate the girls from the boys in this work. *Pater* clearly has balls, but there's an asexualness throughout that is cold."<sup>39</sup> Words like "hot" and "cold" have the same relevance to Basquiat's figures as they do to classic African sculptures.

The space spirituality occupies in the African American unconscious is important to speculate upon, but I have to be clear. My own concern as an artist is to reclaim black female subjectivity so as to "de-haunt" historic scripts and establish worldly agency. Subjectivity for me will always be a social and not merely a spiritual quest.<sup>40</sup> To paraphrase Brecht, "It is a fighting subjectivity I have before me," one come into political consciousness.<sup>41</sup>

Neither the body nor the psyche is all-nature or all-culture, and there is a constant leakage of categories in individual experience. As Stuart Hall says of the relations between cultural theory and psychoanalysis, "Every attempt to translate the one smoothly into the other doesn't work; no attempt to do so can work. Culture is neither just the process of the unconscious writ large nor is the unconscious simply the internalization of cultural processes through the subjective domain."<sup>42</sup>

One consequence of this incommensurability for my practice as an artist is that I must remain wary of theory. There have been no last words spoken on subjectivity. If what I suspect is true, that it contains a multiplicity of centers and all the boundaries are fluid, then most of what will interest me is occurring in the between-spaces. I don't have a prayer of locating these by prescriptively following theoretical programs. The one advantage art has over other methods of knowledge, and the reason I engage in it rather than some other activity for which my training and intelligence might be suited, is that, except for the theoretical sciences, it is the primary discipline where an exercise of calculated risk can regularly turn up what you had not been looking for. And if, as I believe, the most vital inheritance of contemporary art is a system for uncovering the unexpected, then programmatic art of any kind would be an oxymoron.

Why should I wish to surrender modernism's hard-won victories, including those of the Romantics and Surrealists, victories over classicism's rearguard ecclesiastical and statist theories? Despite its "post-ness," postmodernism, with its privileging of mind over body and culture over nature, sometimes feels like a return to the one-dimensionality of the classic moment. That, more than any rapidity of contemporary sociocultural change and fragmentation, may be why its products are so quickly desiccated.

Because I am concerned with the reclamation of black female subjectivity, I am obliged to leave open the question of modernism's demise. For one thing, there seems no way around the fact that the method of reclaiming subjectivity precisely mirrors modernism's description of the artistic process. Whatever else it may require, it needs an act of will to project the inside onto the outside long enough to see and take possession of it. But, though this process may appear superficially *retardataire* to some, repossessing black female subjectivity will have unforeseen results both for action and for inquiry.

I am not suggesting an abandonment of theory: whether we like it or not, we are in an era, postmodern or otherwise, in which no practitioner can afford to overlook the openings of deconstruction and other poststructural theories. But as Spivak has said with respect to politics, practice will inevitably norm the theory instead of being an example of indirect theoretical application: "Politics is asymmetrical [*sic*]," Spivak says; "it is provisional, you have broken the theory, and that's the burden you carry when you become political."<sup>43</sup>

Art is, if anything, more asymmetrical than politics, and since artistic practice not only norms but, in many cases, self-consciously produces theory, the relation between art and critical theory is often problematic. Artists who are theoretically aware, in particular, have to guard against becoming too porous, too available to theory. When a well-intentioned critic like bell hooks says, "I believe much is going to come from the world of theory-making, as more black cultural critics enter the dialogue. As theory and criticism call for artists and audiences to shift their paradigms of how they see, we'll see the freeing up of

possibilities,"<sup>44</sup> my response must be: Thanks but no thanks, bell. I have to follow my own call.

Gayatri Spivak calls postmodernism "the new proper name of the West," and I agree. That is why for me, for now, the postmodern concept of *fragmentation*, which evokes the mirror of Western illusion shattered into inert shards, is less generative than the more "primitive" and active *multiplicity*. This is not, of course, the cynical *multi* of multiculturalism," where the Others are multicultural and the Same is still the samo. Rather, paradoxically, it is the *multi* implied in the best of modernism's primitivist borrowings, for example in Surrealism, and figured in Éluard's poem: "Entre en moi toi ma multitude" (Enter into me you my multitude).<sup>45</sup> This *multi* produces tension, as in the continuous equilibration of a *multiplicity of centers*, for which dance may be a brilliant form of training.

Stuart Hall has described the tensions that arise from the slippages between theory development and political practice and has spoken of the need to live with these disjunctions without making an effort to resolve them. He adds the further caveat that in one's dedication to the search for "truth" and "a final stage," one invariably learns that meaning never arrives, being never arrives, we are always only becoming.<sup>46</sup>

Artists must operate under even more stringent limitations than political theorists in negotiating disjunctive centers. Flannery O'Connor, who in her essays on being a Catholic novelist in the Protestant South may have said most of what can be said about being a strange artist in an even stranger land, soon discovered that though an oppositional artist like herself could choose what to write, she could not choose what she could make live. "What the Southern Catholic writer is apt to find, when he descends within his imagination," she wrote, "is not Catholic life but the life of this region in which he is both native and alien. He discovers that the imagination is not free, but bound."<sup>47</sup> You must not give up, of course, but you may have to go belowground. It takes a strong and flexible will to work both with the script and against it at the same time.

Every artist is limited by what concrete circumstances have given her to see and think, and by what her psyche makes it possible to initiate. Not even abstract art can be made in a social or psychic vacuum. But the artist concerned with subjectivity is particularly constrained to stay alert to the tension of differences between the psychic and the social. It is her job to make possible that dynamism Jacqueline Rose has designated as "medium subjectivity" and to avert the perils of both the excessively personal and the overly theoretical.

The choice of *what* to work on sometimes feels to the artist like a walk through a minefield. With no failproof technology, you try to mince along with your psychic and social antennae swiveling. Given the ideas I have outlined here, on subjectivity and psychoanalysis, modernism and multiplicity, this is a situation in which the following modest words of Rose's could prove helpful: "I'm not posing what an ideal form of medium subjectivity might be; rather, I want to ask where are the flashpoints of the social and the psychic that are operating most forcefully at the moment."<sup>48</sup>

I would add to Rose's directive the following: the most interesting social flashpoint is always the one that triggers the most unexpected and suggestive psychic responses. This is because winning back the position of the questioning subject for the black female is a two-pronged goal. First, there must be provocations intense enough to lure aspects of her image from the depths to the surface of the mirror. And then, synchronously, there must be a probe for pressure points (which may or may not be the same as flashpoints). These are places where, when enough stress is applied, the black female's aspects can be reinserted into the social domain.

I have only shadowy premonitions of the images I will find in the mirror, and my perception of how successfully I can locate generalizable moments of social agency is necessarily vague. I have entered on this double path knowing in advance that as another African American woman said in a different context, it is more work than all of us together can accomplish in the boundaries of our collective lifetimes.<sup>49</sup> With so much to do in so

little time, only the task's urgency is forcing me to stop long enough to try and clear a theoretical way for it.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 77.
- <sup>2</sup> Sylvia Arden Boone, *Radiance from the Waters: Ideals of Feminine Beauty in Mende Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 102.
- <sup>3</sup> "African American Women in Defense of ourselves," advertisement, *New York Times*, 17 November 1991, 53.
- <sup>4</sup> Judith Wilson, "Getting Down to Get Over: Romare Bearden's Use of Pornography and the Problem of the Black Female Body in Afro-U.S. Art," in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 114
- <sup>5</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, (New York: Knopf, 1987), 119.
- <sup>6</sup> George Nelson Preston, quoted in Wilson, "Getting Down," 114.
- <sup>7</sup> For an examination of the relationship of black women to the first white feminist movement, see Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) chs. 1 and 5, and bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981). For insights into the problems of black women in the second white feminist movement, see Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Cornel West (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990), and Bernice Johnson Reagon. "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century," in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983). For problems of women of color in a white women's organization at the start of the third feminist movement, see Lorraine O'Grady on WAC, "Dada Meets Mama," *Artforum*, 31, no. 2 (October 1992):11-12.
- <sup>8</sup> See Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage* (New York: Anchor / Doubleday, 1979).
- <sup>9</sup> Spillers, "Interstices," 78.
- <sup>10</sup> Michelle Wallace, "Multiculturalism and Oppositionality," in *Afterimage* 19, no. 3 (October 1991):7.
- <sup>11</sup> Nancy Hartsock, "Rethinking Modernism: Minority vs. Majority Theories," in *Cultural Critique* 7, special issue: "The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse II," ed. Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd, 204.

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- <sup>12</sup> See the title story by Merle Hodge in Pamela Mordecai and Betty Wilson, eds., *Her True-True Name* (London: Heinemann Caribbean Writers Series, 1989), 196-202. This anthology is a collection of short stories and novel extracts by women writers from the English, French, and Spanish-speaking Caribbean.
- <sup>13</sup> The understanding that analysis of the contemporary situation of African American women is dependent on the imaginative and intellectual retrieval of the black woman's experience under slavery is now so broadly shared that an impressive amount of writings have accumulated. In fiction, a small sampling might include, in addition to Morrison's *Beloved*, Margaret Walker, *Jubilee* (New York: Bantam, 1966); Octavia E. Butler, *Kindred* (1979; reprint, Boston: Beacon Press, 1988); Sherley A. Williams, *Dessa Rose* (New York: William Morrow, 1986); and Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1988). For the testimony of slave women themselves, see Harriet A. Jacobs, edited by Jean Fagan Yellin, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987); *Six Women's Slave Narratives*, the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); and Gerda Lerner, ed., *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972). For a historical and sociological overview, see Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985).
- <sup>14</sup> Wilson, "Getting Down," 121, note 13.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 114
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>18</sup> Judith Wilson, telephone conversation with the author, January 21, 1992.
- <sup>19</sup> Wilson, "Getting Down," 116-18.
- <sup>20</sup> Adrian Piper, "Food for the Spirit, July 1971," in *High Performance 13* (spring 1981). This was the first chronicling of *Food* with accompanying images. The nude image from this performance first appeared in Piper's retrospective catalogue, Jane Farver. *Adrian Piper: Reflections 1967-87* (New York: Alternative Museum, April 18-May 30, 1987).
- <sup>21</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (summer 1987): 68).
- <sup>22</sup> Hartsock, "Rethinking Modernism," 196, 194.
- <sup>23</sup> Toni Morrison, in Charles Ruas, "Toni Morrison's Triumph," an interview in *Soho News*, 11-17 March 1981, 12.
- <sup>24</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," in *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 272.

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<sup>25</sup> "Carnal Knowing: Sexuality and Subjectivity in Representing Women's Bodies," a panel of the College Art Association, 80th Annual Conference, Chicago, February 15, 1992.

<sup>26</sup> A riff on Barbara Christian's title, "But What Do We Think We're Doing Anyway: The State of Black Feminist Criticism(s)," in *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*, ed. Cheryl A. Wall (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), which is itself a riff on Gloria T. Hull's title, "What It Is I Think She's Doing Anyhow: A Reading of Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*," in Smith, *Home Girls*, which is in turn a riff on Toni Cade Bambara's autobiographical essay, "What It s I Think I'm Doing Anyhow," in *The Writer on Her Work*, ed. Janet Sternberg (New York: W.W. Norton, 1980).

<sup>27</sup> "But by thus remaking contact with the body, and with the world, we shall also discover ourselves, since, perceiving as we do with our body, the body is a natural self and, as it were, the subject of perception.: Quoted by Edward R. Levine, unpublished paper delivered at College Art Association, 80th Annual Conference, Chicago, February 13, 1992

<sup>28</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Strategy, Identity, Writing," in *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1990), 42.

<sup>29</sup> Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien, "Race, Sexual Politics and Black Masculinity: A Dossier," in *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity*, ed. Rowena Chapman and Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1987), 106-7.

<sup>30</sup> Wallace, "Multiculturalism," 7.

<sup>31</sup> Spivak, "Criticism, Feminism, and the Institution," in *The Post-Colonial Critic*, 11.

<sup>32</sup> See the oft-quoted phrase, "for the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," in Lorde, "Age, Race," 287.

<sup>33</sup> Jacqueline Rose, "Sexuality and Vision: Some Questions," in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. al Foster, Dia Art Foundation, Discussions in Contemporary Culture no. 2 (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), 130.

<sup>34</sup> Wallace, "Multiculturalism," 7.

<sup>35</sup> bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 115-31.

<sup>36</sup> Spivak, "Criticism, Feminism, and the Institution," 11.

<sup>37</sup> Spillers, "Interstices," 79.

<sup>38</sup> See the famous description of African American "double-consciousness" in W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: New American Library, 1982), 45.

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- <sup>39</sup> Elizabeth Hess, "Black Teeth: Who Was Jean-Michel Basquiat and Why Did He Die?" *Village Voice*, 3 November 1992, 104.
- <sup>40</sup> "The expressionist quest for immediacy is taken up in the belief that there exists a content beyond convention, a reality beyond representation. Because this quest is spiritual, not social, it tends to project metaphysical oppositions (rather than articulate political positions); it tends, that is, to stay within the antagonistic realm of the Imaginary." Hal Foster, *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1985), 63.
- <sup>41</sup> Cited in Teresa de Lauretis, *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 17.
- <sup>42</sup> Stuart Hall, "Theoretical Legacies," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 291.
- <sup>43</sup> Spivak, "Criticism, Feminism, and the Institution," 47.
- <sup>44</sup> bell hooks, interviewed by Lisa Jones, "Rebel without a Pause," in the *Voice Literary Supplement* (October 1992): 10.
- <sup>45</sup> Paul Éluard, quoted in Mary Ann Caws, *The Poetry of Dada and Surrealism: Aragon, Breton, Tzara, Éluard, and Desnos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 167.
- <sup>46</sup> Hall, "Theoretical Legacies," passim.
- <sup>47</sup> Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, selected and edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1961), 197.
- <sup>48</sup> Rose, "Sexuality and Vision," 129.
- <sup>49</sup> Deborah E., McDowell, "Boundaries," in *Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s*, ed. Houston A. Baker Jr. and Patricia Redmond (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 70.

WANDERING/WILDING:  
BLACKNESS ON THE INTERNET

niv Acosta | Hannah Black | Evan Ifekoya | E. Jane  
Devin Kenny | Tabita Rezaire | Fannie Sosa

Curated by Legacy Russell

#WanderingWILDING

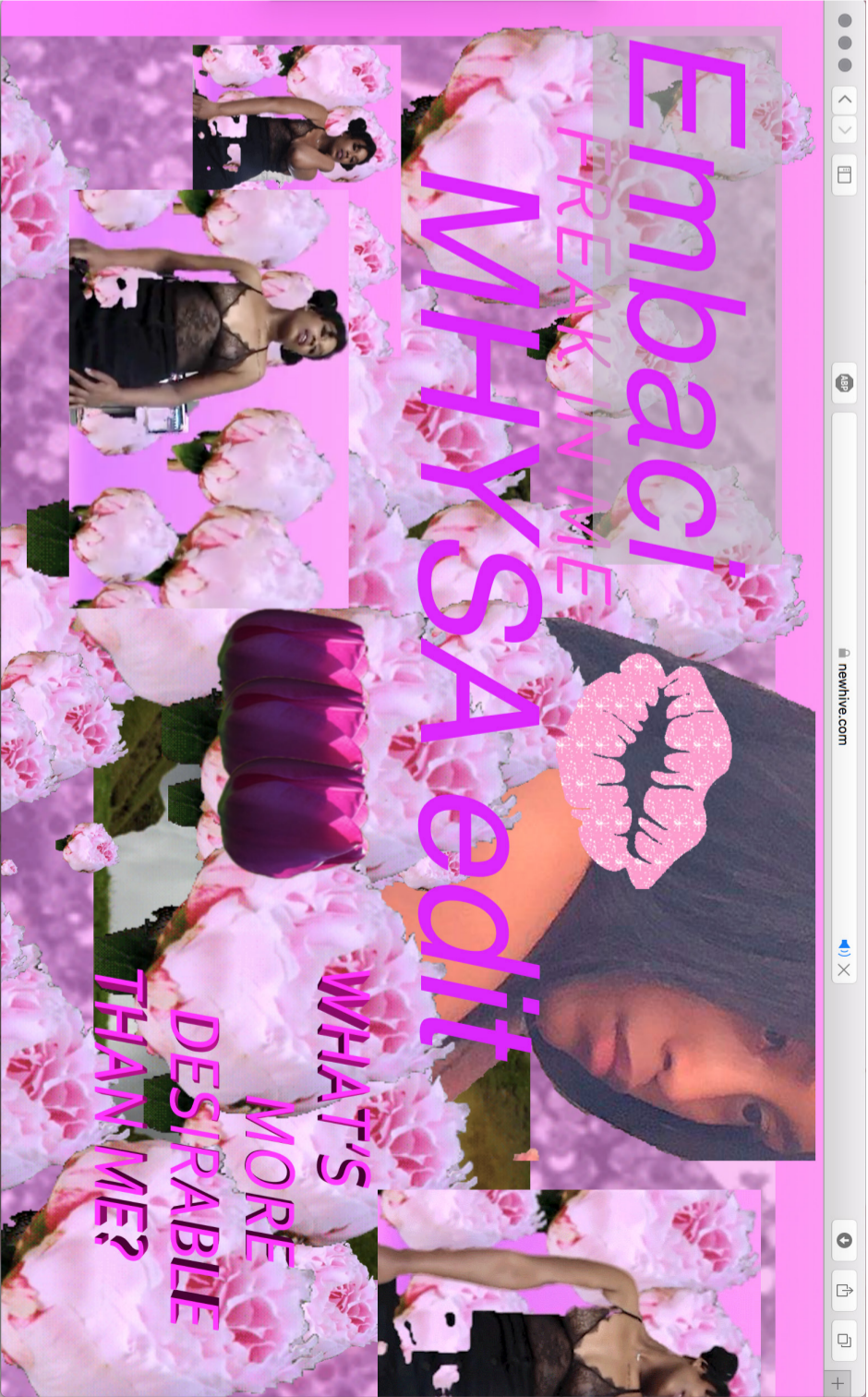
A call-and-response to “The Peril of Black Mobility”, a critical essay by Doreen St. Félix, “Wandering / WILDING: Blackness on the Internet” presents the work of seven artists—Niv Acosta, Hannah Black, Evan Ifekoya, E. Jane, Devin Kenny, Tabita Rezaire, and Fannie Sosa—whose work mobilizes an exploration of race via the material of the Internet.

Wandering points to the socio-cultural identity of the *flâneur*, mused on by Baudelaire as “a roving soul in search of a body”, later reintroduced into the academy by Walter Benjamin as a mark of modernity distinctly threatened by developments of an impending Industrial Revolution. Alternately, *wilding* is a slang word which came into mainstream use in 1980s New York, a dog-whistle term used to describe the gang assault of strangers that rose out of the controversial Central Park jogger case in 1989 wherein five teenagers of color were accused of and jailed for a crime they did not commit.

In relation to this event “WILDING” was the cover headline of New York’s Daily News on April 22nd, 1989 and became part of the fear-mongering language used to mark the collective socialising of black and brown bodies as inherent public threat and, in turn, justify increased profiling and policing of such bodies throughout New York City. With ongoing media attention turned to #BlackLivesMatter, a global movement that continues to grow online and out in the world in the U.S., U.K., and beyond, the reality of such policing as international phenomena has sparked a much-needed discussion surrounding freedom of movement, as well as race and class tied to the exercising of civil liberties.

Thus “Wandering / WILDING” presents a challenging dichotomy and essential opportunity for discourse, situating a spotlight on the privileged white body that Baudelaire’s “roving soul” has historically inhabited and that American culture has inherited and built into the consciousness of its cultural mythology with the ongoing desire to be “on the road”, the same roads and streets that are not equally carefree nor safe for all bodies that traverse them. What can the Internet do for the black *flâneur*? What freedoms can be found in the “publics” realized via the digital for bodies of color? In what way do artists make new spaces for black lives to matter, online? Wandering / WILDING: Blackness on the Internet and the artists therein aim to inspect, and investigate.

Legacy Russell



Published on the occasion of the exhibition Wandering/WILDING: Blackness on the Internet with niv Acosta, Hannah Black, Evan Ifekoya, E. Jane, Devin Kenny, Tabita Rezaire and Fannie Sosa at IMT Gallery, London, curated by Legacy Russell.

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## **"NO HUMANS INVOLVED": AN OPEN LETTER TO MY COLLEAGUES**

*Forum N.H.I.: Knowledge for the 21st Century.* vol. 1, no. 1, Fall 1994.

Dear Colleagues:

You may have heard a radio news report which aired briefly during the days after the jury's acquittal of the policemen in the Rodney King beating case. The report stated that public officials of the judicial system of Los Angeles routinely used the acronym N.H.I. to refer to any case involving a breach of the rights of young Black males who belong to the jobless category of the inner city ghettos. N. H. I. means "no humans involved."

Stephen Jay Gould argues that "systems of classification direct our thinking and order our behaviors." [Gould, 1983] By classifying this category as N.H.I. these public officials would have given the police of Los Angeles the green light to deal with its members in any way they pleased. You may remember too that in the earlier case of the numerous deaths of young Black males caused by a specific chokehold used by Los Angeles police officers to arrest young Black males, the police chief Darryl Gates explained away these *judicial* murders by arguing that Black males had something abnormal with their windpipes. That they had to be classified and thereby treated *differently* from all other North Americans, except to a secondary degree, the darker-skinned Latinos. For in this classificatory schema too *all* "minorities" are equal except one category - that of the peoples of African and of Afro-mixed descent who, as Andrew Hacker points out in his recent book, are *the least equal of all*.

"Certainly," Hacker writes, in *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (1992) "all persons deemed to be other than white, can detail how they have suffered discrimination at the hands of white America. Any allusions to racist attitudes and actions will find Cherokees and Chinese and Cubans agreeing with great vigor ... yet ...members of all these intermediate groups have been allowed to *put a visible distance between themselves and Black Americans*."

"The Vietnamese," Richard Pryor quipped, "learned how to become good Americans by learning how to say nigger."

### **WHERE DID THIS CLASSIFICATION COME FROM? THE POINT OF MY LETTER TO YOU**

Yet where did this system of classification come from? One that was held both by the officers involved in this specific case of the routine "nigger breaking" of Black males, as well as by the mainly white, middle class suburban Simi Valley jurors? Most of all, and this is the point of my letter to you, why should the classifying acronym N.H.I., with its reflex anti-Black male behaviour-prescriptions, have been so actively held and deployed by the judicial officers of Los Angeles, and therefore by "the brightest and the best" graduates of both the professional and non-professional schools of the university system of the United States? By those whom we ourselves would have educated?

How did they come to conceive of what it means to be both *human* and *North American* in the *kinds of terms* (i.e. to be White, of Euroamerican culture and descent, middle-class, college-educated and suburban) within whose logic, the jobless and usually school drop-out/push-out category of young Black males can be

*perceived, and therefore behaved towards*, only as the *Lack* of the human, the Conceptual Other to being North American? The same way, as Zygmunt Bauman has been pointed out, that all Germans of Jewish descent were made into and behaved towards as the Conceptual Other to German identity in its then Pan-Aryan and Nazi form [Bauman, 1989].

If, as Ralph Ellison alerted us to in his *The Invisible Man*, we see each other only through the "inner eyes" with which we look with our physical eyes upon reality, the question we must confront in the wake of the Rodney King Event becomes: What is our responsibility for the making of those "inner eyes?" Ones in which *humanness* and *North Americanness* are always already defined, not only in optimally White terms, but also in optimally middle-class (i.e. both Simi Valley, and secondarily Cosby-Huxtable TV. family), variants of these terms? What have we had to do, and still have to do, with the putting in place of the classifying logic of that shared mode of "subjective understanding" [Jaime Carbonell, 1987] in whose "inner eyes," young Black males, can be perceived as being *justly*, shut out from what Helen Fein calls the "universe of moral obligation" that bonds the interests of the Simi Valley jurors as Whites and non-Blacks (one Asian, one Hispanic), to the interests of the White policemen and the Los Angeles judicial office-holders who are our graduates?

In her book on the 1915 genocide of the Armenians by the Turkish pan-nationalists, and on the Jews by the Pan-Aryan racialists in the 1930's-1940's, Helen Fein points out that in both cases there was a common causal factor. This factor was that over the millennium which preceded their group annihilation, "both Jews and Armenians had been decreed by the dominant group that was to *perpetrate in the crime to be outside the sanctified universe of obligation* - that circle of people with reciprocal obligations to protect each other whose bonds arose from their relation to a deity

or a sacred source of authority" [Helen Fein, 1979]. In both cases, although the genocides were inflicted in the secular name of a now *sacred "national"* identity, based, in the case of the Turks on the discourse of a historical Pan-Turkism and, in the case of the German-Aryans, on that of the sanctity of a "pure" racial stock, both groups had been defined "*within recent memory similarly to pariahs outside the sanctified social order.*" It was this discursive classification that had enabled them to be misrecognized as *aliens*, as *strangers* who were, as if it were, of a different *species*; strangers, "*not* because they were aliens but because the dominant group was alienated from them by a traditional antipathy." [Fein, 1979].

This is the same case, of course, with the N.H.I. acronym. For the social effects to which this acronym, and its placing outside the "sanctified universe of obligation," of the category of young Black males to which it refers, leads, whilst not *overtly* genocidal, are clearly having genocidal effects with the incarceration and elimination of young Black males by ostensibly normal, and everyday *means*.

Statistics with respect to this empirical fact have been cited over and over again. Andrew Hacker's recent book documents the systemic White/Black differential with respect to life-opportunity on which our present North American order is based. Nevertheless, this differential is replicated, and *transracially* so, between, on the one hand, the *classes* (upper middle, middle, lower middle and working, whether capital owners or jobholders), who are therefore classified *within* the "universe of obligation" integrating of our present world system and its nation-state sub-units, and on the other hand, the category of the non-owning jobless young of the inner cities; primarily Black with Latino, and increasingly also, White, assimilated to its underclass category.

In the wake of the Civil Rights movements, and of the Affirmative Action programs which incorporated a now new Black middle class into the "American Dream," the jobless category has been made to bear the weight of the Deviant status that, before the Sixties had been imposed on *all* Americans of African and Afro-mixed descent, by the nation-state order of the U.S., *as an imperative condition of its own systemic functioning*. Indeed, it may be said that it is this category of the jobless young Black males who have been made to pay the "sacrificial costs" (in the terms of René Girard's *The Scapegoat*, 1986) for the relatively improved conditions since the 1960's that have impelled many Black Americans out of the ghettos and into the suburbs; that made possible therefore the universal acclamation for the Cosby-Huxtable TV family who proved that *some* Black Americans could aspire to, and even be, drawn inside, the "sanctified category" of Americans *just like us* - if still secondarily so, *behind* "women" and the other "minorities."

The price paid by the jobless Black male category for this social transformation is inescapably clear. With respect to the judicial apparatus itself, statistics show that whilst Black men constitute 6% of the U.S. population, they have come to make up 47% of the prison population. Whilst, in the entire prison population, in the wake of the mandatory sentences for drug offenses imposed by (largely White and middle class) Drug War officials, both Afro-Black young males and Latino-Brown ones, are to be found out of all proportion to their numbers in the society. The May 7, 1992 *New York Times* editorial which gives these statistics, also point out that it costs \$25,000 a year "to keep a kid in prison; which is more than the Job Corps or college." However, for society at large to choose the latter option in place of the former would mean that the "kids" in question could no longer be "perceived" in N.H.I. terms as they are now perceived by all; nor

could they continue *to be induced to so perceive themselves* within these same terms, as they now do, fratricidally turning upon themselves, killing each other off in gang wars or by other violent methods.

Where does this "inner eye" which leads the society to choose the former option in dealing with the North American variant of the jobless category of the post-Industrial New Poor [Bauman, 1987], the category to which at the global level, Frantz Fanon has given the name *les damnés*, the *condemned*, [Fanon, 1963] come from? Why is this "eye" so intricately bound up with that code, so determinant of our collective behaviours, to which we have given the name, *race*?

"It seems" a sociology professor, Christopher Jenks, points out in the wake of the L.A. "that we're always trying to reduce race to something else. Yet out there on the streets race does not reduce to something else." [*Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 13, 1992] I have come to believe, after struggling with this issue from the "lay" perspective of Black Studies (which was itself able to enter academia only in the wake of the Civil Rights movement, the Watts urban riots, and the protests which erupted after the assassination of Martin Luther King), not only that "race" cannot be reduced as an issue, to anything else, but that it is we in academia who alone hold the key to "race," and therefore to the classificatory logic of the acronym, N.H.I.

My major proposal is that both the issue of "race" and its classificatory logic (as, in David Duke's belief that "the Negro is an evolutionarily lower level than the Caucasian") lies in the founding premise, on which our present order of knowledge or *episteme* [Foucault, 1973] and its rigorously elaborated disciplinary paradigms, are based.

## TAKING THE MAP FOR THE TERRITORY: THE FALLACY OF SUPRACULTURALISM

What is this premise? Michel Foucault traces the processes by which our present major disciplines came to be put in place at the end of the eighteenth century by European thinkers, to a central *representation* by means of which the human would come to perceive and know itself *as if it were* a purely natural organism in complete continuity with organic life. For if, in the terms specific to the "local" culture [Geertz, 1983] of Western Europe, and therefore to its founding Judaeo-Christian Narrative of human emancipation [Griaule, 1948, Lyotard, 1989] the human had been represented as a *divinely created being* in the terms of the Biblical Genesis account of origins, the new conception of the human, that would be based during the nineteenth century on the new Narrative of Evolution, would be that of an *evolutionarily selected being*. In this conception the human was held to *pre-exist* the "local cultures," including ours, by means of which alone human "forms of life" can come to exist [D.T. Campbell, 1982; Lieberman, 1991], as the hybridly biological (*bios*) and narrative-discursive (*logos*) level of existence that they are [Wynter, 1991]. That is, as they are *outside* the mode of subjective understanding or "inner eyes" constituted by the "prescriptive categories" of the "native cultural model" [Legesse, 1973] which is itself rigorously elaborated by the present disciplinary paradigms of the Humanities and the Social Sciences.

The Eritrean anthropologist Asmarom Legesse points out that our present organization of knowledge is premised on what he terms the *technocultural* fallacy. This fallacy, he asserts,

derives from the failure of anthropology [and the other disciplines as well] to distinguish the purposive aspects of human behavior ...and the unconscious structure in human culture (as reflected in language and the cognitive bases of life) from the *nonconscious empirical processes* that link man directly to animal societies and the ecosystem [to in effect economic processes] [Legesse, 1973]

It is this fallacy which underlies the premise of the discipline of economics, (as the present master discipline in the place of theology), that our human behaviours are motivated primarily by the imperative common to all organic species of securing the material basis of their existence; rather than by *imperative* of securing the overall conditions of existence, (cultural, religious, representational and through their mediation, material), of each local culture's represented conception of the Self (Wittgenstein's "form of life"). In this context, history falls into the trap of taking its narration of what happened in the past, a narration clearly oriented by our present culture specific conception of the human, as if indeed it were what actually happened, when seen from a transcultural perspective. The recent controversy over the California school textbook, *America Will Be*, which imagines the United States as a "nation of immigrants" provides an instructive example of the historical paradigm's conflation of narrative history with "history as what happened" [Waswo, 1988].

The classificatory logic of the acronym N.H.I., (as well as the belief system of a David Duke for whom whilst the "Caucasian" incarnates the ostensibly most highly evolved and selected mode of "normal" human being, the "lower non-White races" and most ultimately the "Negro," incarnate the most atavistic non-evolved Lack of the human), *derives* therefore from a second fallacy related to the above; one which underlies our present disciplinary paradigms, and their hegemonic mode of

economic rationality. This second fallacy, that of *supraculturalism*, mistakes our present "local culture's representation-of-the-human-as-a-natural organism as if it were the human-in-itself, mistakes the representation for the reality, the map for the territory.

For whilst the human species is bio-evolutionarily programmed to *be* human on the basis of the unique nature of its capacity for speech [Lieberman, 1991] it realizes itself *as human* only by coming to regulate its behaviours, no longer *primarily*, by the genetic programs specific to its genome, but by means of its narratively instituted conceptions of itself; and therefore by the *culture-specific discursive programs*, to which these conceptions give rise. As in the case of our present scholarly elaboration of the natural organism idea of the human, and of its representation as a "form of life" regulated in its behaviours by the same imperatives of material food production and of procreation that also regulate the lives of purely organic species. Rather than, I propose here by the narratively instituted goal-trees [Carbonell, 1987] or purposes specific to each "local culture" including our own.

It is only within the terms of our present local culture, in which the earlier feudal-Christian religious ethic and its goal of Spiritual Redemption and Eternal Salvation has been inverted and replaced by the goal of Material Redemption, and, therefore, by the transcendental imperative of securing the economic well being, of the now biologized body of the Nation (and of national security!), that the human can at all be conceived of *as if it were* a mode of being which exists in a relation of pure *continuity* with the that of organic life. Whilst it is only within these terms, that the N.H.I. acronym and its classificatory logic is to be understood as part of the *genetic status-organizing principle* of which the phenomenon that we have come to know as "race", is the expression. The feudal-Christian order of Europe had conceived of the caste (noble

birth and descent) organizing principle of its order as being divinely ordained (theocentric paradigm). Equally it is only on the basis of our present conception of a genetic status organizing principle, based on evolutionarily pre-selected degrees of biological value, as iconized in the White/Black invariant differential, that our present world system and its nation-state sub-units, can be hierarchically allocated on the basis of each category's ostensible pre-selection for higher and lower degrees of genetic worth (biocentric paradigm). One ostensibly "verified" by the individual or category's place on the social ladder.

"The problem of the twentieth century" W. E. B. Du Bois predicted in 1903, would be the problem of the *Color Line*. This line is made fixed and invariant by the institutionally determined differential between *Whites* (as the bearers of the ostensibly highest degrees of *eugenic descent*), and *Blacks* (as the bearers of the ostensibly lowest degrees of the lack of this descent); by its highest degree of its nigger dysgenicity as the extreme form of the "native" within the logic of the "Man"/non-White Native code deciphered by Fanon and Sartre [Fanon and Sartre, 1963].

Consequently the White/Black invariant Absolute serves to provide the status organizing principle that the Caribbean historian Elsa Goveia identified as being based on the *superiority/inferiority* ranking rule according to which all other non-White groups as "intermediate categories," place themselves, and are assessed on their relative "worth" according to their nearness to the one and distance from the other. At the same time, as it also enables the middle classes to institutionally legitimate their own ostensible *analogically* selected genetic superiority, as a group category over the non-middle classes; most of all over the underclass of South Central Los Angeles and its global extensions.

**FROM "NOBLE" TO "EUGENIC" DESCENT, "CASTE"  
TO "RACE," WHITE/BLACK TO OWNERS,  
JOBHOLDERS/NON-OWNING JOBHOLDERS  
DIFFERENTIAL**

Before the Civil Rights Movement of the Sixties, the institutionally secured White/Black segregation served to absolutize, as the icon of an ostensibly pre-selected genetic value differential between *human hereditary variations*, the representation of *eugenic descent* on whose basis the global middle classes legitimate their ontological hegemonic social status. In the same way as in the earlier feudal order of Europe the Noble/Peasant invariant status differential had recursively served to verify the "truth" of the divinely ordered hegemony of the aristocracy based on its Noble line of descent; one which legitimated their caste dominance. This earlier truth had only been brought to an end by the intellectual revolution of humanism of fourteenth and fifteenth century Europe, when the lay humanists had challenged and displaced the absolutism of the theological categories of the then mainstream Scholastic order of knowledge, presided over by the Clergy - categories, whose primary function was to "verify" the ostensibly divinely ordained status principles of the order, and its code of "Caste." Equally the code of "Race" can only be brought to an end with the bringing to an end of the "our present mode of truth" together with the Absolutism of its economic categories.

Both W. E. B. Du Bois and Elsa Goveia have emphasized the way in which the code of "Race" or the Color Line, functions to systemically *pre-determine* the sharply unequal re-distribution of the collectively produced global resources; and, therefore, the correlation of the racial ranking rule with the Rich/Poor rule. Goveia pointed out that all American societies are integrated on the

basis of a central cultural belief in which all *share*. This belief, that of the genetic-racial inferiority of Black people to *all others*, functions to enable our social hierarchies, including those of rich and poor determined directly by the economic system, to be perceived as having been *as* pre-determined by "that great crap game called life," as have also ostensibly been the invariant hierarchy between White and Black. Consequently in the Caribbean and Latin America, within the terms of this socio-symbolic calculus, to be "rich" was also to be "White," to be poor was also to be "Black."

Where the segregation system of the United States' variant had made the White/Black invariant into the absolute and primary invariant, with the Civil Rights struggle and the rise of the Post-Industrial consumer-driven economy, the primary focus has shifted to a variant of the old differential. This differential is one between the suburban category of the owners and job-holders on the one hand (of all races including the Cosby-Huxtable and *A Different World* Black Americans), and the Black non-owners and non-jobholders on the other. Consequently, since the Sixties, this new variant of the eugenic/dysgenic status organizing principle has been expressed primarily by the growing life style differential between the suburban middle classes (who are metonymically White), and the inner city category of the Post-Industrial Jobless (who are metonymically young Black males). Where the category of the owners/jobholders are, of whatever race, assimilated to the category of "Whites," the opposed category of the non-owners, and the non-jobholders are assimilated to the category of the "young Black males."

The analogy I want make here is this. That if the ostensibly divinely ordained caste organizing principle of the Europe's feudal-Christian order was fundamentally secured by the Absolutism of its Scholastic order of knowledge, (including its pre-Columbus

geography of the earth and its pre-Copernicus Christian-Ptolemaic astronomy), the ostensibly evolutionarily determined genetic organizing principle of our Liberal Humanist own, as expressed in the empirical hierarchies of *race* and *class* (together with the kind of gender role allocation between men and women needed to keep these systemic hierarchies in place), is as fundamentally secured by our present disciplines of the *Humanities and Social Sciences*. Given that once the physical and the biological sciences had, after long struggles, freed human knowledge of the physical and biological levels of reality, from having to *verify*, as they still did in the feudal-European and all other pre-Sixteenth century human cultures, the "truth" or mode of *subjective understanding/inner eyes* on whose basis the role allocation system of each order can alone be perceived as having been *extra-humanly* determined, and therefore as just, *only the "truths" with respect to our knowledge of the social reality* of which we are subjects (and therefore always already *subjected* and socialized agents/observers), could now be deployed to verify the ostensible extra-human, because bio-evolutionary determined nature of our present status-organizing principle based on the code of "Race." As the Liberal analogue therefore of the feudal code of "Caste."

My proposal here therefore is that it is only on the basis of the classificatory logic of our present Humanities and Social Sciences, and its related mode of subjective understanding or "inner eyes" generated from the representation of the human as an evolutionarily selected organism, (and who can therefore be *more* or *less* human, even totally lacking in humanness as in the case of the N.H.I.), that we can be induced to see all those outside our present "sanctified universe of obligation," whether as racial or as Jobless Other, as having been placed in their inferiorized status, *not* by our culture-specific *institutional mechanisms* but rather by the extra-human ordering of bio-evolutionary Natural Selection.

That our global and nation-state socio-systemic hierarchies are therefore the expression, not of the prescriptive categories of our now globalized cultural epistemological model, but of the, in the last instance, evolutionarily pre-selected degrees of eugenic "worth" between human groups at the level of *race, culture, religion, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and sex*.

### THE NEW QUESTION, FROM WOODSON TO WIESEL TO ORR: WHAT IS WRONG WITH OUR EDUCATION?

The central institutional mechanisms which integrate and regulate our present world system, I propose here, are the prescriptive categories of our present order of knowledge, as disseminated in our present global university system and its correlated textbook industry. How and why is this so? Paul Ricœur has based himself on the thesis of Clifford Geertz that "ideology is a function of human cultural systems," to propose that the systems of knowledge by which human orders know themselves, must serve to provide a "generalized horizon of understanding" able to induce the collective behaviours of each order's subjects. Since these are the behaviours by means of which each order is integrated and made stably replicable as such an order, without such horizons of understanding or "inner eyes," no human order could exist [Ricœur, 1979].

Legesse further suggests that all mainstream scholars necessarily function as the *grammarians* of our order; that is, as "men and women" who are well-versed in the "techniques of ordering a select body of facts within a framework that is completely consistent with the system of values, the *weltanschauung* and, above all, the *cognitive model*" of the society

to which they belong [Ricoeur, 1979; Legesse, 1973]. It is only by the "trained skills" which we bring to the ordering of such facts, that intellectuals as a category, are able to ensure the existence of each order's conceptual framework, which we rework and elaborate in order to provide the "inner eyes" by whose mode of subjective understanding, each order's subjects regulate their behaviours, for both enormous good and evil.

So what are we to do as the grammarians by means of whose rigorous elaboration of the "prescriptive categories" of our present epistemological order, and therefore of our "local culture" [Geertz, 1983] "inner eyes," the collective behaviours which bring the present nation-state order of the United States into being as such a specific order of reality are oriented, now that we are confronted with the price paid for the putting in place of this order of reality, as in the case of the Rodney King Beating/jury acquittal/South Central Los Angeles uprising Event? What are we, specifically as Black intellectuals, to do?

For we as Black intellectuals owe our *group* presence in the university system (rather than as pre-Sixties, where our exceptionality as the token Black scholar verified the rule which excluded our ostensibly I.Q.- lacking population group), to the call for a new intellectual order of knowledge that was originally made in the wake of the Civil Rights movement. This call that had been reinforced and made powerful, then too by the burning cities of Watts, of other ghettos, as well as the uprisings after Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination of the "captive population," who, as James Baldwin wrote, normally have no means of enforcing their will upon the city or State. Given this situation, are we then to recycle the same old pieties? Shall we continue to settle for the *Bantustans* in which, as David Bradley wrote in 1982, we have been trapped?

Bradley had first pointed to the systemic nature of the curriculum exclusion imposed on all Black Americans as the function of the United States continuing to conceive of itself as a White and Euroamerican "Nation of Immigrants." He had then argued that in the wake of the Sixties and Seventies social movements, Black American intellectuals had been trapped by their refusal to confront a central question. This question was that of the *systemic* nature of the rules which governed their exclusion from the mainstream conception of the United States, and which erased their

centrality to the existential reality of North America. Bradley wrote:

As a result of rallies we got courses in 'black literature' and 'black history' and a special black adviser for black students and a black cultural center...rotting white washed house on neither edge of campus...reachable...by way of a scramble up a muddy bank...And all those new courses did was exempt the departments from the unsettling necessity of altering existing ones, so they could go right advertising a course in 'American Fiction' that explicitly includes Hawthorne, Clemens, James, Wharton, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and implicitly excludes Chesnutt, Hurston, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison.

The issue here was that of deconstructing the curriculum mechanisms which expelled the Black Conceptual Other outside the "universe of obligation;" that therefore of redefining *White America*, as simply *America*. The issue therefore of a curriculum freed from the coding of race, on which it is at present instituted, and one that would have necessarily led to the asking of a central question - that of the validity of our present order of knowledge itself.

This question had been raised by the Black American educator Carter G. Woodson as early as 1933 in his book *The*

*Miseducation of the Negro* and has been re-asked in somewhat different but still related terms by Elie Wiesel, a survivor of the Nazi Holocaust, as well as by David Orr, an environmentalist educator. Woodson had asked then, what was wrong with our present system of education? One whose scholarly curriculum not only served to strongly demotivate Black students, and to lead to their dropping out, but which also socialized White students to be the lynchers (and policemen-beaters) of Black Americans when they became adults. Woodson then used his analysis of the 1933 school curriculum, to argue that the demotivated and inferior intellectual performance of Black students, as a category, should be sought in the same source from which the deep-seated anti-Black phobia shared in by White students (as well as by the students of all other intermediate non-White groups) was also generated. These effects, he proposed, should be sought for, neither in the I.Q. deficiency of Blacks as an ostensibly evolutionarily retarded population group [C.D. Darlington, 1979], nor in the "innately racist" psyche, of the White lynchers. Instead both were to be seen as psycho-social responses that were regularly induced by the systemic nature of the cognitive distortions with respect to the North American, as well as to the human past and present, that were everywhere present in the 1933 curriculum/textbooks.

These distortions, he went on, served an extra-cognitive function. This function was that of inducing the White students to believe that their ancestors had done everything worth doing in both the past, and at the same time, to induce the Black students to believe that their ancestors had done nothing worth doing, whether in the human or in the American past. One of the clues to this extra-cognitive function was that all non-Whites were not equally stigmatized. Whilst the past of all other groups was stigmatized, they were nevertheless left with certain shreds of human dignity. This was not so with respect to the 1933 curriculum's

misrepresentation of the Afro-American past and as well as its present.

Woodson's "epistemological break" at this juncture was to see that the function of these White/Black misrepresentations was that of *differentially* motivating the respective categories of White and Black, in order to ensure the stable replication of the *invariant relation* of dominance/subordination between the two social categories as the empirical embodiment of the socio-symbolic analogy from which the genetic status-organizing principle, about which our present global national order institutes itself as an autopoietic or self-organizing living system [Maturana and Varela, 1980], can alone be generated. It was therefore the role of these systemic cognitive distortions to provide the mode of "truth" able to induce the White students (as the potential enforcers of their totemic group differential status vis-à-vis the Black category, whether as adult lyncher, policeman-beater or Simi Valley juror), to perceive it as their "just" and legitimate duty to keep the order's Conceptual Other in its systemic place. "Why not," Woodson asked, "exploit, enslave, or exterminate a class that everybody is taught to regard as inferior?" "There would be," he further pointed out, "no lynching if it did not start in the classroom." Why not judicially "lynch" those who had been made perceivable as "no humans involved?" This all the more so in the case of the Rodney Kings, who since the Sixties have come to occupy a *doubled pariah* status, no longer that of *only* being Black, but of also belonging to the rapidly accelerating Post-Industrial category of the *poor and jobless*? As the category which, defined by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman as that of the New Poor, embodies a plight, which like that of the ongoing degradation of the planetary environment, is not even *posable*, not to say *resolvable*, within the conceptual framework of our present order of knowledge.

Which is of course, where we come in, and the new form of the question - what is wrong with our education? Environmental educator, David Orr pointed out in a 1990 commencement address, that the blame for the environmental destruction of a planet on which we are losing "116 square miles of rain forest or an acre a second," and on which at the same time we send up "2, 700 tons of chlorofluorocarbon into the atmosphere" as well as other behaviours destructive of our ecosystemic life support system, should be placed where it belongs. All of these effects, he argues, are the results of decisions taken *not* by ignorant and unlearned people. Rather, they were and are decisions taken by the "best and brightest" products of our present system of education; of its highest levels of learning, of universities like ours here at Stanford. Orr then cited in this context a point made by Elie Wiesel to a Global Forum held in Moscow in the Winter of 1989.

"The designers and perpetrators of the Holocaust," Wiesel pointed out, "were the heirs of Kant and Goethe." Although, "in most respects the Germans were the best educated people on earth, their education did not serve as an adequate barrier to barbarity. What was wrong with their education?"

### **THE ISSUE THAT CONFRONTS US: TO MARRY OUR THOUGHT TO THE PLIGHT OF THE NEW POOR AND THE ENVIRONMENT**

I come now to the final point of my letter to you. Jesse Jackson made the point that the uprising of South Central L.A. "was a spontaneous combustion - this time not of discarded material but of discarded people." As is the case with the also hitherto discardable environment, its ongoing pollution, and ozone layer depletion, the reality of the throwaway lives, both at the

global socio-human level, of the vast majority of peoples who inhabit the "*favela/shanty town*" of the globe and their jobless archipelagoes, as well, at the national level, of Baldwin's "captive population" in the urban inner cities, (and on the Indian Reservations of the United States), have not been hitherto easily perceivable within the classificatory logic of our "inner eyes." In other words, the two phenomena, that of the physical and that of the global socio-human environments, have been *hidden costs* which necessarily remained *invisible* to the "inner eyes" of the mode of subjective understanding," generated from our present disciplines of the Social Sciences and Humanities. And therefore, within the mode of "truth" or epistemological order based upon the representation of the human *as if it were* a natural organism.

My proposal here is that both of these "hidden costs" cannot be normally seen as *costs* within the terms of the hegemonic *economic categories*, and therefore of the absolutism of its related *economic ethic* (as the analogues of the theological categories/Absolutism of the Scholastic order of knowledge of feudal-Christian Europe). That furthermore it is by this ethic, and its supraordinate goal of higher and higher "standards of living" (i.e. the goal of *Material Redemption*, whereas in the feudal order the behaviour-orienting goal was that of *Spiritual Redemption*), which now sets the limits of our culture-specific "inner eyes" - the limits therefore of how we can see, know and behave upon our present global and national order; the limits therefore of our "Truth." That it sets these limits (as the now purely secularized form of the original Judaeo-Christian theological ethic in its feudal form), as rule-governedly as that ethic had set "limits," before the revolution of lay humanism, with respect to how the subjects of its then order could see, know and behave upon the world. In the same way also, as before the intellectual revolution which took place from the end of the eighteenth century onwards, the political

ethic (with which the humanists had replaced the theological), had itself set the limits of how the then sociocultural reality of Pre-Industrial Europe could be seen, known and behaved upon; within the terms therefore of what Foucault defined as the Classical *episteme*.

Keith Tribe points out in his book *Land, Labour and Economic Discourse* (1978) that it was only with Adam Smith's partial, and with David Ricardo's completed putting in place of new "economic categories," at the beginning of the nineteenth century, that the earlier order of knowledge based on the hegemony of *political categories* was finally displaced; and that the emergent centrality of the processes of Industrial production, over against the earlier hegemony of agricultural production, was given epistemological, and therefore, optimally behaviour-prescriptive status.

Black Americans are the only population group of the post-1492 Americas who had been legitimately owned, i.e. enslaved, over several centuries. Their owned and enslaved status had been systemically perceived within the "inner eyes" and the classificatory logic of the earlier *episteme*, its hegemonic political categories and behaviour-orienting political ethic, to be legitimate and *just*. The frequent slave revolts as well as the Abolition Movement, together with the Haitian Revolution and the Civil War in the United States, fundamentally broke the military power which had sustained that perception. Nevertheless, the displacement of that earlier "Truth" had been only verified at the level of the cognitive models of the society, when "heretical" thinkers like Smith and Ricardo had been able to "marry their thought" to the cause of the emergent forces of the Industrial world - i.e. to the cause of "free trade" (against "protection" for *agricultural* producers) and of the activity of the Industrial bourgeoisie - forces that were then blocked in their emergence, not only by the

restrictive laws, but also, by the behaviour-prescriptive categories of the earlier *episteme* in whose logic the "hidden costs" of protectionist policies for agricultural produce (including products grown by forced slave labor), *could not be seen as costs*.

This is the central point that Bauman makes with respect to the now global category of the New Poor. Consequently, the central issue that confronts us here, is whether we too will be able to move beyond the epistemic limits of our present "inner eyes" in order, in Bauman's words, to "marry our thought" to the emergent post-Industrial plights of both the planetary as well as the global socio-human environment. Specifically with the "captive population" and, jobless category of South Central Los Angeles, who can have no peaceful way of imposing their will upon a city and State, whose ordered hierarchies, and everyday behaviours are legitimated in the last instance by the world view encoded by our present order of knowledge.

Zygmunt Bauman points out that the emergence of the category of the New Poor is due to a systemic factor. *Capital*, with the rise of the global processes of technological automation, has increasingly freed itself from its dependence on *labor*. The organized working class, in consequence, which had been seen as the potential agent of social transformation during the phase of capital accumulation, one that had been primarily based on production, no longer has enough clout, to put a stop to the process of expanding job erosion, now that consumption has displaced production as the primary medium of capital accumulation. During the production phase, the category of the jobless Poor, both in the First as well as in the reserve "native" Third worlds, had a function. This function had been that of providing an excess of labor supply over demand, in order to put a brake on wage costs. In this new consumption phase of capital accumulation, it has no function.

Illiterate, unskilled and without job experiences, as the more and more low-skilled jobs dwindle with the acceleration of automated work processes, the jobless New Poor are without the wherewithal to serve as a reserve army of consumption. Where they receive welfare checks, (as in Britain and the United States), as part of an internal "pacification program," the neighborhood shops, (as we have seen in the case of South Central Los Angeles, where these shops are owned by new immigrant groups such as Iranian, Taiwanese, Korean, Mexican, most of whom maintain a protected labor market by employing their own "ethnic" kin, see *Time*, May 18, 1992) serve as the mechanism to siphon what little wealth there is, out of the ghettos; to thereby lock the New Poor into their discardable throwaway status at the same time as the shop owners (including the Black owners) realize the American Dream, represented as social mobility *out* of the ghettos. As successful "breadwinners," *their Conceptual Others are those who make possible their accelerated enrichment*; that is, the members of the captive population" of the ghettoes (and of the global jobless archipelagoes) who are like the environment, the negative systemic costs, that are not perceivable within the logic of our present "inner eyes" and behaviour-regulating ethic, and its mode of hegemonic economic (rather than ecosystemic or human) reason.

It is within the "Truth" of our present epistemological order, and therefore within the terms of its related "grand narrative of human emancipation" [Lyotard, 1989], whose supraordinate goal or purpose, rather than being as it had been in the case of the earlier Classical *episteme* that of the expansion of the state, is now that of securing the material well being of the biologized Body of the Nation, and therefore of its optimal middle class mode of the subject, Foucault's *Man*, that, as Bauman points out, we cannot as intellectuals, whether Liberal Positivist or Marxist-Leninist, marry our thought to the plight of the New Poor; cannot marry our

thought to the well-being *of the human*, rather than only to that of "Man," i.e. our present middle class *mode* of the subject (or of sociogeny) [Fanon, 1963].

The poor and the oppressed, Bauman notes, have therefore come to lose all attractions for the intellectuals. This category, unlike the working class jobholders *cannot* be seen, within the economic logic of our present organization of knowledge, as contributors to the process of production who have been *unjustly deprived* of the "full value of their labor power." Moreover, the fact that this New Poor, seduced too, *like all of us*, by the clamor of advertisements which urge them to consume, so that frustrated in their consumption goals, they turn on one another, mutilate and kill each other, or "damage themselves with alcohol and drugs" convinced of their own worthlessness, or in brief episodes of eruption, "fire the ghettoes, riot, looting whatever they can lay their hands on," means that *today's intellectuals, whilst they feel and express their pity, refrain from proposing to marry their thought with this particular variety of human suffering*.

"They theorize," Bauman writes, "the reason for their reluctance. Habermas would say that the New Poor are not exploited. Offe would add that they are politically ineffective, as having no labor to withdraw, they are deprived of bargaining power... [The] New Poor need help on humane grounds: they are unfit for grooming as the future remakers of the world." [Bauman, 1987]

How then did they change the course of North American history in two days? How did they, the proscribed category of the N.H.I., Baldwin's "captive population," Fanon's *les damnés*, come to not only impose their will upon the city and the state, but to also directly challenge the mode of "Truth" in whose logic their plight, like that of the environment's, is neither posable nor resolvable?

If, as Legesse suggests, because of our role as the grammarians of our order, we must ourselves, normally, and as the condition of our order's integration and stable replication, remain imprisoned in the "structural models" that we ourselves put in place, then how are we to be enabled to break out of one cultural specific native model of reality (one variant of our "inner eyes") and make the transition from one Foucauldian *episteme*, from one founding and behaviour-regulating narrative, to another? In other words, how can we marry our thought so that we can now pose the questions whose answers can resolve the plight of the Jobless archipelagoes, the N.H.I. categories, and the environment?

The answer to both will necessarily call for us to move beyond the Absolutism of our present economic categories, as in the fourteenth to the fifteenth centuries the lay humanists of Europe moved beyond that of the *theological* categories of Scholasticism; and the nineteenth century Classical economists moved beyond that of the *political* categories of the earlier epistemological order. For Legesse defines his explanatory key in the *new* terms of *culture-systemic categories* which move outside the logic of our present mode of subjective understanding, based on the concept of the human as a purely natural organism which can pre-exist the culturally instituted and "sanctified universe of obligation" by means of which we are alone "socialized" as inter-altruistically bonded mode of symbolic "kin;" and therefore as specific modes of the sociogenic subject [Fanon, 1964] and of systemic sociality [Campbell, 1982].

Legesse suggests that the cognitive escape hatch is always to be found in the category of the *liminal*. This is the category whose rule-governed negation, institutes a principle of difference from which both the optimal criterion of being and the "fake" mode of similarity or of unanimity [Girard, 1986], on which each order can alone institute itself as a living system, are dynamically

generated. Whether that of the "fallen" lay humanists of medieval Europe, who were negatively represented as being "enslaved to Original Sin" unlike the celibate Clergy who were as such, the guardians of the mainstream system of Scholastic knowledge, or, in the case of the peoples of African and Afro-mixed descent as the category of the Human Other, represented as enslaved to its dysselected evolutionary origins and whose physiognomic distance from "normal" being, provides the genetic principle of *difference and similarity* which bonds all *Whites*, and increasingly non-Blacks, non-Whites at the level of *race*, and of *all* middle class subjects at the level of *class*. Most crucially of course, since the Sixties the liminal category of *les damnés*, i.e. the N.H.I. category of South Central Los Angeles whose doubled pariah status as Poor/Jobless and Black, has come to serve a central systemic function for the now Post-Industrial nation-state order of the United States.

Because the negative proscription of the *liminal* category, is the very condition of each human order's functioning as an organizationally and cognitively closed self-regulating or autopoietic system [Maturana and Varela, 1980], the premise of this category's proscription is central to the "ground" from which the "regimes of truth" of each epistemological order and its disciplinary paradigms are rule-governedly generated. The liminal category's empirical exclusion, like that of the exclusion of the inner city ghetto of South Central Los Angeles, *is therefore a condition of each order's "truth."*

It is only when such a category moves out of its negated place, therefore, that the grammarians of an order (as in the case where the lay humanists intelligentsia refused their liminal role in the Scholastic system of knowledge), can be freed from their system-maintaining "structural models" and prescriptive categories.

For it is precisely, Legesse argues, out of the field of dynamic interaction between "the generalized horizon of understanding" or "inner eyes" put in place by the prescriptive categories of all culture-specific orders of knowledge, and the empirical on-the-ground process to which the collective behaviours of each order's subjects, as oriented by these prescriptive categories, give rise, that there emerges the liminal category which, in its thrust towards emancipation from its systemic role can serve to "remind us that we need not forever remain prisoners of our prescriptions." Since by its very movement out of its proscribed place, as in the uprising that followed on the Simi Valley jurors' acquittal of the policemen "Nigger-breakers" - such a category generates *conscious* change in all subjects, by *exposing all the injustices inherent in structure*; and again, like the N.H.I. category of South Central Los Angeles, in two days of rage, "by creating a real contradiction between structure and anti-structure, social order and man-made anarchy," epistemological orders and new modes of knowing.

### **THE SPEECH OF THE STREET? OR THE SPEECH OF A SCIENTIFIC HUMANISM?: TOWARDS THE REWRITING OF KNOWLEDGE**

In a 1984 essay, I had proposed that the task of Black Studies, together with those of all the other New Studies that had also entered academia in the wake of the Sixties uprisings, should be that of rewriting knowledge. I had proposed then that we should attempt to do so in the terms of the Chilean biologists Maturana and Varela's new insights into the rules which govern the ways in which humans can and do know the social reality of which they are always already socialized subjects [Frantz Fanon, 1963]. I had

then cited Sir Stafford Beer's argument (who wrote the introduction to their book) to this effect. Beer, as I wrote then had argued that "contemporary scholarship is trapped in its present organization of knowledge" in which, anyone "who can lay claim to knowledge about some categorized bit of the world, however tiny, which is greater than anyone else's knowledge of that bit, is safe for life." As a result, "while papers increase exponentially, and knowledge grows by infinitesimals, our understanding of the world actually recedes." Consequently, "because our world is an interacting system in dynamic change, our system of scholarship rooted in its own sanctified categories, is in a large part, unavailing to the needs of mankind." If, Beer concluded, "we are to understand a newer and still evolving world; if we are to educate people to live in that world; if we are to abandon categories and institutions that belong to a vanished world as it is well nigh desperate that we should... then knowledge must be rewritten."

My proposal did not get very far then. After Los Angeles, however, both the times and the situation have changed. Hence my open letter to you. St. Clair Drake, one of the founders of the Afro-American Studies Program at Stanford, always pointed out to students that there were "street tasks" and intellectual tasks. To extrapolate from Drake, there is street speech and intellectual speech. It is not unfair to say that the recent Los Angeles example of the street tasks and street speech of a "captive population" imposing its will upon the city and the State *by the only means* it had available, took place *in the absence* of that new Post-Industrial and post nation-state speech or order of knowledge which it was the collective task of all the New "lay" Studies to have effected in the wake of the Sixties; in the wake of those first urban uprisings therefore which challenged the "Truth" of our present *episteme*.

The eruption of the N.H.I./liminal category in South Central Los Angeles has again opened a horizon from which to spearhead

the speech of a new frontier of knowledge able to move us toward a new, correlated human species, and eco-systemic, ethic. Such a new horizon, I propose, will also find itself convergent with other horizons being opened up, at all levels of learning - as for example in the case of the new sciences of complexity related to the rise of the computer as Heinz Pagels points out in his 1988 book *The Dreams of Reason*. It is this convergence that will make it possible for us to understand the rules governing our human modes of perception and the behaviours to which they lead - as in the case of the *misrecognition of human kinship* expressed in the N.H.I. acronym, in the beating, and the verdict, as well as in the systemic condemnation of all the Rodney Kings, and of the global Poor and Jobless, to the futility and misery of the lives they live, as the price paid for *our* well-being. It is only by this mutation of knowledge that we shall be able to secure, as a species, the full dimensions of our human autonomy with respect to the systemic and always narratively instituted purposes that have hitherto governed us - hitherto outside of our conscious awareness and consensual intentionality.

"I believe," Pagels wrote at the end of his book, "that the most dramatic impact of the new sciences will be to narrow the gap between the natural and the human world. For as we come to grasp the management of complexity, the rich structures of symbols, and perhaps consciousness itself, it is clear that the traditional barriers - barriers erected on both sides - between natural science and the humanities cannot forever be maintained. The narrative order of culturally constructed worlds, the order of human feeling and beliefs, will become subject to scientific description in a new way. Just as it did during the Italian Renaissance, a new image of humanity will emerge in the future as science and art interact in the complementary spheres... I continue to believe that the distant day will come when the order of human affairs is not entirely established by domination" [Pagels, 1988].

The point of this letter is to propose that the coming of that distant day, and the end, therefore, of the need for the violent speech of the inner city streets, is up to us.

The starving fellah, (or the jobless inner city N.H.I., the global New Poor or *les damnés*), Fanon pointed out, does not have to *inquire into the truth*. He *is*, they *are*, the Truth. It is we who institute this "Truth." We must now undo their narratively condemned status.

I am  
Sincerely yours,

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