



IMPOSSIBLE LIFE

ILL WILL

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IMPOSSIBLE LIFE: A MEDITATION ON PARAONTOLOGY

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First published April 2023

Ill Will Editions

Cover artwork by Yael Martinez

In the following text, Marquis Bey wades into the waters of Afropessimist discourse to offer an in-depth exploration of the concept of “paraontology.”

Despite its apparent neutrality, the tradition of Western ontology has immediate political implications. Ontology operates by producing models or paradigms by which a “true” or proper human existence can be recognized. As such, it is routinely called upon to demarcate the boundary between authentic and inauthentic life, sanctioning the ways in which we are permitted to *be* in the world. For example, as Afropessimist thinkers have repeatedly shown, the paradigm of modern subjectivity has long defined itself through the annulment of its outside. To authenticate oneself as a subject means to peel oneself away from a zone of abjection against which valorized life must defend itself. This policed zone of de-subjectification, abandonment, and objecthood—a zone symbolically located outside of Humanity—is how Afropessimist thinkers propose to understand the term “Blackness.” By contrast with other forms of oppression that push people to the *margins* of the dominant white male identity (reducing them to its “junior partners”), to be “Blackened” is to experience an inability to analogize oneself with white civil society. As Frank B. Wilderson writes, the Black position “is less a site of subjectification and more a site of desubjectification—a ‘species’ of absolute dereliction, a hybrid of ‘person and property,’ and a body that magnetizes bullets.”¹

This diagnosis has serious implications for revolutionaries. On the one hand, it means that any schema of emancipation insensitive to this absence of an “existential commons” risks remaining unable to speak to or even comprehend Black desires. On the other hand, it forces us to ask: might the possibility of an anti-racist politics depend upon a certain refusal or destitution of Western ontology? Is such a gesture even possible for those trapped within it?

Marquis Bey belongs to growing lineage of black thinkers exploring a politics rooted in the refusal to subjectivize and legitimate oneself. As Bey explains, “The ‘para’ in *para*ontology invites us to care less about the mandates of ontology,” insisting instead upon “all those other things we might have been and might be if only we could unleash our imaginations.” The present article seeks to deepen this approach, by searching for a practice of care that would perform that “slight gesture” by which life slips away or escapes ontological capture—if such escape is possible at all.

Setting the record crooked

If ontology as a philosophical branch speaks to all the ways that we are said to exist, and such ways are wrapped up in coloniality, white supremacy, and gender normativity, this means that to validly “be” one must adhere to what these supremacies have dictated. And when we fall outside of those mandates, we are met with punishment and discipline—from the disapproving to the carceral to the fatal. When we fall outside, the space into which we fall is deemed impossible. But what does it mean to assert an impossible life? When one wishes to *live* that impossibility and enact radical change, it is quite difficult to do when the world is unwelcoming and even hostile to such a change, deeming one unrealistic, wrong, too-fast-too-soon, detached from material realities, and so many other accusations. One way to describe the practice of living that impossibility is to speak of *paraontological* life. One of those five-dollar words that few—not even me sometimes—quite understand, and even fewer care much about, paraontology refers to a way of being that refuses the options provided for our being. The “para” in *paraontology* invites us to care less about the mandates of ontology—mandates that offer paltry, unchosen options that stanch the possibility of life lived otherwise—and instead to care more about all those other things we might have been and might be if only we could unleash our imaginations. And, as we’ll see, that will include being unleashed from some things we actually think we deserve to hold on to.

When someone wishes to imagine something different, they often encounter a familiar retort. A response pointing to various kinds of harm and oppressive structures that, by implication, nullify the imagining one is attempting. This happens too with paraontology, as recourse made to, most often, anti-blackness is often meant to end the conversation: “if paraontology cannot do anything about the behemoth that is anti-blackness, then all your imagining is for naught.” But anti-blackness is an apparatus of ontologizing; it attempts to expunge those proximal to blackness from social and political space, renders blackness pathogenic, and violates all traces of blackness. In ontologizing, it tries to capture blackness, delimit it. But no apparatus of capture is a totality; no apparatus of capture can indeed succeed in the entirety of its attempted capture. The paraontological, then, proceeds from a recognition of this fact, with the conviction those things that are not and cannot be captured are not merely outside of or opposed to but positively *unconcerned* with the apparatus itself, with ontology.

Such seemingly lofty philosophical musings might at first glance be understood as so lofty as to leave the ground on which life’s struggle happens, especially if paraontology is articulated as a radical project—a radicality often linked to black and, also for me, trans life. But one of the very things that I, personally, try often to insist upon is how the philosophical or the theoretical or the “academic” bear quite seriously on the “lived experiences” (a term I have grown to loathe very much)² of people, how they bear on the parameters by which we might even determine what qualifies as “lived” and “experience.” Those parameters *are*, in so many ways, a matter of ontological investigation. To query the *para*ontological would imply the alteration and thoroughgoing reconfiguration of our very existence, our purview, our world, our sense of self. Whether we understand ourselves as certain kinds of subjects, racial or gendered or otherwise, and thus how we are to encounter others on or off those grounds; whether we can even say certain things about ourselves or history or, perhaps more importantly, the future; whether we feel compelled to be responsible for history in certain ways or for the world as it unfolds; whether we think we are allowed to say or do or be this or that; or so much more—all of these will undergo serious reconsideration, intensification, or obliteration contingent on how we take up the question of the (para)ontological. A

question so philosophical as ontology, and for the purposes of this meditation, paraontology, is not “merely” philosophical, with all the connoted abstraction and off-the-groundedness it implies; rather, this is, as that blasphemous, corruptive examiner of life has said, practice for death and dying. Which is to say, as is customary of the inflection I always give my questions of interest, practice for life and living.

This meditation is both recently prompted and a long time coming. Prompted because I have been tapped to sit with the term in writing, as one of its supporters and theorists; and prompted, too, because of the recent publication of the deeply rigorous, astute, and measured article by black critical theorist Axelle Karera, “Paraontology: Interruption, Inheritance, or a Debt One Often Regrets.” This meditation is a long time coming, however, because I have been sitting with, thinking alongside, moved by theorizations of the paraontological for quite some time now. Indeed, perhaps since I came of intellectual age, as it were, beginning in 2014. I have surely written in paraontology’s illustrious wake on multiple occasions, but I have yet to give an account of the why and wherefore and how of my own love affair, raucous and intimate and abiding as it is, with the paraontological. And it is because of a deep fear that this has not happened. To give the backstory and details of that love, as with any revelation of the behind the scenes of one’s intimate relationalities, is to reveal the contours of one’s desires. To recount in detail *why* I love you is a scary, exposing thing, and to do that in front of those who are not you—indeed, to those who may not think too highly of you—is terrifying.

But I will risk the terror. Because in risking the terror I will hopefully allow for others to experience, more abundantly, love.

What I hope to do is express paraontology’s worthiness. This is, then, an “axiological” account of paraontology, an account of its value. In what follows, paraontology will be given a sort of plea that offers the why and how it can be of a certain kind of worth to us, and that offers why and how it has come to be desirable in the first place, and further still that offers why and how it seems difficult for many to get on board with. It has been the subject of a small debate in black studies, with some saying that paraontology is a way out of the draining, exhausting, and fatal ravages of anti-blackness because it makes us less focused on simply reacting to white supremacy; others saying paraontology is a pipedream that hope-

lessly thinks it can will black people out of violence. Even within each side there are quibbles: Nahum Chandler, black critical theorist and the thinker in black studies who perhaps used the term most extensively, departs from others like Fred Moten and J Kameron Carter and R.A. Judy over the question of what aspects of ontology are being emphasized here, and what the “para-” can actually do. On the side of the opposition, there are some like Calvin Warren who depart from paraontology as it is used and implied philosophically, whereas for someone like Karera it is departed from, too, because of its fascistic origins in German philosophers Oskar Becker and Martin Heidegger.

So to be clear about my purposes here, what “Impossible Life: A Meditation on Paraontology” is doing, all it is trying to do, is to think paraontology’s worth and implications, scary and perplexing as they may be. It is trying to engage, humbly and considerately, Karera’s brilliant meditation, as well as the work of Calvin Warren, another thinker given to afropessimism and, more accurately, black nihilism. It is trying to think through care as a practice that looks differently than it is often conceived of, a care that has implications for what we conceptualize as a possible future (and indeed, a possible present and past). And it is trying to illuminate what precisely is driving the, my, desire for paraontology—impossible life.

Now that I think of it, this is not an essay, not a meditation. This is, in all of my atheistic glory, a prayer.

Some of my best friends

Somehow, I have found myself with a not insignificant amount of friends who lean more black pessimistically than I do. And with such a sociopolitical and intellectual camp typically comes a disdain for paraontology. Conversations concerning paraontology’s implications or impact almost always end with an agreement to disagree. And still, we are friends. And even more, we insist on that friendship. Despite the ways we are coaxed to maliciously butt heads; indeed, despite the ways that, dictated by anti-blackness, we are not supposed to have the capacity for such friendship—an abiding, loving friendship—at all.

So maybe what I’m trying to say is that the paraontological offers a kind of practice of care. Sure, this is all the rage in contemporary parlance, com-

mercials and Tweets about care and self-care and all that. And sure, this is fine—let us not condemn, or dampen, the *figuring out* of how to care better, more deeply. We will screw this up in our early attempts to articulate this (hell, even late attempts); and it will be, as it has been, co-opted by (neo)liberal and capitalist modes of life. But care perhaps should stay, and a robust care—one that, I hope, does just a little more than “endure,” as someone like Calvin Warren has argued. This undergirds, at least in part, paraontology. With the other angles which I will explore, care is part of paraontology because it must continually think about how we are not what they say we are, and continually gifts us with any number of things we might not have known we could become. It thinks about the parts of you that were never permitted to be valid parts of you—or parts at all.

All of this is simply to say care is multifaceted (and that is far from a novel assertion). But maybe it's more than this: care *lives* and facilitates capacity for other ways of living—it facilitates the capacity for life to expand in excess of its extant delimitations toward non-existent modes of emergent life. I want to offer care as a gesture that refuses to make ownable, exclusionary property out of relations and life, that is always open to non-normative arrangements of sociality, such that no one arrangement is touted as holding sway over what ought to be. Care, one that attends to how we might be and become with others in such a way as to dissolve the otherness of supposed others, one that permits capacitating relationality and life via the worked soil and nourishment from sentient and nonsentient forces and objects that facilitate our persistent existence. That kind of care is found in paraontology. It practices nondisposability, because it refuses to dispose of anything and anyone, even before it is a “thing” or a “one” to dispose of; it practices coalition, and coming together radically un-predicated upon conceits of sameness or adherence to criteria; and it practices nonhierarchization—whatever mode of life you need to emerge lovingly and beautifully will be met, by the paraontological, with a resounding, “My, my, my. Welcome.”

Surely Karera cares, as well as others who might be moved by her thinking. I do not doubt this. But her aim, as is Warren's aim, is different from mine. A matter of emphasis perhaps, or a matter of strategy. Or, a matter of language. The matter, though, is the how—*how* is care being demonstrated. For Karera, it is a care for inheritance and history and origins, and

what happens when such care is not taken. For Warren, it is perhaps care for a notion of rigor, and an attention to the primacy of anti-blackness. For me, it is care for all we could have been were it not for *this*.

Karera's article cannot be dutifully summarized or engaged sustainedly in this brief treatise, so this essay will not purport to. There are, however, key passages I wish to sit with as a matter of illumination. If one of the primary undercurrents of "Paraontology: Interruption, Inheritance, or a Debt One Often Regrets" is the *inheritance* portion, what I offer in my account of paraontology is a measured skepticism regarding the role and relationship one ought to have to inheritance. For when Benjamin Brewer writes, in the introductory remarks to the translation of Oskar Becker's "Transcendence and Paratranscendence" in the *Critical Philosophy of Race* journal issue in which Karera's essay appears, "as [Karera] points out, paraontology's reemergence today in an entirely different historical and philosophical context raises profound and troubling questions about what it means to inherit the history of philosophy," there is no doubt a question of inheritance occurring.³ But long has inheritance been something a bit troubled to me, inasmuch as inheritance is perhaps assumed to be always tied to familial lineage and the establishment of a proper origin (and thus proper protocols for carrying forth and honoring said origin). As Karera writes, "we have hardly chosen" the inheritance of paraontology; with this inheritance, "breaks and radical cuts are endlessly haunted by the returns of the old and the summations of overseeing creditors in the face of which prefixes (like para-) are bound to be scant ruses for deceit"; and, the final paragraph that proves to be the kicker of Karera's essay,

What is it left to say or ask about this heritage worth regretting? What is there to gain from remaining soberly aware of the violence of unwanted inheritance or the torments of its transmissibility? What gets lost from foregoing the glimmers of lines of flight, however illusory or constricted they might be? How does one inherit responsibly from unbearable secrets? *What kind of relationship to the structures of inheritance can we sustain as the unwanted, and yet indispensable, heirs of ontology*, of Becker, and of inheritance itself? At what cost does one sustain a hereditament devoid of a will? Hence, what would it mean for us to affirm a legacy that needs us for its sustenance while simulta-

neously resisting being claimed? Do such grievous bequests become, therefore, unpayable debts? And if, indeed, inheritance reaffirms an exorbitant indebtedness, how must we confront the horizon of ongoing austerity?⁴

I nevertheless wonder if inheritance is something we are destined to receive. This is because inheritance, like the overseeing creditors, have pages and pages of terms and conditions that I think it is possible to rebuke. And, if we are heirs, this presupposes a familial line and thus all that the notion of family or inheritance imply, which it is necessary and radical to reject. It is true there are parts of paraontology that we have not chosen to inherit—namely, its link, through Heidegger and Becker, to fascism—and I wonder if there is ever, by definition, a *completion* of the inheritance if it has not been chosen. In other words, what if one bears a contentious relationship with inheritance's predicates themselves, the notions of “family” and “origin” and “property”? What if the wealth of that inheritance is not to belong to the lineage doing the bequeathing, thus making it quite attractive to violate the very terms the familial lineage set up for proper inheritance? If paraontology has been inherited by those who take up the term and practice, what if the presumption that it both has a specific origin and that that origin is inscrutable and naturalized is the very thing we refuse? Might that not allow for the inheritance to be refused and, consequently, handled *improperly*? *If* we are indebted to these inheritances, that indebtedness is not an uncompromising demand to be paid back with interest. It is an indebtedness that is pervasive and nonspecific, asking only to be shared and dispersed, to be taken up to proliferate further sharing.

Yes, there are “risks and potential gains from unwanted inheritance, unexpected affinities, violent friendships, or the ghastly proximity of a family one never chose. Are we indeed obligated,” Karera asks, “to respect the authority or filial responsibilities of such consanguinity?”⁵ But if we reject the filial, the familiarity of this, because we have learned from Saidiya Hartman that its very definitional sinew is to function as a facilitator of capitalist marketplace valuation and to manage—which is to say discipline—by way of reproducing the regulatory effects of the state, then we might come to a different response.⁶ If we note that the very notion of

family “is getting in the way of alternatives” because “it’s existentially petrifying to imagine relinquishing the organized poverty we have in favor of an abundance we have never known and have yet to organize,” as Sophie Lewis writes in *Abolish the Family*, which is to say reject the violence that inheres in the notion of family and the proprietary logics in inheritance itself, then no, we are not obligated. And it would then be strange to even ask such a question.⁷

There is also in Karera’s thinking a deep questioning of (black) paraontology’s efficacy when it comes to refusal and what is refused. The question goes something like this: In what ways has a black paraontological method refused its own conditions of possibility, namely fascist origins, and how has it ironically reinscribed the violence of ontology precisely by trying to flee it? Instead of responding directly to this, this provocation bears very similar traces to one of Warren’s critiques in “Black Mysticism: Fred Moten’s Phenomenology of (Black) Spirit.” For Warren, after a beautifully rich and rigorous characterization of Moten’s position—the best I’ve seen, and the most generous too—he offers two robust critiques: first, that paraontology does not offer a strategy for dealing with the brutality of anti-blackness (which Karera also finds troubling in paraontological discourses: “Moten does not find it necessary to account for ontology’s retaliatory effects on blackness’ paraontological disobedience,” she writes). And second, paraontology believes too much in its conceit of escape—of the “otherwise” and its “transcendental horizon.” That is, on the one hand, one can think and do paraontology all day long, but one is still amidst a world that is anti-black, that is brutally ontological, and all the linguistic footwork regarding paraontology is cute and all, but it does not inoculate you against the white supremacist violence that *will* arrive at your doorstep again and again. And on the other hand, simply insisting on escape does not mean one escapes, and maybe even emphatically insisting on escape to the contrary of historical and contemporary evidence does more harm than good. What difficult criticisms to respond to, though I will wager a response, one that will, of course, suffice to many.

In the instance of the realities of anti-blackness, making recourse to others is often my preferred strategy. Take, of course, Moten: “But to be committed to the anti- and ante-categorical predication of blackness,” which is to say the paraontological—the refusal of categorical mandates

as well as an existence before and that exceeds categorical mandates, that blackness is not defined in its totality by violation (blackness does not begin and end at terror and violation)—“is to subordinate, by a measure so small that it constitutes measure’s eclipse, the critical analysis of anti-blackness to the celebratory analysis of blackness. To celebrate is to solemnify, in practice. *This is done not to avoid or ameliorate the hard truths of anti-blackness but in the service of its violent eradication.*”⁸ Take, too, Dixia Ramirez D’Oleo: “But having the military power to end our lives is not the same as having the power of being the word of ‘God.’ When did those of us interested in defying white supremacy collectively decide that the white supremacist hail—from the cop, the nurse, the teacher, the president—had the ontological power to define us?”⁹ And there are so, so many others who articulate similar feelings.

Where blackness bears a relationship to the paraontological is where blackness names precisely, via its paraontology, a disruption of ontological thinking itself. It names the impossible life of living without (concern for) ontology. It is a blackness Denise Ferreira da Silva wishes to unleash, since—and this part is my reading; I don’t want da Silva thinking I’m trying to speak for her—fixating on ontology’s supposed hold is exactly the effort da Silva is trying to “dissolve,” it is that “form that keep[s] the radical disruption that is blackness from being unleashed.” The deeply paraontological aim then, for da Silva, and for my purposes here, “is to release blackness (and other signifiers of racial difference) from the constraints of understanding”—and “understanding” here indexes a mode of commonsense logic of categorization emergent with Enlightenment rationality—“and to make it available to the imagination and the capacity to contemplate existence without the movement of determinacy, which is institutive of both juridical and scientific assemblies.”¹⁰

On escape: I have been guilty of the very distinction I will be pushing back against here. It is not all that much about “escape,” meaning an absolute break from the ontological joint, unfettered in any way by that which caged one in the first place, but, to borrow from Judith Butler, a working of the trap we find ourselves in, such that the working constitutes, robustly, a substantive mode of life and living that is not subsumed simply by being within the trap (*if* one is indeed still within the trap). In other words, one need not find themselves wholly outside of a prison in order to be

said to be doing actually anti-prison work—one can escape solitary confinement, general population, detention centers, this gate or that gate, and all those supposedly smaller gestures, in no uncertain terms, *matter*. And they matter in part because they offer different, more radical ways to exist within such carceral spaces in the interim between being forced into them and fleeing from them. They offer, as it were, mutated ways of existing. To whatever extent paraontology is related to ontology, it offers a *mutation*.

I have to kindly offer a disagreement with Warren on the grounds he raises, where he notes that paraontology reinscribes and repeats ontology, asking subsequently,

can we ever truly wrest paraontology from the ontology that distinguishes it? Does not the trace of the other (ontology) inevitably infuse itself into the sphere that purportedly excludes it (paraontology)—as its illegitimate foundation? Is the ‘para’ here an actuality or a yearning for reprieve? In other words: Does the pathogen need its host to survive?¹¹

It is at times tiring when the experimentalizing of other ways to be gets immediately subsumed under “just” another kind of being. To use or alter a word is not to inevitably doom the new word to the machinations of the former; neither etymology nor syntactic similarity are destiny, I don’t think. Because there is mutation. There is context without being contextualized, and there is emergence without genuflection. Paraontology is not, on this account, simply a tinkering with ontology such that it inevitably bears its fascistic traces. It is a mutation of ontology such that it is no longer, and perhaps never was, ontology.

It feels like something in all of this is lost. And something in all of what I am saying and have said is lost too, as some I’ve encountered are willing, graciously, to point out. That which is lost in Warren or Karera is not unique to them. But what is lost, to me, is a tending to, perhaps a *cares for and after*, the other things. Is that, maybe, not what the para-ontological is, these “other things”? Even in that constant ur-text, if you will, for the pessimistic and nihilistic stance, Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection*, there is—by the author herself—something that is constantly lost: the other things. In her Preface to the second edition of that canon-

ical text, twenty-five years after its publication, Hartman writes, “*Scenes* endeavored to illuminate the countless ways in which the enslaved challenged, refused, defied, and resisted the condition of enslavement and its ordering and negation of life, its extraction and destruction of capacity.” But this “inventory of ways of doing and a genealogy of refusal” is not very often referred to, she says, as “The focus on its arguments about empathy, terror and violence, subjection, and social death has overshadowed the discussion of practice,” a practice, I would say, of care.¹² Those other things are the paraontological, and maybe they are yearned for simply by virtue of them being other things. They are those moments when the enslaved, even if only for an evening, absconded and gathered in hush harbors or broke tools for a few minutes of reprieve. Or when amidst the concerted extermination of black people, we still imagine, still feast, marveling at the never-dying will toward creativity because “We must be, this world ain’t *never* been safe, so we make new ones,” choosing, as hard as it is—impossible sometimes—to, as Javon Johnson poeticizes, “be happy and black.”¹³ Or, when you spend the night setting fire to buildings and throwing molotovs, even if weeks later the buildings are back and “nothing has changed.” No, no, you were there, in coalition with others, insurrecting as a mode of sociality, knowing that even if nothing changes, everything, for all of you, will be forever changed.

These gestures are not good in themselves necessarily, valorized and romanticized as if they themselves will deliver us from evil—“ceaseless fugitivity” it has been called, to my face—so much as they are attempted illegible maps drawn and erased and redrawn and felt toward what else there might be or not be to move closer toward something that feels like something else. They are, as Hartman writes, “cartographies of the fantastic utterly antagonistic to slavery,” sketched in the wilderness, “discern[ing] in the arrangement of leaves a hieroglyph of freedom coming”—coming, and here, though not here and not yet, all the while being lived.¹⁴

A paraontology named desire

As promised, the behind the scenes, if pieces of it have not already emerged into the light. Sometimes the terms we use or advocate for are (not-so-)simply stand-ins for desires, as I recently learned from black fem-

inist and anarchist thinker James Bliss. That is true here too. Paraontology is something I bear an ethical relationship to. It offers something interesting, something with potential. There are no presumptions here that it is in any obvious way the “right” way to think about things, nor is it inherently better than any and all other ways. Here, the paraontological is a terminological manifestation of an exhaustion with what seems to be the extant discourse surrounding justice and radicality, an exhaustion with what we have been given, and a smoldering and simmering wish to cut that shit out.

I want to say all this with love, patience, and understanding. And hope that comes across at the same time as the frustration. If paraontology offers the practice of care, it is, too, care for those ways one has been foreclosed from being and becoming, those ways we did not even know were possible for us. That is to say, if paraontology is not only a besidedness to, but a *refusal* of ontology, an ontology that categorizes people along lines of race and gender, an ontology that is not innocently descriptive but adamantly terroristic—because, though I am not one to fankid over him and his work, Ta-Nehisi Coates has already told us that, in albeit patrilineal language, “race is the *child* of racism, not the father”—an ontology that does harm and circumscription and fundamental violation in its very course. To assume the preeminence and staying power of one’s racial blackness or racial whiteness, for example, is to insist on the naturalness of such categorizations and the inability to operate outside of such logics, *which is ultimately, radically, an ethical imperative*. Paraontology is a chance to not capitulate to and recapitulate the ontology of, say, race or gender; it is a chance to be unwavering even in the face of “material realities” and “lived experiences” because such rejoinders, too, attempt to capture, to ontologize. The “racial” is a form of attempted ontological community, capturing and disallowing exiting of those *forced* to “belong,” a priori, to that community. But community, which is to say the racial, “is nothing more than the inherited legacy of police control, dressed up in varying degrees of progressive discourse,” says Nevada in *The Abolition of Law*. “For there to be an outside, there must be an inside with borders in need of protection. The investigation of who does and does not belong—in a neighborhood or in a riot—has at its heart the desire for the fort, which cannot lead us to any meaningful form of abolition. It is the fort

that must be abolished too.”¹⁵ The fort is the ontological, the supposed community that comes with being a part of the same race or gender or class. The paraontological abolishes the fort too, even if—or when—the fort is all we are said to have.

That slight gesture is what all this might be about. Because frankly, and Karera helped me see this more clearly than I did before, I actually depart from Chandler, crucially, and perhaps from Moten as well. Not radically, but significantly enough. Where, on Karera’s (I think accurate) account, Moten pursues the “unthought” as an end in itself and “*puts ontology radically into question*,” Chandler’s paraontological project—and both of these are always with respect to blackness (though Chandler very rarely uses this term)—“*poses radical questions about ontology*.”¹⁶ The difference is a matter of syntactic emphasis and order, which can be everything sometimes. On the one hand, blackness asks ontology what it has to say for itself, how can it defend itself; and, how has no one felt brave enough to ask you this question before? (Chandler); on the other, blackness tells ontology: *You are indefensible* (Moten). Though I know where I would fall in this binary, if forced to choose, I’m not so interested in doing that now so much as I wish to offer another point of emphasis: that of not asking anything of ontology. Ontology is not the thing. The paraontological here is not asking anything of ontology, not, as accused, wrapped up inevitably in ontology—we do not care about what ontology has said of us and of what exists or is possible. It is, for lack of a better term at the moment, ignored. This has been learned by my grandmother, seventy-three years old now, who can ignore you like nobody’s business. You can be standing right there, talking and talking about how big and bad you are, how you’ll kick us out if we don’t pay our rent, but she will not even acknowledge your existence, will sit there peeling her potatoes for potato salad, watching those Marvel movies she loves, not giving a single fuck (though Grandma won’t use such language). In short, affectively telling me and anyone else that brings “reality” or “brutality” or whatever else to her, “What that got to do with me?” Nothing, Grandma.

I yearn for nothing for the paraontological, if not Grandma’s utter refusal, her *what that got to do with me?* Ontology ain’t got nothing to do with the paraontological.¹⁷

The point of departure is, admittedly, Moten, when he discusses para-

ontology in an aside during his M.H. Abrams lecture at Cornell University in March of 2022, the same named lecture where Chandler gave his remarks on paraontology. Moten notes his difference with Chandler on the paraontological, and establishes his understanding of it as a vestibular term (referencing without citing, of course, Hortense Spillers) that would approach the ante- or anti-ontological, the before and beyond and opposed to—or, *apposed* to—ontology.¹⁸ I'm down with this, do not misunderstand. But there is often something left out in Moten's poeticism, a poeticism that Karera and Warren find off-putting and lacking in rigor (to which Moten has a bit of a response).¹⁹ What is left out, I think, is a clarity in the stakes of this—stakes that inhere in the *racial* and the *gendered*, in particular, which Moten and others often generalize just a bit too quickly at times. Because ultimately he is not, nor others like him, wrong. They are astoundingly right, in my estimation. But I need, and want, an elaboration of *how* they are right, and the scary, maybe even batshit mad implications of that rightness.

So what do I mean? I mean, as I've noted at the outset of this meditation, the paraontological offers a way to grow more and more uninterested in the snares that disallow us to arrive at, or move closer toward, the radical liberation we seek, which includes those things we are so, so interested in but perhaps shouldn't be. Namely, and I will say this with my head held high, *race* and, too, *gender* (though the latter rarely makes it into these discussions). There is such a zapping anxiety that takes hold when even the suggestion of race or gender being dispensed with arises, and I get that. Tales of yore about "color-'blindness'" and the non-mattering of gender or sexuality haunt us, because they were decidedly, concertedly, intentionally deployed as a way to, in short, get the libs to stop whining about racism, to knock it off about how this or that was sexist. We don't see these things, so stop bringing it up. We know this narrative well, we bear its memories in us, and we respond accordingly. As we should. But please, listen for just a bit longer to what it is I am suggesting. I promise—*trust*—that there is something here you can bounce to.

Paraontology knows all too well that ontology, its definitional and manic categorization, is a violence and cannot be abided. It also knows that such captivative apparatuses take myriad forms: obviously carceral things like prisons and the logics of criminality; but also things like race.

Racialization is a gesture of ontology. Thus, paraontology's radicality comes in its invitation, subtle and humble, to no longer be enthralled by the assumption that a certain disposition or value or worthiness is predicated on an identity bestowed by and in service of coloniality. One's ontologized subjectivity not only stems from a nonconsensual violent fundamentality but also cannot predict and determine the way one ought to move and think and relate and imagine. Indeed, ontology stanches imagination. Paraontology recognizes the "bourgeois formation" that is the racial and its predicates. The desire that paraontology is naming, for me personally, is this: I am so often *tired* of the ways the racial institutes an ontologizing of modalities of life that necessitate inheritance and consequently disallow breaches from the lineage, without much grappling with the horrors of various generations of that lineage. Tired of the ways that, by virtue of how one has been ontologized, one is understood as automatically right or intellectually unimpeachable about things pertaining to, however loosely, that ontology. Tired of constantly making recourse to ontologies that, because they feel familiar or because they give the look of a kind of progress, are not doing it for us. We lose, have lost, and are losing so much when we, from the jump, foreclose our imagination to other things; where is the imagination for things not subject to the ontologies we've been foisted, what Spillers might call a connection to something else, something so much bigger than this—"But the price" of these scraps of ontology is to "lose this precious insight that connects you to something human and bigger than white folks—I don't give a fuck what color the folk—something bigger than that. We are losing that connection because we are buying this other shit."²⁰ I don't want to buy it anymore. I want out. The paraontological is my out. Which ultimately might be impossible.

Notes

- 1 Frank B. Wilderson, III, *Red, White, & Black. Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, Duke Press, 2010, Ch. 2.
- 2 See Marquis Bey, “On Lived Experience,” *AAIHS* (blog), December 2, 2019. See also Joan Wallach Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4, 1991, 773–97.
- 3 Benjamin Brewer, “Translator’s Introduction to “Transcendence and Paratranscendence,”” *Critical Philosophy of Race* 10, no. 2, 2022, 250.
- 4 Axelle Karera, “Paraontology: Interruption, Inheritance, or a Debt One Often Regrets,” *Critical Philosophy of Race* 10, no. 2, 2022, 178–85. Emphasis mine.
- 5 Axelle Karera, “Paraontology,” 159–60.
- 6 See Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Revised and updated paperback edition, W.W. Norton, 2022. Specifically, see the section “The Manhood of Race” in the chapter “Fashioning Obligation.”
- 7 Sophie Lewis, *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation*, Verso, 2022, 4, 2.
- 8 Fred Moten, *Black and Blur*, Duke University Press, 2017, viii.
- 9 Dixá Ramírez D’Oleo, “Mushrooms and Mischief: On Questions of Blackness,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 23, no. 2, 2019, 153–54.
- 10 Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Unpayable Debt*, Sternberg Press, 2022, 96. See also 55.
- 11 Calvin L. Warren, “Black Mysticism: Fred Moten’s Phenomenology of (Black) Spirit,” *Zeitschrift Für Anglistik Und Amerikanistik* 65, no. 2, 2017, 227.
- 12 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 6.
- 13 Javon Johnson, “Happy and Black,” 2017.
- 14 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 7.
- 15 Nevada, *The Abolition of Law*, Friends Publishing, 2022, 86–87.
- 16 Axelle Karera, “Paraontology,” 183–84.
- 17 *Then why use the word ontology in it?! Sure. “That’s a really wonderful question, and I’ve asked myself that question,” Hortense Spillers says in response to not so much this exact question but this exact affect. She’s asked about blackness and her idea of black culture, and why, if black culture is not racially specific but a criticality, call it “black” culture. “I don’t really have an answer to your question, except that to call it black even after all of that”—all the paraontological stuff, all the de-racinated stuff—“would be,” and she pauses to think, “poetic irony.” But, why? Why black? “What makes this black if anybody can participate, which is what I’m advocating? So why is it still black? That’s a really good question.” And that’s all she says. And I love this, both the linking of blackness to criticality but also that she just ends there. It’s a really good question. And there’s no long answer to it. (See University of Waterloo English Department: Hortense Spillers discusses “The Idea of Black Culture” in Winfried Siemerling’s “Contemporary Critical Theory” class, March 19, 2013.)*
- 18 Fred Moten, M.H. Abrams Distinguished Visiting Professor, “Nothing in the Way of Things” for the 2022 M.H. Abrams lecture at Cornell University on March 31, 2022.
- 19 “Let me be weird,” he says during the Q & A. “You be rigorous. Let me be silly.”
- 20 From Arthur Jafa, *Dreams Are Colder Than Death*, Documentary, 2014; as quoted in Alesandra Raengo, “Dreams Are Colder than Death and the Gathering of Black Sociality,” *Black Camera* 8, no. 2, 2017, 120–40. Emphasis added.

The 'para' in paraontology invites us to care less about the mandates of ontology—mandates that offer paltry, unchosen options that stanch the possibility of life lived otherwise—and instead to care more about all those other things we might have been and might be if only we could unleash our imaginations.

