Stephen Best

NONE LIKE US

BLACKNESS, BELONGING, AESTHETIC LIFE

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A series edited by Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman

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For Paul

Having travelled over a considerable portion of these United States, and having, in the course of my travels, taken the most accurate observations of things as they exist—the result of my observations has warranted the full and unshaken conviction, that we, (coloured people of these United States,) are the most degraded, wretched, and abject set of beings that ever lived since the world began; and I pray God that none like us ever may live again until time shall be no more.

DAVID WALKER, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1833)

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| INTRODUCTION |

Unfit for History

A communitarian impulse runs deep within black studies. It announces itself in the assumption that in writing about the black past "we" discover "our" history; it is implied in the thesis that black identity is uniquely grounded in slavery and middle passage; it registers in the suggestion that what makes black people black is their continued navigation of an "afterlife of slavery," recursions of slavery and Jim Crow for which no one appears able to find the exit; it may even be detected in an allergy within the field to self-critique, a certain *politesse*, although I have no doubt that this last may be a bridge too far for some. My goal, at any rate, is to encourage a frank reappraisal of the critical assumptions that undergird many of these claims, not least and certainly most broadly the assumed conjuncture between belonging and a history of subjection, for as much as attempts to root blackness in the horror of slavery feel intuitively correct, they produce in me a feeling of unease, the feeling that I am being invited to long for the return of a sociality that I never had, one from which I suspect (had I ever shown up) I might have been excluded. Queer theorists have tended to bemoan the omnipresence of futurism in queer politics. I

view black studies as burdened by a contrary malady: the omnipresence of history in our politics.[1] Disencumbering queer studies of its investments in the future, while not an easy task, at least retains a sense of the possible to the extent that it involves reassessing the optimistic hopes and visions of utopia to which queers find themselves attached.[2] Black studies, on the contrary, confronts the more difficult task of disarticulating itself, if it should so seek, after years of a quite different form of debate, from the historical accretions of slavery, race, and racism, or from a particular *commitment* to the idea that the slave past provides a ready prism for understanding and apprehending the black political present. In spite of the many truths that follow our acceptance of slavery as generative of blackness, as productive of the background conditions necessary to speak from the standpoint of blackness, *None Like Us* begins in the recognition that there is something impossible about blackness, that to be black is also to participate, of necessity, in a collective undoing, if not, on the occasion that that should either fail or seem unpalatable, a self-undoing.

I know that that last line reads a bit cryptically, so an example would seem to be in order. If I were to say to you, whoever you might be, that "I am not *your* Negro," it would have to be admitted, in spite of the disavowal, that I must be someone's—perhaps, meaningfully, only as I relate to myself.[3] Not surprisingly, as that example and others to follow will suggest, James Baldwin inspires the difficult leap that a knowledge of belonging disarticulated from the collective requires.

> I was not . . . a Black Muslim,
> in the same way, though for different reasons,
> that I never became a Black Panther:
> because I did not believe that
> all white people were devils,
> . . . . . .
> I was not a member of any Christian congregation
> because I knew that they had not heard
> and did not live by the commandment
> "love one another as I love you,"
> and I was not a member of the NAACP
> because in the North, where I grew up,
> the NAACP was fatally entangled
> with black class distinctions,

or illusions of the same,
which repelled a shoe-shine boy like me.

I did not have to deal with
the criminal state of Mississippi,
hour by hour and day by day,
to say nothing of night after night.
I did not have to sweat cold sweat after decisions
involving hundreds of thousands of lives.
. . . . . .
I saw the sheriffs, the deputies, the storm troopers
more or less in passing.
I was never in town to stay.
This was sometimes hard on my morale,
but I had to accept, as time wore on,
that part of my responsibility—as a witness—
was to move as largely and as freely as possible,
to write the story, and to get it out.[4]

I find in Baldwin's formulations, tentative as they are, a model for thought and those difficult leaps of which I earlier spoke. This book seeks to break the hold on black studies that the oscillation between subjection and belonging has taken in the interest of the pleasures of a shared sense of alienation understood, in the first instance, as an unfitness for the world and history as it is. This introduction will, if nothing else, offer my reasons for advocating such a break.

I think it is important, for a start, to give an account of my first memory of where that break may lie. It would be more accurate, in truth, to say that it was felt rather than known, that feeling now hardwired into my critical nervous system, although the details remain sketchy.

I can remember how we were seated, but not where. The occasion was my last meal as an undergraduate, the night before my graduation. On my left sat my mother; to my right, my father; across from me, a favored political science professor, Grenada's former ambassador to the Organization of American States.[5] My motives for including her now feel expedient, short of beneficent. I had a sense that she might like them, and they her, liberating me to some degree from having to take full ownership of the evening. I feared the night would be celebratory for them, mournful for me. Perhaps their shared Caribbean origins would occasion a sense of

mutual affinity. My parents might feel anchored, at long last, to my college experience, invited into that experience, though on the brink of its closure.

The conversation feels normal to me; at least, as I experienced normal at that time: across a chasm with my parents, and familiar in that regard; free-flowing and animated with my professor. My father excuses himself from the table, as if to lubricate the conversation by way of his absence, but after a time I am made uncomfortable by the fact that he is not here, like a splinter one might feel but not see. Eventually, we all feel it. Turning to my mother, her facial expression conveying a simple "I don't know," I turn back. I hear my professor: "The pride he feels for you, which he can't speak, can't say to you, is making him sick."

Her words are to this day far from easy to absorb. At first, they stirred in me an almost bitter confusion. In our black West Indian demimonde, carved here and there across suburban Connecticut, the message had always been that it was cool to be smart. This day was certainly one we had all contemplated and anticipated, and for which my father had prepared me: summer science and math courses, internships at the medical school, advanced placement courses; long drives to attend music and choir camps at elite New England private schools. And yet, by the time the day arrived, my father wasn't ready.

Whenever I mull over those words "pride" and "sick," I can feel all over again their mutual repulsion. They name so many dimensions of the relation between my father and me, not least our mutual alienation or, better, our mutual aversion. I think of that gathering as the moment that we slide into open retreat from our kinship—when a story begins to be told, a story in which my academic achievements feed the disaffiliation that keeps us in relation. The dinner, intended as a celebration, instead marks this aversiveness as our future condition, offers it not as a state to be overcome but as a condition of our moving on. (Even now, I hesitate to tell my father when I go on sabbatical, such perks sounding too much, to a man who worked for a wage, like getting paid not to go to work.) At the same time, the professor's words attune me to the strange gift that haunts my father's act of self-abnegation. It is as if the goal of reproducing the child is to *not* reproduce yourself.

I am reminded, though not entirely comfortably, of Baldwin's account of his own relationship to his father, as described in his essay "Notes of a Native Son." Baldwin is keen to show that his father, much like other

blacks of his generation, bore an impossible duty: "how to prepare the child for the day when the child would be despised and how to create in the child . . . a stronger antidote to this poison than one had found for oneself."[6] Of course, from Baldwin's perspective, it doesn't appear that his father developed anything of the sort, having instead chosen to fight poison with poison: "In my mind's eye I could see him, sitting at the window, locked up in his terrors; hating and fearing every living soul including his children who had betrayed him, too, by reaching towards the world which had despised him."[7] Baldwin slides along an arc from inheritance to isolation to underscore his father's failure at the paternal function. The father, unable to pass on the defenses his children need, remains "locked up in his terrors"—paranoid, alienated, ashamed — his children abandoned to the world.

Baldwin wants us to focus on the pathos of this situation, marking it from the very first line of the essay as the disjuncture between death and life (father and child): "On the 29th of July, in 1943, my father died. On the same day, a few hours later, his last child was born." He doesn't shy from weaving this simultaneity throughout the essay: "The day of my father's funeral had also been my nineteenth birthday"; "Death . . . sat as purposefully at my father's bedside as life stirred within my mother's womb"; "When planning a birthday celebration one naturally does not expect that it will be up against competition from a funeral."[8] He makes little effort to muffle a sense that the simultaneity between black death and black life, which is also their mutual and aversive divergence and distinction, has about it a perfume of literary embellishment; every reader's task, however, is to figure out what it *means*.

I largely concur with Ismail Muhammad that Baldwin's figurations of his father challenge the idea of familial lineage and "the logic of perpetual trauma." Muhammad writes, "Baldwin's writing often looks askance at biological family ties, with language that figures generational bonds as a problem, laden as they are with oppressive histories. These bonds always threaten to become chains for Baldwin, and lineage seems coextensive with numbing repetition."[9] In Muhammad's reading of "My Dungeon Shook," Baldwin's letter to his nephew, which opens *The Fire Next Time*, "The paternal relationship means incessant repetition." One feels the force of repetition even in "Notes of a Native Son," an essay presumably intent on breaking it: "It seemed to me that God himself had devised, to mark my father's end, the most sustained and brutally dissonant of codas.

And it seemed to me, too, that the violence which rose all about us as my father left the world had been devised as a corrective for the pride of his eldest son."[10] That reference to God's "corrective" focuses our attention on Baldwin's efforts to distance himself from his father and interrupt the line of descent. Wanting to exit the paternal function and to supersede his father, Baldwin proposes in this essay, if I might hijack Muhammad's language, "a queered definition of reproduction."

Muhammad and I share the view that Baldwin's figurations of his father and the paternal relation, across his writings, represent as much a sustained working out of his relationship to history as a statement of personal biography. Baldwin resists "a traumatic model of black history" in which the present is merely an endless, Oedipal repetition of slavery and Jim Crow; a rigid relation to temporality or "narrative stiffness," in Eve Sedgwick's phrase, which feels like the generations marching in lockstep: "It happened to my father's father, it happened to my father, it is happening to me, it will happen to my son, and it will happen to my son's son."[11] Muhammad and I share, too, a sense of Baldwin's queer divergence from that inheritance, although we differ on its origin and locus. For Muhammad, Baldwin's letter to his nephew is itself "an interruption in [the] line of descent, a familial relation not premised on the paternal." For me, that queer exemption originates, paradoxically, in the father's disdain. In other words, the queerness isn't Baldwin's alone, isn't his either to own or to introduce. A sense of kinship shadowed by severance resides, in addition, in his father's orientation toward the world outside and his figuration as betrayal of his children's orientation toward that world.[12]

For me, to read Baldwin's "Notes" is to gaze into a mirror, though one in which everything has been reversed. The disdain for which he felt he was being prepared feels so removed from the support and privileges of my own world — the cruelty that his father directs at him ("his cruelty, to our bodies and our minds") a far cry from my father's wordless love. It is not the feelings here that have captured my interest, mind you; it is the structure—a structure of paternal self-exemption. The immediate question is this: why should Baldwin's father's disdain be so closely *structurally matched* with my father's pride?[13] From my understanding of this structure, in what I want to propose about it, the father inhabits the pathos of a necessary social condition, preparing his son for a social situation, a world, for which he all along knows himself to be unfit.

The anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli celebrates Baldwin's ability to

capture the pathos of a "subjective suicide" that is for her a condition of all progressive politics, or of any politics based on social rupture: "how bodies and minds can remain at once in the world and out of sequence with the world it is seeking to create or has successfully created."[14] Readers of Baldwin will recall that he often uses the word "apocalypse" to signal this simultaneity of creation and destruction, a language that reflects his earlier decision to leave the world of the church, as he once said, to preach the gospel. Povinelli prefers the term "extinguishment": "When I extinguish I am making a world in which I no longer make sense, and I am making it without the capacities that I am trying to bestow on the subsequent generation and without certain knowledge of the subsequent world."[15] Whatever the term of art, the father finds himself in the situation, in the existential condition, of seeking to create a world that will not have him.

In narratives of the closet, however, the specter of the breakup (the anticipation of severance) is assumed to be the child's alone. This affect haunted me throughout my adolescence: if I come out as gay, I will die in the eyes of my father, but I realize that a part of me is already gay and that he cannot not see that, so there must be a part of me that is already dead. I could choose to stay in the closet and pursue more socially sanctioned forms of achievement (I was no stranger to counterinvestment), but to become an intellectual is just another declension of becoming gay. We both know that; the affect is shared.[16]

My father was as much queered by the sting of disaffiliation as I was. Our familiarity (Lat., *familiaris*, of the family) threatened with rupture, it startles how easily queerness percolates out of the condition of blackness. Father and son find that they've arrived at a moment in which they *both* inhabit a queer time, their kinship shadowed, from both ends of the relation, by the specter of its obliteration and extinction, by its imminent severance. "Son looks at son, son at father, mother at daughter, and subsequent generations to antecedent ones with the same painful alienation."[17] The pathos may initially have belonged to my father, but in the end it becomes ours to share, as we are both living as insider outsiders, living outside the norm—father against the backdrop of the academy; son against the backdrop of family. Povinelli wonders why this pathos is so infrequently the focus of critical theory, and so do I, but with this one difference: I can see there are pleasures to be found in a shared sense of alienation, a shared queerness, emerging from a shared blackness that is

still understood, in the first instance, as an unfitness for the world and history as it is.

It would be a misstep on my part to suggest that the mutual alienation between father and son is uniquely black, or specifically cultural or ethnic, even as my narration lends that alienation all the characteristics of an immigrant story. But it would be no less of an error to imply that blackness is not here. It is, but not as we might expect. I have chosen to begin in conversation with Baldwin, in an autobiographical meditation on fathers, sons, and the intimate kinship shadowed from both sides of the relation by its imminent severance, because I am seeking a way to understand the filial world of subjects and the ethics of subjectivity (etymologically, a "thrown-downness" [Lat., *subiectivitas*], the condition of being placed after something or someone else). In considering Baldwin's father's orientation toward the world outside as a betrayal of his children's orientation toward that world, and asking why Baldwin's father's infamous disdain for his son should be so structurally matched with my own father's pride in me, my intention is to chart a relay in the subject and in intersubjectivity between disdain and pride, shame and exaltation, cynicism and expectation, which the criticism of black art and the historiography of black life often seem unwilling to acknowledge even as black art and black life are so richly burdened with resources to illumine that relay.

Let me be blunt, at the risk of oversimplifying my claim. I want to force the question of whether there is something unique—or, rather, too tragically conventional and absorbed—about what surely must be understood as Baldwin's father's *antiblackness*.[18] In ways that should be obvious to anyone, and that I cannot ignore, that question is already present in the righteousness and vengeance of David Walker's *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1833), from which this book takes its title: "I pray God that none like us ever may live again until time shall be no more."[19]

Walker's "none like us" bears a set of alternatives that it also liquidates, in the manner of litotes, or "antenantiosis," implying a meaning by denying its semantic opposite. These alternatives constitute a "we" in the very moment of marking its apparent impossibility. I note three:

1 First, there is an impulse toward the *minor* in Walker's attempt to constitute the collective. Why not pray that none like them shall ever live again—"the most degraded, wretched, and abject set of beings"? What is it about "us" as we are right

now that prompts this prayer "that none like us ever may live again," a prayer that must also be understood as an invocation of an absolute right to life? Is there a situation in which we could consolidate self-extinction and the right to life, such perfectly contradictory impulses?

2 I sense, as well, an opposing drive toward the *universal* in Walker's turn of phrase. Perhaps the term "us" is not so easily interpreted as black people. Perhaps there is an assumed and impossible universality to Walker's "us." If that is so, the challenge of discerning the collective nominated by the term "us" presents a problem of interpretation all its own.

3 All the same, I feel the prick of a *personal* address every time I read the opening lines to Walker's *Appeal*. When I read his prayer that "none like us ever may live again," I find it impossible to avoid a sense that he is praying that one like me might never have lived at all. Can "our" disappearance from history preserve "me"? (Is that, as the phrase goes, my condition of possibility?) Or does that disappearance also constitute another continual advent given in the refusal rather than the achievement of the self?

These tensions bely resolution, yet the myriad concerns I wish to take up in this book converge in the grammatical complexities of Walker's prayer, in his fraught semantic attempt to constitute a collective first person: my concern for the ethics of history written against the consequences of slavery, the articulation of blackness and belonging, the involution of rhetoric and identity. Walker's "none like us" cannot be read as simple affirmation or negation, an expression of belonging or alienation. Rather, the very condition of possibility, the origin, of that "us" renders it impossible. In his grammar I hear the difficulty, pathos, desire, anguish, and frustration entailed in the effort to constitute the "we" of blackness. Black collective being finds itself acknowledged and refused in the same rhetorical act. What is more, in the very moment that Walker prays a black people—a "we"—into being, he leaves us in serious doubt as to whether that "we" can exist in history. The implication is not that black people have been excluded from history (although that will be a concern in what follows), rather their very blackness derives from bearing a negative relation to it. *None Like Us* finds purpose in sitting with this imponderable.[20]

In the longstanding debate over "the antisocial thesis"—particularly, say, Leo Bersani's view of sex as a "shattering" of the subject, as "the locus of the social's disarray"—the invitation to extend that negativity to include the black case has been met with something short of enthusiasm (largely on the grounds that a certain "shattering" experience, the object of political *resistance*, already defines the condition of being black).[21] Quite to the contrary, Robyn Weigman argues, race has been "the figure of a difference inscribed in, not against, the social."[22] Weigman asks, "Does race, conceptually speaking, 'belong' only to one side of queer theory's contentious distinction between the negativity of social differences that arise from histories of racial and gendered negation and the negativity that repels and annuls sociality as such?"[23] It will be my position that the answer to that question is a strenuous "no." In what follows then, I set about the task of drawing out the connections between a sense of impossible black sociality—the simultaneity of black exception and black exemption that Walker gives us to ponder—and strains of negativity that often have operated under the sign *queer*: on the one hand, what registers with and in me, concerning art and life, as the minority subject's sense of *unbelonging* (e.g., forms of negative sociability such as alienation, withdrawal, loneliness, broken intimacy, impossible connection, and failed affinity, situations of being unfit that it has been the great insight of queer theorists to recognize as a condition for living); on the other hand, my critical interest in what Valerie Traub has termed "unhistoricism," an animus toward teleology and periodization in queer studies of which she remains skeptical but that, in my view, appears rooted in the insight that we are all always outside of history, always inside the gap between that which can be eternally remembered and that for which the future will give account, inside "that divided site that must look both ways at once . . . between the writing of history as prediction and as retrospection," prolepsis and analepsis, if you will (more on that gap in the next chapter).[24]

Walker can stake a claim within this line of thought. His hope lacks hopefulness. His prayer reads like the hope of someone firm in the belief that black people will never have their moment in time; a peculiarly agonistic description of black life lived in proximity to its irrelevance, of black identity disarticulated from time, or, as I will be in the habit of saying, unfit for history. Walker gives us blackness as a condition of genealogical isolation.

Walker's prayer on behalf of the "coloured citizens of the world"; Baldwin's figuration of his father, and me of mine. I am certainly not blind to the fact that these men exist in three distinct social and economic situations. (It would offend to pretend otherwise.) But an anti-communitarian undertone vibrates within these examples, and only with effort can I resist hearing it. Walker's "none like us" accrues critical analogs over the course of this book: the sense of being held and rejected by a tradition, or what it means (will mean in these pages) to have a queer relation to it; the recognition that separation, fearful estrangement, is what makes relationship (makes relationships) possible; the challenge of calling an object into being without owning or being owned by the call of identity or identification, of recognition or acknowledgment. *None Like Us* makes use of that undertone, extracts from it a sense of both the joy and the pain in genealogical isolation. It stands at the ready, a tool to break the hold on black studies that the oscillation between subjection and belonging has taken.

The Scholar's Sacrifice

It seems right to inquire into when this oscillation may have gotten its start, as one of its effects has been the production of that "we" of black history, which effect continues to exert its hold on us. I would hazard that some of the first ripples were felt upon G. W. F. Hegel's assertion, in 1831, in *Philosophy of History*, that Africa "is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit. . . . What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit . . . presented here only as on the threshold of the World's History."[25] Hegel's is arguably the most prominent in a long line of disavowals of black history and black culture, each of which, in its turn, has prompted a search for the black past.

If Hegel stands as the most prominent figure in the disavowal of the black past, as well he should, then the historian, law clerk, and bibliophile Arthur Schomburg can claim title to its signature rebuttal. His essay "The Negro Digs Up His Past," from 1925, captures the terms of what would become a century-long attempt to recover archival traces of black life. The opening paragraph reads:

> The American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future. Though it is orthodox to think of America as the one country where it is unnecessary to have a past, what is a luxury for the nation as a whole

> becomes a prime social necessity for the Negro. For him, a group tradition must supply compensation for persecution, and pride of race the antidote for prejudice. History must restore what slavery took away, for it is the social damage of slavery that the present generations must repair and offset. So among the rising democratic millions we find the Negro thinking more collectively, more retrospectively than the rest, and apt out of the very pressure of the present to become the most enthusiastic antiquarian of them all.[26]

Credit Schomburg with outlining the practice of historical inquiry posthumously termed "the recovery imperative," a critical ethic that has prevailed in black studies since at least the publication of his essay.[27] Schomburg's essay bears the marks of this imperative—the idea that "history must restore what slavery took away," that recovered black traditions "repair" "the social damage of slavery" and "compensate[e] for persecution."

It is not hard to see in the recovery imperative a powerful and compelling theory of how history works—not simply the theory that the past persists in the present, or the proposition that the past has to be made relevant to the present, but the idea that history is at its core a fundamentally redemptive enterprise, the idea "that everything that has eluded [the subject] may be restored to him."[28] It is the promise, Michel Foucault once wrote, that "one day the subject—in the form of historical consciousness—will once again be able to appropriate, to bring back under his sway, all those things that are kept at a distance by difference, and find in them what might be called his abode."[29] This isn't simply a matter of history arrayed as teleology; it is, rather, the ethic of an empathetic historicism fundamentally recuperative in its orientation. It marks, in Foucault's words, "the founding function of the subject."[30]

Imperatives calling for the Negro to "dig up his past" were meant to found just such a subject, a collective subject, as is evident in Schomburg's talk of "the Negro thinking more collectively, more retrospectively" (far from a throwaway line). A collective is born of this inquiry into the past (what he calls "group credit" and "credible group achievement"), although the logic that connects the collective's formation to thinking about the past is simultaneously implied and obscured. Schomburg's recovery imperative is the manifestation of a command we have *all* obeyed since Hegel's regrettable move to exclude Africans from narratives of historical progress—to regard the recovery of archival evidence of black histori-

cal being, on the one hand, and recovery in "the ontological and political sense of reparation . . . recuperation, or the repossession of a full humanity and freedom, after its ultimate theft or obliteration," on the other, *as belonging the same order of thought*.[31]

Recovery has been the subject of considerable debate, particularly within the broad critical reorientation described as the "archival turn."[32] Some of the sharpest questions have emerged from the field of Atlantic slavery and freedom, particularly work focused on the crime of slavery, and the return to the scene of the crime—return not to its scenes of violence but, rather, to what is represented more often as the crime of "the archive." In this vision of the archive, everything from state archives (e.g., records of trial, orders of execution, coerced testimony, gallows confessions, provincial gazettes) to the records of commercial transactions (e.g., account books, planters' journals, ships' logs, colonial correspondence) "threaten to obscure the humanity of the people they describe."[33] The archival turn is thus born of a generative tension between recovery understood, on the one hand, as "an imperative that is fundamental to historical writing and research" and, on the other, as a project that is essentially impossible "when engaged with archives whose very assembly and organization occlude certain historical subjects."[34] Let me state as bluntly as I can the fundaments of my claim regarding the recovery imperative. I contend that, where the doubled imperative persists (in which recovery from the slave past rests on a recovery of it), it is not too difficult to see the search for lost or absent black culture as substituting for the recovery of a "we" at the point of our violent origin. That imperative has a way of persisting even in the case of the recent archival turn, where recovery itself has been viewed with the greatest skepticism.

Particularly eloquent statements in the archival turn include:

> *Death and Power*. Vincent Brown—"It is thus less revealing to see the extravagant death rate in Jamaican society as an impediment to the formation of culture than it is to view it as the landscape of culture itself, the ground that produced Atlantic slavery's most meaningful idioms."[35]

> "If people looked to the past to find the roots of contemporary forms of inequality, domination, and terror, rather than the origins of freedom, rights, and universal prosperity, they might see early colonial Jamaica as home to the people who made the New World what it became."[36]

Tradition and Modernity. Stephan Palmié— "Even though we may never physically recover the product of José Antonio Aponte's imagination and artistic creativity, we are left with the paradoxical record of an eloquent absence. Created and preserved by the same machinery of power and knowledge production that annihilated Aponte, the archival record has become the medium through which his ghostly voice—warped and distorted, to be sure, by the noise of multiple interferences—now speaks to us about a world of images that we will never see. . . . The remnants of the strange dialogue . . . may be taken as evidence of . . . the symbolic order on which the power of Aponte's executioners rested and that they reaffirmed by liquidating . . . him along with his book. Part of this gesture of affirmation by violence was the creation of a record that involves us—if we engage it at all—in an almost hallucinatory mission to recover a history that never was and whose creator was killed in the act of its enunciation. . . . Aponte speaks to us first and foremost as a self-appointed historian of a past that is, in the true sense of the word, a *vision*: a record of histories rendered impossible, unreal, fictitious, and fantastic by the obliterating agency of a regime of truth that, in a perverse but consistent gesture, preserved the excess of its own operation."[37]

Slavery and the Archive. Saidiya Hartman—"The stories that exist are not about them, but rather about the violence, excess, mendacity, and reason that seized hold of their lives, transformed them into commodities and corpses, and identified them with names tossed-off as insults and crass jokes. The archive is, in this case, a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhea, a few lines about a whore's life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history."[38]

Sexuality and the Colonial Archive. Anjali Arondekar—"The archival responsibility of this book, if you will, is to propose a different kind of archival romance, one that supplements the narrative of retrieval with a radically different script of historical continuation. . . . The critical challenge is to imagine a practice of archival reading that incites relationships between the seductions of recovery and the occlusions such retrieval mandates. . . . Through my readings, (lost and found) figurations of sexuality . . . are not objects that are lost and can be recovered, but subject effects sedimented through the enactments of disciplinary discourses."[39]

These responses to the conundrum of the archive share a figure of thought: an emphasis on discipline as the dynamic that produces historical knowledge, which is an idea with roots in the thinking of Foucault. It can be heard in Arondekar's talk of the archive's "sedimented . . . subject effects"; in Brown's focus on death as generative of "the landscape of culture," on terror as what made Jamaica "home to the people who made the New World what it became"; and in Palmié's "affirmation by violence," his vision of the archive as a site that "liquidat[es]," "obliterate[es]," and "preserve[s]." Foucauldian discipline has certainly sharpened perception of the epistemic violence transmitted via the archive in work on colonialism and Atlantic slavery.[40]

No one wants to be erased from history, of course. Obliterated. Snuffed out. And most scholars of slavery are drawn into the vortex of lives lost in the very moment in which they are found, quite in earnest, out of a longing to bear witness to violent extermination and in the hope that such witness may occasion compassionate resuscitation. Still, these repeated returns to the scene of the crime, a crime imagined as the archive itself, in practice have mirrored the orientation that Sigmund Freud called "melancholy," and these keen attunements to archival disfiguration within recent Americanist cultural criticism might then be filed under the term "melancholy historicism."[41] The turn toward melancholy has been propelled by the publication of a trove of important books in the field by Ian Baucom, Anne Cheng, Colin (Joan) Dayan, Paul Gilroy, Saidiya Hartman, David Kazanjian and David Eng, Stephanie Smallwood, and Michel-Rolph Trouillot, among others, and finds its identity in adherence to a particular structuring of the racial other, as Cheng describes it, "whereby his or her racial identity is imaginatively reinforced through the introjection of a lost, never-possible perfection, an inarticulable loss that comes to inform the individual's sense of his or her own subjectivity."[42] Frequently underwritten by traumas of slavery and middle passage that appear unknowable and irrecoverable and yet account for history's *longue durée*—the "root identity," in Édouard Glissant's phrase, "sanctified by the hidden violence of a filiation that strictly follows from [a] founding episode"—melancholy historicism provides for the view that history consists in the *taking possession* of such grievous experience and archival loss.[43] The massacre aboard the slave ship *Zong* and the Margaret Garner infanticide have proved the more memorable examples of this archival loss, although crimes of the archive at reduced scales of history have often also left their mark. Mel-

ancholy, whether in its Freudian or post-Freudian declensions, according to Baucom, "serves to preserve, safeguard, or protect the dead by offering them an unsurrenderable, interminable, commemorative lodging within the social, political, and psychical imagination of the living," but it does so in "profound mistrust of representation," aiming "to pass itself off not as a representation of the lost thing but as that lost thing itself."[44] Thus, the melancholy text tends to take on a "cryptic" quality and manifest a "paradoxical and anxious reiterativity" in its attempt "to reduce representation to the exclusive domain of the nominative, to the speaking, over and over again, of the secret name of the dead."[45] The vanished world of the black Atlantic comes into existence through loss and can be sustained only through more tales of its loss. To frame history in this way preserves faith in the lost object as a counterpoint to the past's irrecoverability. The injury of slavery engenders a loss that requires abundant recompense, which is never (can never *be*) achieved.[46]

Baucom's account of the occlusions that mark the circum-Atlantic archive is exhaustive, detailed, and compelling, as is his sense of the problems such occlusions present for both eighteenth-century abolition discourse and any cosmopolitanism that moves in its wake: "the problem of the unseen, the problem of nonappearance, the problem of blocked vision."[47] The task of any cosmopolitan politics, of any melancholy act of witnessing, is "to render the unseen visible, to bear witness to the truth of what has not been (and what cannot have been) witnessed"; a task that, as the language suggests, verges on the impossible. Melancholy weds "an inability to forget what cannot be remembered" to an "obligation to see what has not been seen." In short, melancholy's problem is the possibility (or, again, the impossibility) of obtaining a view for the interested observer understood as a problem of knowledge. Baucom continues: "The witness (and, by implication, humanity) . . . requires some theory of knowledge by which to render the invisible visible, some technology of displaced knowledge by which to make the work of witness possible, some way of authenticating the credibility of the melancholy facts it brings imaginatively into view."[48] One such technology, one answer to these problems of "nonappearance" and "blocked vision," has been a dark brood of "negative allegory" that melancholy repeatedly engenders, an obsession with "displacement, erasure, suppression, elision, overlooking, overwriting, omission, obscurantism, expunging, repudiation, exclusion, annihilation,

[and] denial"; an obsession, in essence, with the *failure* of something that was lost to history ever making an appearance.[49] The sustained focus on the irretrievable within the archive has been phenomenally intellectually generative, and the mutual attunement between archival disfiguration and melancholy affect strikes me as neither a problem nor a surprise.

Arondekar's search for a link between "the seductions of recovery" and "the occlusions such retrieval mandates," and Hartman's accent on "the archive [as] death sentence," suggest one source for these scruples regarding blocked vision, erasure, and annihilation in Foucault's essay "The Life of Infamous Men" (1977).[50] It would not stretch the truth to say that "The Life of Infamous Men" provides a template for how a current generation "digs up [its] past" on account of how frequently the essay has been cited.[51] More to the point, the essay sinks into questions of attunement, witnessing, and the complex entanglements of the archive with such unparalleled nuance, it figures so centrally in the way a number of scholars have seen themselves bound to their work and to the historical subjects about which they write, and it plays such a pivotal role in advancing the archive as a method of inquiry in queer and black studies, that we avoid exploring the terms of its influence at great peril.[52]

The introduction to a book he never wrote, "The Life of Infamous Men" was conceived as an unsystematic anthology ("a kind of herbarium") of the lives of obscure men he encountered in the prison archives of the Hôpital Général and the Bastille; individual lives that medical and juridical authorities sought to consign to oblivion through laconic statements which, in something of a paradox, preserved the very lives that would otherwise have vanished:

> All those lives destined to pass beneath any discourse and disappear without ever having been told were able to leave traces—brief, incisive, often enigmatic—only at the point of their instantaneous contact with power. So that it is doubtless impossible to ever grasp them again in themselves, as they might have been "in a free state." . . . Lives that are as though they hadn't been, that survive only from the clash with a power that wished only to annihilate them or at least to obliterate them. . . . The return of these lives to reality occurs in the very form in which they were driven out of the world. Useless to look for another face for them, or to suspect a different greatness in them; they are no longer anything but that which was meant to crush them—neither more nor less.[53]

In line with his thinking on disciplinary regimes of power, Foucault focuses attention on how lives that were putatively outside of history could be made to shine for a brief moment in their clash with the very power that would relegate them to oblivion—"lowly lives reduced to ashes in the few sentences that struck them down" as if "they had appeared in language only on the condition of remaining absolutely unexpressed in it."[54] By writing in a prose that mirrors these inverse movements of power in the archive, Foucault also gives us to know something of what it felt like to encounter these "flash existences"—"a knot of conflicted interdependence," as Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt observe, between the paradox of the anecdote and the pathos of the anecdotalist, between a disciplinary power that allows these lives to "shine blindingly with a dark light" and the (counter) historian's attempt to clutch the life of the anecdote, which leads it to expire in his or her grasp.[55]

Foucault describes his somatic response to the archives as a "resonance" (*cette vibration*), conveying by that term a sense of the scholar's personal involvement in the lives of others. The language of resonance gathers many paraphrases throughout the essay, amplifying the sense of an affective continuum linking scholar and subject. *Seriatim*: "an emotion . . . *a certain dread or some other feeling* whose intensity I might have trouble justifying, now that the first moment of discovery has passed"; "it would be hard to say exactly *what I felt* when I read these fragments"; "one of *these impressions* that are called 'physical'"; "it was doubtless because of *the resonance* I still experience today when I happen to encounter these lowly lives"; "*I brooded* over the analysis alone"; "*the first intensities* that had motivated me remained excluded"; "it's a rule- and game-based book, the book of *a little obsession* that found its system"; "*the shock* of these words must give rise to a certain effect of beauty mixed with dread."[56] Foucault's talk of "dread" and "shock," his "brood[ing]" over fragments, far from a symptom of scholarly misadventure, models a sensorium for his readers in which scholar and subject coexist in a kind of archival "nervous system."[57]

It is not hard to see the appeal of these affective tremors to those who lack "some vantage on history, some view from the window by which to witness the melancholy facts of history."[58] Certainly, queer and slave historiographies appear to be on the same page with respect to what this nervous system affords. For Saidiya Hartman, the appeal of this language and method lay precisely in its suggestion of personal involvement—the

sense of being empathetically connected to the lives of those about whom she wishes to write. One discerns this order of attachment when Hartman reflects that "this writing is personal because this history has engendered me, because 'the knowledge of the other marks me,' because of the pain experienced in my encounter with the scraps of the archive."[59] One detects it, too, when Heather Love describes the double-edged "cross-historical touch" she experiences in the archive, one caught between "the caress of a queer or marginal figure" and the "brutal touch of the law."[60] For Carolyn Dinshaw, this touch of the archive affords the sense of "de-subjectified connectedness" necessary to the writing of queer history, a queer community "constituted by nothing more than the connectedness (even across time) of singular lives that unveil and contest normativity."[61]

Foucault has been accused of tending to overdramatize his situation, of protecting and projecting an "exaggerated sense of immediate moral brinkmanship" and "imagining [his] research to be implicated in the life-and-death struggles of . . . these unsung offenders."[62] These critics risk something of the same. Still, they draw our attention quite compellingly to the project of thinking through affective intimacy in the archive, specifically for queer theory, not because the archive's brutal energies "either transcend or disguise the coarser stuff of ordinary being, but because those energies are the stuff of ordinary being."[63] Hartman longs to extend a bit of what she feels to those locked in archival obscurity and (to quote Gallagher and Greenblatt on Foucault) "to bring something back to life that had been buried deep in oblivion." Love's subjects tend to recoil from our touch ("untouchability runs deep in queer experience"), but it is Dinshaw who gets closest to affirming the broader truth coursing through all of this work, the sense in which, in the energy running back and forth across this affective circuit, the mutual implication between scholar and subject is barely to be distinguished from the sense of community across time.[64]

The jolt of the archive (*cette vibration*) welds its figuration as scene of the crime to the scholar's implication in that figuration. And through these complex figures of entanglement, we have, in fact, made for the possibility of a "we" (whether queer or black), for the emergence of centripetal social bonds formed "at . . . the impact point of a collective disaster, one at which witnessing is mutually witnessed and so forms a momentary social encounter and joint world."[65] Witnessing promises mutuality, and that mutuality, in turn, a kind of intimate acknowledgment. The paradox

is that, through the shock of the archive (the force with which these "few sentences . . . struck them down"), we experience "the joy of finding counterparts in the past."[66]

That touch of the archive is no small matter, as it turns out, certainly not a simple matter of the scholar reaching out to touch a recalcitrant subject, certainly not innocent. But I wonder whether there are different stakes in that touch for queer and black studies. For Love, the sensation is negative ("as much a mauling as a caress"), a jolt that spurs recoil, one that is "queer" in the sense that it flags the ways the sexual past is nothing like the sexual present (again, see Traub on queer "unhistoricism"). For Hartman, it is a sign of life at the point of expiation, a symptom of what links lives prone to premature death across time and, arguably, as another scholar of the slave past suggests, a circuit in which "the continuum between past and present [is] made to be deeply felt."[67] I suppose that I am less ecumenical than Love, less hopeful and optimistic than Dinshaw, and more cynical than Hartman.

Sensitive of playing a hand in the expiation the archive effects, I am led to a more astringent take on affective history. Over the course of researching and writing this book, I have often felt undone by the archive, unable to find the subjects (the precursors) that I seek. Time and again, I would set out to recover something from the archive and fail in the attempt. But what seemed to be affirmed in each attempt was not the recalcitrance of the past but, rather, the extent to which I am drawn into being ecstatically dispossessed. Facing up to this fact, I am inspired to craft a historicism that is not melancholic but accepts the past's turning away as an ethical condition of my desire for it. I try to reframe the jolt of the archive—its refusal, its rebuff—as a call to sacrifice, seeing no reason not to put such failure to some use.

To sharpen the distinction I am attempting to draw, I find it helpful to rescript Foucault's "knot of conflicted interdependence" into two distinct types of scholarly sacrifice, torqued in each case by race and the ghost of slavery. Think of the first sacrifice (the melancholic) as a kind of debt: *As a scholar, you owe that other something by virtue of the fact that you exist and the other does not. This involution is what binds us, what ties our present to the past, our present to their past; but, on account of this involution, in writing about the past, we execute our debts not in living, but in reanimating the other.* Think of the alternative as more astringent, a version of Walker's "none like us": *I must acknowledge that were it not for*

the other's obliteration, I would not exist; the relation is self-eclipsing, but, by the same token, there is no alternative past that would still result in the production of me.[68] This book makes every effort to predicate its thinking within the latter astringency.

I earlier spoke of "the scene of the crime" and "*return* to the scene of the crime," and now seems the right time to make explicit my reasons for stressing return. I mean to focus on an understanding of melancholy historicism as a kind of crime scene investigation in which a specifically *forensic imagination* is directed toward the archive. "Forensic" in my use of the term indicates not the police procedures of criminal law or the analysis of evidence and the examination of crime scenes, but (following the thinking of Michael Ralph) a political calculus, a power of translation.[69] I track the movements of this forensic imagination with the goal of drawing attention less to what searching finds (to what can or cannot be held, has or has not been retrieved from the archive) than to what searching itself brings about, what is born of the understanding of the archive as a scene of injury.

Now, between my interlocutors and me, in the pages to follow, the scene of the crime as a scene of origin is, in a sense, agreed upon. What remains in dispute is the question of what is born of that scene. Were I to reprise my earlier statements, this time with a bit of reverb, the nature of the dispute should become abundantly clear. Melancholy historicism is a kind of crime scene investigation in which the forensic imagination is directed *toward the recovery of a "we" at the point of "our" violent origin*. It participates in a broader intellectual matrix within black studies that assumes slavery as the point of origin of this we. Bryan Wagner writes,

> Perhaps the most important thing we have to remember about the black tradition is that Africa and its diaspora are older than blackness. Blackness does not come from Africa. Rather, Africa and its diaspora become black during a particular stage in their history. It sounds a little strange to put it this way, but the truth of this description is widely acknowledged. Blackness is an adjunct to racial slavery. . . . Blackness is an indelibly modern condition that cannot be conceptualized apart from the epochal changes . . . that were together made possible by the European systems of colonial slavery.[70]

The origin he calls forth generates a blackness that cannot and must not be understood as transcendent or as a positive negation of its origins in

chattel slavery. Hartman's arguments on "dispossession" and those of Jared Sexton on "Afro-pessimism" yield further extraordinary leaps in our thinking on blackness and slavery, but the underlying assumptions in this matrix shore up a notion of black selfhood that is grounded in a kind of lost black sociality, in black sociality's groundedness in horror. We are given to understand slavery as the scene of the crime and that scene of the crime as a scene of origin. But it will be my intention to show, in *None Like Us*, across a range of materials and archival encounters, that there is and can be no "we" in or following from such a time and place, that what "we" share is the open secret of "our" impossibility. Walker's and Baldwin's prose, as I have already suggested, gestures toward this secret—and their turns of phrase offer a map, or sonar, in my search for a selfhood that occurs in disaffiliation rather than in solidarity. Whatever blackness or black culture is, it cannot be indexed to a "we"—or, if it is, that "we" can only be structured by and given in its own negation and refusal.

Aesthetic of the Intransmissible

In *None Like Us*, I set about drawing limits around the imperative toward melancholy in the historiography of slavery by building a new set of relations between contemporary criticism and the black past on the basis of aesthetic values and sensibilities that I espy in works of literature and art that, in my understanding of them, strive to forge critical possibilities by way of a kind of apocalypticism, or self-eclipse. The shimmering throwaway-aluminum constructions of the Ghanaian artist El Anatsui, the layered paper canvases of the Los Angeles artist Mark Bradford, Gwendolyn Brooks's free-verse poems, and (somewhat surprisingly) the recent novels of Toni Morrison: I have settled on these particular artworks, and foreground them in the first half of the book, not solely because that is what an "aesthetics of existence" calls for (Foucault: "We have to create ourselves as a work of art"), but because each appears to take on a self-consuming form in which the work itself strives to either close itself off or use itself up.[71] What is more, when taken as the manifest expression of an *aesthetics of the intransmissible* these works of art inspire me to the view that contemporary artists are in the process of enacting a kind of thought that literary critics are not yet willing to entertain, that they may be enacting a "style" of freedom: freedom from constraining conceptions of blackness as authenticity, tradition, and legitimacy; of his-

tory as inheritance, memory, and social reproduction; of diaspora as kinship, belonging, and dissemination.

Chapter 1, "My Beautiful Elimination," makes the case for a philosophical project of self-divestiture. It espies both an invitation to and a model for this project in the aesthetic tendencies at work in Anatsui and Bradford, which have been read by most critics of their work as moving toward the opposite goal of a kind of recognition, remembrance, and striving after cultural dignity and respect—a consolidation of diasporic identity. For example, in the case of Anatsui, the work is often taken as linking globalization to the ghost of slavery (Africa's liquor market merely extending the terms of the triangular trade). But in the case of Anatsui, it appears that a contrary sort of invitation is being issued in the form of a trompe l'oeil error (the mistaking of trash for gold) by which the work encourages the viewer unwittingly to take part in the perceptual effect of its own undoing. In the case of Bradford, this invitation typically arrives by way of the canvas provoking the viewer's curiosity as to what has been either erased from its once legible surface or immured within its stacked layers, a curiosity that the scholar, in any case, would be in the habit of satisfying by way of the recovery of meaning, context, or history, but that remains effectively foreclosed, an object of perpetual failure. In thus setting up the conditions for its final irrelevance, attributing its effects not to art but to a world without art (trash), or, alternatively, in creating the very object that must then go on to be destroyed, these artworks actively lose sight of their own forms. In Adorno's words, they "immolate themselves . . . , rushing toward their perdition" and conscript those who experience their effects in a similar and companionate act in which they lose sight of the coherence that goes by the name of the self.[72] Rather than accept critique as the adversarial inversion of terms of historical exclusion, these objects afford a view of critique as assimilation, appeasement, and leave-taking (the capacity to "*sich anschmiegen ans Andere*," as Adorno phrased it in *Dialect of Enlightenment*: "to mold oneself to the other").[73] The more muted, contingent, and relativistic selfhood I seek is both held and conveyed in this array of disappearing artworks. Why should we think we can see anything else in a work of art besides the forms in which we see ourselves and see ourselves disappear?

In chapter 2, "On Failing to Make the Past Present," I argue that a similarly disintegrative impulse can be discerned in the recent writings of Toni Morrison (against the arguments of both boosters and detractors

of the project of melancholy historicism that was inaugurated with the publication of her *Beloved*). The chapter questions whether the recovery imperative that motivates much critical melancholy offers the only way to either have or do slave history and ponders the possibility that the unforthcomingness of the past may be the fount of its deepest political (if not human) significance. The chapter makes the case for the writing of a history of discontinuity, the model for which is again provided by Morrison, in her novel *A Mercy*, which by way of its ungenial textual effects expresses its author's apparent turn away from the affective history project she earlier so capably inspired.

The third and fourth chapters offer examples of what this history of discontinuity might look like by exploring suicide and rumor in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century archives of slavery as the kind of evidence often made to serve the goals of historicism, i.e., an idea of criticism as a redemptive project that continues, reanimates, or completes the political projects of those who were defeated by history. I argue for the need to shift from a historical to a rhetorical mode, from a mode of writing that keeps reintroducing the sense of loss that necessarily haunts any attempt at retrieval to one that, in the words of Michel de Certeau, "succeeds in failing," much like the tropes of metalepsis and litotes, which involve a negation or an awareness of moving "from a *can not say* . . . to a *can say* . . . by way of a *can say nothing*."[74]

Chapter 3, "The History of People Who Did Not Exist," presents another example of the kind of writing this shift toward rhetoric requires, taking up death as both the most persistent object of contemporary criticism and, in the form of slave suicide, an ideal object of metaleptic history. In the chapter I draw on slave suicide to fracture some of the presumed intimacies between our critical present and the historical past. In the struggles over slavery and the slave trade at the turn of the eighteenth century, nothing signaled what was at stake more than black death, and there was no more potent representation of those stakes than the image of slave suicide. Abolitionists often invoked the suicides of slaves as a barometer of the institution's horror while also glorifying such acts in their own romantic literature as forms of the "good death" (e.g., Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*; Thomas Day's "Ode to a Dying Negro"). In the abolitionist cult of death, slave suicide was taken up as evidence of culture, as the sign that slaves possessed a code of honor that gave suicide meaning, and in nineteenth-century medical literature, slave suicide was often labelled

"nostalgia."[75] In the recent rehabilitation of death and melancholy in the study of slavery, the imperative once again has been to make death in slavery mean (social death, civil death, necropolitics, necrocitizenship), which carries with it the demand that these acts be evidence of something—of a culture of resistance or of nihilism and social death. In this chapter, I argue that the slave's suicide is less to be interpreted than to be pondered as a problem for interpretation, drawing on the insight of historians such as Constantin Fasolt, who sees his discipline as uniquely challenged when it comes to writing about people who "consciously suppressed themselves in acts of self-immolation."[76] The chapter asks what it would mean to write about figures who resist our attempts to restore them to wholeness, who resist our projects of historical recovery—figures for whom our present does not (and cannot) represent the future they imagined. What they would require is certainly not history writing as we know it but a writing in full awareness of the negativity that labors to undo any historical project. This would be a writing predicated on knowing what withholds itself from the possibility of being known, one that sought to acknowledge without actually knowing. The chapter takes slave suicide as the theoretical object of this gossamer writing.

Chapter 4, "Rumor in the Archive," marks the intellectual origins of this project: the evidentiary problem of rumor in the archive and the tendency of Americanist/black studies critics to enshrine voice as the apotheosis of minor history. The chapter examines the first-person testimony of slaves recorded in the proceedings of various select committees that were appointed (as directed by the British House of Commons) "to inquire into the origin, causes, and progress of the late insurrection[s]" in the Caribbean.[77] These inquisitions were noteworthy for providing a subject where initially there was none, and retrieving an intention from language that could have none, with the effect that a voice comes to be engendered in its repression. (Historians of slavery will often make the error of taking these forms of utterance as the "voice" of their subjects.) My primary interest is in the attempt to preserve rumor as speech—or, to be more precise, to turn what functioned for all intents and purposes as a kind of "writing" into a "voice"; to turn everyday prattle (which circulates anonymously, as many commentators at the time noted, between dominator and dominated alike) into the confessional "voice" of conspirators. Focused in particular on the slaves' testimony that they believed the British monarch had freed them, I view their words neither as evidence irre-

deemably corrupted by the sovereign power that extracted them nor as verbatim speech through which we can recover subjects lost to history. These words are, rather, exactly what they appear to be: "impossible speech" that oscillates between loyalty and insurgency, speech and paraphrase, fact and prophesy, confession and coercion. In that sense, it reflects back to us the deeply felt uncertainty of the enslaved. Attention to the rumors on the surface of the archive challenges our conception of the latter as a repository of latent voices and "hidden transcripts" and requires that we reconsider whether the story of slavery can ever be narrated "from below" if our aim is to register what is inaccessible in the voice of the enslaved. Attuned to the component of meaning that is wanting in speech, the chapter performs what Brent Hayes Edwards has described as a "queer practice of the archive," or "an approach to the material preservation of the past that deliberately aims to retain what is elusive, what is hard to pin down, what can't quite be explained or filed away according to the usual categories"—a method that in practice involves, as he has shown, making multiple approaches toward one's object, never arriving at it.[78]

These essays will have their life. They are offered on the understanding that it is neither the recovery of an impossible community, nor the making of a utopia or dystopia that is at stake. They are offered out of a wish that, if some part of what I say here should catch, if any argument I make should find adherents, I may in that case have ended up creating a world that will no longer have me, as would be the point.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. When I speak of the omnipresence of futurism in queer politics I am thinking in particular of the critique of "reproductive futurity" in Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). In what follows, my reflections on fathers, sons, and failures of reproduction deliberately echo Edelman's eloquent statement of the antisocial thesis in queer theory.

2. The ideational tilt in queer theory can be detected in a long-standing debate over the value of utopia as measured against "antisociality" (the inescapable antagonisms of queer life), a debate in which "optimism" and "utopia" have frequently appeared as keywords. Some signature appearances (although this list is far from exhaustive) include Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, "Sex without Optimism," in *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 1–34; José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), a text that is deeply indebted to Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995 [1954]); and Michael Snediker, *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

3. The title of Raoul Peck's *I Am Not Your Negro* distills (and, not insignificantly, euphemizes) James Baldwin's measurably more barbed assertion that "what white people have to do is try and find out in their own hearts why it was necessary to have a 'nigger' in the first place, because I'm not a nigger, I'm a man. But if you think I'm a nigger, it means you need him. The question that you've got to ask yourself. . . . If I'm not the nigger here and you invented him, you the white people invented him, then you've got to find out why": James Baldwin, interviewed by Kenneth Clark, "Perspectives: The Negro and the American Promise" (WGBH-TV, Boston, 1963).

4. James Baldwin, *Remember This House* (incomplete ms.); reprinted in James Baldwin and Raoul Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro* (New York: Vintage, 2017), 30–31.

5. The Grenada Revolution (led by Maurice Bishop and the New Jewel Movement) lasted from March 13, 1979, to October 19, 1983, when the US military invaded the island. My professor, Dessima Williams, had been exiled because of Ronald Reagan's overthrow of the island's government: see David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

6. James Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon, 1955), 106. James Weldon Johnson also homes in on this impossible responsibility in *Along This Way* (New York: Penguin, 1990 [1933]), 56:

> The question of the child's future is a serious dilemma for Negro parents. Awaiting each colored child are cramping limitations and buttressed obstacles in addition to those that must be met by youth in general; and this dilemma approaches suffering in proportion to the parents' knowledge of and the child's ignorance of these conditions. Some parents up to the last moment strive to spare the child the bitter knowledge; the child of less sensitive parents is likely to have this knowledge driven in upon him from infancy. And no parent may definitely say which is the wiser course, for either of them may lead to spiritual disaster for the child.

7. Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," 90.

8. Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," 85, 98, 104.

9. Ismail Muhammad, "The Misunderstood Ghost of James Baldwin," *Slate*, February 15, 2017, accessed February 16, 2017, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/books/2017/02/how_critics_have_misunderstood_james_baldwin_s_influence_on_today_s_great.html.

10. Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," 85.

11. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 147.

12. I mark this anticipation of severance *queer* on account of its affinities with the thesis of "antirelationality." The antisocial thesis in queer theory, as originally formulated by Leo Bersani, assumes "a potentially revolutionary inaptitude—perhaps inherent in gay desire—for sociality as it is known." This inaptitude is a threat to the social because "insofar as we fail to reproduce the family in a recognizable form, queers fail to reproduce the social": see Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 76. See also Tim Dean, "The Antisocial Homosexual," *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (2006): 826.

Over the past three decades, Toni Morrison and Nathaniel Mackey have also offered some of the richest and most sustained explorations into these

concerns. I discuss Morrison in chapter 2. For Mackey's inscription of Afro-diasporic experience as "wounded kinship," see Nathaniel Mackey, "Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol," *Callaloo* 30 (1987): 29–54. Nadia Ellis presents an eloquent weave of these queer and diasporic critical traditions, building a case for the idea that "diasporic consciousness is at its most potent when it is, so to speak, unconsummated"—and, at such times, she adds, its most "paradigmatic": Nadia Ellis, *Territories of the Soul: Queered Belonging in the Black Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 2. Ellis's book has broken important ground in the critique of race and belonging, and in *None Like Us* I am attempting to build on that ground.

13. It is, as Hortense Spillers might say, "as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, show movement": see Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 208.

14. Elizabeth A. Povinelli, "On Suicide, and Other Forms of Social Extinguishment," in *Theory Aside*, ed. Jason Potts and Daniel Stout (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 88.

15. Povinelli, "On Suicide, and Other Forms of Social Extinguishment," 88.

16. Now would be a good time to admit to my (no longer) secret love of Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody," a coming-out anthem for sure, but in my view, in addition, a hymn to severance as the essence of queer art—to letting oneself be consumed with the pleasures of what the choice of severance (from the mother, in the song's imaginary) involves.

17. Povinelli, "On Suicide, and Other Forms of Social Extinguishment," 88.

18. "Antiblackness" has circulated in the quite recent (theoretical) past as one name for the project of questioning the origin and ontology of blackness (the other name for it is "afro-pessimism"). In one way to phrase the question, does the position that sets itself against blackness (call it "racism," call it "white supremacy") precede or follow it? In another formulation, this one from Fred Moten, "If . . . the black cannot be an other for another black, if the black can only be an other for a white, then is there ever anything called black social life?" I am sympathetic to this line of interrogation, but my objective is to remove the question of antiblackness to the registers of rhetoric and relation. See Jared Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism," in *Time, Temporality and Violence in International Relations: (De)fatalizing the Present, Forging Radical Alternatives*, ed. Anna M. Agathangelou and Kyle D. Killian (New York: Routledge, 2016), esp. 67, 72–73; Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness," *Criticism,* vol. 50, no. 2 (Spring 2008): esp. 178.

19. David Walker, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, ed. Peter P. Hinks (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012 [1829]), 3.

20. Sexton claims that, for all of the back and forth within black studies between optimism and pessimism, one "agreed upon" point is the idea that "black life is not social life in the universe formed by the codes of state and civil society, of citizen and subject, of nation and culture, of people and places, of history and heritage. . . . Black life is not lived in the world that the world lives in, but underground, in outer space. . . . [B]lack life is not social, or rather black life is *lived* in social *death*, which is also *social* death": Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death," 69. This claim feels almost too stark, too absolute to be an object of universal assent, although I share with Sexton his sense of the breadth of its reach in the sense that it forms a point at which many of the field's "arguments . . . begin, but cannot (yet) proceed": Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death," 69. Sexton captures one of the meanings I intend when I speak of being *unfit for history.*

21. Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" in *Is the Rectum a Grave? and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 25; Robyn Wiegman, "Sex and Negativity; or, What Queer Theory Has for You," *Cultural Critique* 95 (Winter 2017), 220.

22. Wiegman, "Sex and Negativity," 236.

23. Wiegman, "Sex and Negativity," 236.

24. Jonathan Goldberg, "The History That Will Be," *GLQ* 1 (1995): 388. Heather Love offers a model for drawing together these strands of the social and the historical: Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). See also Valerie Traub, "The New Unhistoricism in Queer Studies," *PMLA* 128, no. 1 (2013): 21–39.

25. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Colonial Press, 1900), 98–99. For a statement of the tenets behind the claim that "the Negro is . . . a man without a past," see the opening chapter in Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon, 1941).

26. Arthur Schomburg, "The Negro Digs Up His Past," in *The New Negro*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Athenaeum, 1925), 231. Schomburg's essay sits within a discourse of "vindicationism," a tradition of Black Nationalist and Pan-Africanist writings from at least the second half of the nineteenth century that rebut claims of the inferiority of blacks to whites: see David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 79–87; Robert Hill, "C. L. R. James: The Myth of Western Civilization," in *Enterprise of the Indies*, ed. George Lamming (Port of Spain: Trinidad and Tobago Institute of the West Indies, 1999), 255–59.

27. The "recovery imperative" names the desire "to recover black subjects from archives structured by violence and colonial dispossession": Laura Helton, Justin Leroy, Max A. Mishler, Samantha Seeley, and Shauna Sweeney, "The Question of Recovery: An Introduction," *Social Text* 33, no. 4 (December 2015), 1.

28. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 12.

29. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 12.

30. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 12.

31. Lisa Lowe, "History Hesitant," *Social Text* 33, no. 4 (December 2015), 85.

32. Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Helton et al., "The Question of Recovery," 1; Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

33. Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 28. Brown offers a precise articulation of the problem: "The numbers tell an impressive story, but it is easy to forget that they represent the logic of markets better than they do the experience of enslavement": Brown, *The Reaper's Garden*, 28.

34. Helton et al., "The Question of Recovery," 1.

35. Brown, *The Reaper's Garden*, 59.

36. Brown, *The Reaper's Garden*, 260.

37. Stephan Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity & Tradition* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 83, 97.

38. Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe*, no. 26 (June 2008): 2.

39. Anjali Arondekar, "Without a Trace," in Arondekar, *For the Record*, 1, 4.

40. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault understands the archive as an expression of his thesis on power. He challenges us to regard the archive as something held less in libraries than in language—something less certain than a *tradition* but better defined than the *oblivion* that (in his words) "opens up to all new speech the operational field of its freedom." The archive is a generative system "that establishes statements as events and things," the rules of a practice "that enables statements both to survive and to undergo regular modification": see Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 128–30.

41. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Collected Psychological Works*, vol. 14, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1957), 243–258.

42. Anne Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), xi. The body of work that would fall under the sign of melancholy is too diverse and too broad to enumerate here, but important works, in addition to *The Melancholy of Race*, include Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the*

Philosophy of History (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Paul Gilroy, *Darker than Blue* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts"; Saidiya Hartman, "The Time of Slavery," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (2002): 757–77; David Kazanjian and David Eng, eds., *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacy: Making Post-slavery Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010) and *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon, 1995). Key literary texts are Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1997); Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Penguin, 2000); M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008); Dereck Walcott, *Omeros* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990).

There is a great deal of overlap between these works and work that questions whether slavery is over, whether it represents a historical object that has been overcome, although the following make little to no claim to melancholy as a method: Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010); Dennis Childs, *Slaves of the State: Black Incarceration from the Chain Gang to the Penitentiary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); Barnor Hesse, "Escaping Liberty: Western Hegemony, Black Fugitivity," *Political Theory* 42, no. 3 (2014): 288–313; Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

43. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 143–44.

44. Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, 132, 258.

45. Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, 132.

46. Hence, Baucom refers to Jacques Derrida's "mourning without limit."

47. Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, 218.

48. Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, 218.

49. Alan Liu, "The New Historicism and the Work of Mourning," in Alan Liu, *Local Transcendence: Essays on Postmodern Historicism and the Database* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 162. Marjorie Levinson pointed to the method of "negative allegory," or "allegory by absence," in the introduction to *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems: Four Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 8–13.

50. Michel Foucault, "The Life of Infamous Men," in *Michel Foucault: Power,*

Truth, Strategy, ed. Meaghan Morris and Paul Patton (Sydney, Australia: Feral Publications, 1979), 76–91.

51. As early as 2000, Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt described Foucault's essay as "a little-read text," although over the course of the next decade and a half it would become a touchstone in queer and slave historiography, its impact felt less in the frequency of its citation than in the prominence achieved by the books and essays for which it has served as a model: see Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, "Counterhistory and the Anecdote," in *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 66–70. In the field of Atlantic slavery, see Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 137; Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 2; Marisa Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 127–29. In the field of queer theory, see Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 136–42; Brent Hayes Edwards, "The Taste of the Archive," *Callaloo* 35, no. 4 (2010): 946; Love, *Feeling Backward*, 46–49; Chris Nealon, *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion Before Stonewall* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 20–22; Kevin Ohi, *Henry James and the Queerness of Style* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 144–45. Giorgio Agamben also views the essay as fundamental to Foucault's thought: see Giorgio Agamben, "The Author as Gesture," in *Profanations* (New York: Zone, 2007), 62–66.

52. Michel Foucault, "La vie des hommes infâmes," *Les Cahiers du Chemin* 29 (January 15, 1977) : 12–29. The title has also been translated as "Lives of Infamous Men": see Michel Foucault, "Lives of Infamous Men," *Michel Foucault: Power*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: New Press, 2000), 157–75. My citations are to the translation.

53. Foucault, "Lives of Infamous Men," 161–64.

54. Foucault, "Lives of Infamous Men," 157; Agamben, "The Author as Gesture," 66.

55. Gallagher and Greenblatt, "Counterhistory and the Anecdote," 68; Agamben, "The Author as Gesture," 66.

56. Foucault, "Lives of Infamous Men," 157–59, emphases added.

57. Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

58. Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, 218.

59. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 4 (citing Vena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* [Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007], 17).

60. Love, *Feeling Backward*, 48–49.

61. Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 138.

62. Gallagher and Greenblatt, "Counterhistory and the Anecdote," 70.

63. Eve Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think this Introduction Is about You," in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 1–2.

64. Gallagher and Greenblatt, "Counterhistory and the Anecdote," 70–71; Love, *Feeling Backward*, 40.

65. Mark Seltzer, "The Official World," *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 4 (2011): 726.

66. Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero, *Premodern Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1996), viii.

67. Colin [Joan] Dayan, *The Law Is a White Dog: How Legal Rituals Make and Unmake Persons* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), xiii.

68. I am riffing on what the philosopher Bernard Williams called "wrongful life," or the situation in which one is born with a certain disadvantage that under a different set of circumstances would not have come about. Williams aims to work out the validity of a structure of grievance, with human genetics as his sample set. I do not mean to imply that African Americans bear a strongly genetic defect or anything analogous to it. I am thinking homologously of race as a social disadvantage or slavery as a historical injury. I mean only to suggest the logical constraints of the situation in which a person (or, in this case, a people) is inseparable from a certain disadvantage or injury, which situation with respect to African Americans appears to persist in the literary and archival universe explored in *None Like Us*: see Bernard Williams, "Resenting One's Own Existence," *Making Sense of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 224–232.

69. Michael Ralph, *The Forensics of Capital* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 13. In Ralph's formulation, a *forensic* is a calculus or protocol for predicating a subject (a "calculus used to adjudicate social standing"; "political belonging is shaped by strategies for securing political recognition—by protocols for assessing the integrity of a person or polity"). Ralph derives his sense of forensics from the work of William Pietz, who describes the idea as follows: "Modern forensics is a science of 'hybrids' in the sense that its task is to translate a culture's knowledge of physical causality into the rather different language of social causation that establishes legal liability": see William Pietz, "Material Considerations: On the Historical Forensics of Contract," *Theory, Culture and Society* 19, nos. 5–6 (December 2002): 36.

70. Bryan Wagner, *Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power after Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 1.

71. Foucault located an "aesthetics of existence" (an "elaboration of one's own life as a personal work of art") in pre-Christian antiquity, although he found reason to encourage its renewed search near the end of his life: see Michel Foucault, "An Aesthetics of Existence," in *Philosophy, Politics, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings of Michel Foucault*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Routledge, 1988), 49; Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Over-

view of Work in Progress," in Michel Foucault, *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 262.

72. Theodor W. Adorno, "Toward a Theory of the Artwork," in *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 243.

73. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Odysseus presents as cultural progenitor of the idea of mimesis as assimilation and contiguity, for in bartering his way through the threats presented by the various deities and monsters he encounters along his way he survives these threats by cunningly adapting to them. The gods, in turn, in agreeing to the terms of barter, "are overthrown by the very system by which they are honored." Thus, in Odysseus's encounter with Polyphemus, his two contradictory responses, of both answering to his name, and disowning it, function in essence as one: "He acknowledges himself to himself by denying himself under the name Nobody; he saves his life by losing himself." Odysseus "abases himself." In him, "the self does not constitute the fixed antithesis to adventure, but in its rigidity molds itself [*sich anschmiegen*] only by way of that antithesis: being an entity only in the diversity of that which denies all unity . . . Odysseus loses himself in order to find himself." What is true for the epic hero is true for the work of art—and, to my way of thinking, for the critic; see Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1997 [1944]), 47–49, 59–60.

74. Michel de Certeau, "Vocal Utopias: Glossolalias," *Representations* 56 (Autumn 1996): 31.

75. Terri Snyder, "Suicide, Slavery, and Memory in North America," *Journal of American History* 97, no. 1 (June 2010): 50–51.

76. Constantin Fasolt, *The Limits of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 143.

77. *The Report from a Select Committee of the House of Assembly, Appointed to Inquire into the Origin, Causes, and Progress, of the Late Insurrection* (Barbados: W. Walker, 1818).

78. Edwards, "The Taste of the Archive," 970.

1. MY BEAUTIFUL ELIMINATION

1. Jonathan Curiel, "At the de Young, a Stunning Work of Recycled Bottle Tops," *SF Weekly*, July 30, 2010, accessed April 22, 2013, http://blogs.sfweekly.com/shookdown/2010/07/at_the_de_young_a_stunning_wor.php. The work Curiel describes, *Hovor II* (2004), hangs in the De Young Museum in San Francisco.

2. Holland Cotter, "A Million Pieces of Home," *New York Times*, February 8, 2013, accessed February 11, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/10/arts/design/a-million-pieces-of-home-el-anatsui-at-brooklyn-museum.html.

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NONE LIKE US

| BLACKNESS, BELONGING, AESTHETIC LIFE |

Stephen Best

Duke University Press Durham and London 2018

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| PART I |

ON THINKING LIKE A WORK OF ART

How strongly I have felt of pictures, that when you have seen one well, you must take your leave of it; you shall never see it again.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON, "Experience"

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1

| MY BEAUTIFUL ELIMINATION |

On Thinking Like a Work of Art

In almost every respect, you and I had different experiences. You entered through a different door, into a different gallery, in a different museum, at a different time, or maybe simply from a different angle. Yet despite all, we report the same thing: that we have come across an object pieced together from a most precious metal, possibly gold (plate 1). "From a distance," you claim, it seems "to incorporate pristine materials . . . [to] look like a giant screen of gold and bronze."[1] As alive as it is radiant—an "immense sheet of undulant light," a surface "broken by shimmering swags and folds," you say.[2] It scintillates, phosphoresces, appears to give off more energy than went into its making. You are unsure whether to categorize it as sculpture, tapestry, mural, or installation. For a moment, you think it might be a rare piece of gilt cloth, "a vast cascading piece . . . in the Ghanaian kente style, glistening in red and gold."[3] You think you hear the sound of light (*Bling!*).[4]

You feel an impulse to approach the object, drawn in by its shimmer, and as you get closer you experience the frisson of thwarted expectations (plate 2).

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> "When I got up close, I saw that it was made of little strips of metal, 'sewn' together with copperwire."[5]
>
> "Distance made a difference in understanding. When you moved closer you saw that the whole glinting thing was pieced together from countless tiny parts: pieces of colored metal pinched and twisted into strips, squares, circles and rosettes."[6]

Descriptions of the object don't appear to change, or to need to change, to accommodate the object itself, as you testify that others experience the same epiphany: "The woman sauntered up to the giant wall hanging . . . inspected its connecting pieces, then sat down on a nearby bench to get a more expansive view. Every five minutes or so, the pattern was the same. . . . Surprise. Inspection. Survey from afar."[7] What initially presents itself as precious metal appears upon inspection to be of the throwaway kind: cast-off aluminum screw tops and collars from liquor bottles—worthless bottle caps—cut and folded, hammered and stitched together with copper wire into swatches of color and texture. West African scrap metal resurrected as mural.[8] What was gold now reveals itself to be mere trash.

You feel the resplendence begin to fade upon the recognition that the work is built from these bits of trash. Yet you cannot avoid the thought that the artwork has instructed you to follow this precise perceptual itinerary; that the work itself has led you through this process. You feel that the work has guided you, and in a very controlled and particular way, into this encounter with its essence. You think, too, how curious it is that the work would subvert its own beauty—obliterate it, evaporate it—how the work contains the conditions of its own undoing. Why should the artwork issue such a powerful invitation to experience more intimately and intensely an effect it had every intention of subverting in the end? Why should an artwork be so corrosive of its own illusions, of the very illusion that it is art?

And once you see it for what it is, you can't quite unsee it, although you would like to. You want to wipe trash from your perception and capture once again the encounter with that initial shimmer. You make every effort to identity when the illusion fell apart. You ask yourself, At what point did I actually see it as trash, scrap, rubbish; as unformed matter, as shit? Had that moment not emerged in the wake of the shimmer, the materials not appearing to be trash until you looked past their beautiful, luminous sheen? And if to see this work as made up of trash you had to fast forward and look past its beauty, then what were these "countless tiny

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PLATE 1. El Anatsui, *Hovor II* (2004). Woven aluminum bottle caps, copper wire. 120 × 144 in. Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Museum purchase, James J. and Eileen D. Ludwig Endowment Fund, Virginia Patterson Fund, Charles Frankel Philanthropic Fund, and various tribute funds. Image courtesy of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

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PLATE 2. El Anatsui, *Hovor II* (2004), detail.

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PLATE 3. El Anatsui, *Fading Cloth* (2005). Woven aluminum bottle caps and copper wire. 126 × 256 in. Courtesy of the artist and the October Gallery, London.

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PLATE 4. John Haberle, *U.S.A.* (1889). Oil on canvas. 8.5 × 12 in. Indianapolis Museum of Art. Gift of Paul and Ruth Buchanan.

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PLATE 5. Mark Bradford, *PARATE* (2008). Mixed-media collage on canvas. 36 × 48 in. Courtesy of the artist and Hauser and Wirth, London.

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PLATE 6. Mark Bradford, *Paris Is Burning* (2010). Billboard paper, photomechanical reproductions, acrylic gel medium, and additional mixed media. 42 × 200 in. Courtesy of the artist and Hauser and Wirth, London.

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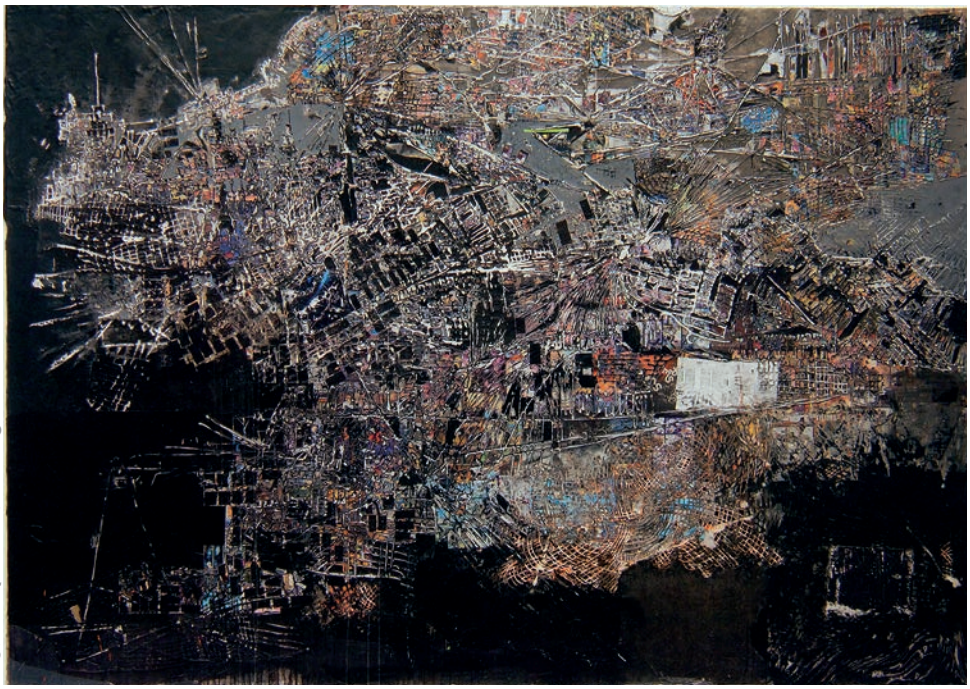

PLATE 7. Mark Bradford, *A Truly Rich Man Is One Whose Children Run into His Arms Even When His Hands Are Empty* (2008). Photomechanical reproductions, acrylic gel medium, comic-book paper, carbon paper, acrylic paint, caulking, and additional mixed media on canvas. 102 × 144 in. Courtesy of the artist and Hauser and Wirth, London.

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PLATE 8. Mark Bradford, *A Truly Rich Man Is One Whose Children Run into His Arms Even When His Hands Are Empty* (2008), detail.

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parts" before they were frozen into the structure of the artwork? Were they not trash before they were framed, as well? Why am I being invited to see trash as the before and after of the artwork? Why is trash its simultaneous origin and destination, point of emergence and disappearance, an analepsis and a prolepsis?

You aren't the first to observe these perceptual effects. Many art critics have also observed them while having surprisingly little to say about them, preferring to emphasize the work's historical and art-historical significance. Some see the work as exposing a web of symbolic links, past and current, between Africa and the Western world. El Anatsui has said as much himself, admitting that when he first spotted the bag of discarded bottle caps by the side of the road he immediately understood them as the "links" connecting Africa to Europe and the Americas. "Several thoughts went through my mind when I found the bag of bottle tops in the bush," he confesses. "I thought of the objects as links between my continent, Africa, and the rest of Europe. Objects such as these were introduced to Africa by Europeans when they came as traders. Alcohol was one of the commodities brought with them to exchange for goods in Africa. Eventually alcohol became one of the items used in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. They made rum in the West Indies, took it to Liverpool, and then it made its way back to Africa. I thought that the bottle caps had a strong reference to the history of Africa."[9] Here we have the direct testimony of the artist as to his inspiration; his assertion that the work is thoroughly committed to the revelation and representation of a web of symbolic links between Africa and the Western world.

Anatsui's talk of "links" has inspired a wide range of interpretations. Some commentators have taken the artist's emphasis on the "repurposed" nature of the materials to signal an attempt to recast these links within the frame of globalization, as part of a "symbolic economy of recuperation in relation to the spread of consumer goods and the pile up of waste in developing societies."[10] Anatsui, ever the perspicacious scavenger, alchemically transforms "the false gold of commercial packaging into a dazzling coin of artistic invention," with mordant connotations: a "doubling evocation of wealth and poverty" that lands a barbed riposte before any view of black Africans as a disposable people, or *négraille* (nigger trash), to invoke Yambo Ouologuem's infamous term.[11] For those critical of modernism's racial politics, the ripostes take aim at the devaluation not merely of African people but also of African art, talking back to early twentieth-

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century modernism's "primitivist" sequester and formal appropriation of African aesthetic form. Quite to the contrary, an Anatsui in this view produces shimmering effects on par with "the gold leaf squares that enliven the backgrounds of [Gustav] Klimt's paintings"; it bears a similarity to Donald Judd's "specific objects," so handily does it resist classification as either "painting" or "sculpture"; and its laterally expansive and intricate surface calls to mind Frank Stella's later experiments with textiles.[12] These links prove hugely generative of meaning in an Anatsui. In short, Anatsui's "links" produces an endless vortex of them, interpretations (each one something of an allegory for the others) that seem important to sustaining his instinctive sense of a "strong reference to the history of Africa" in the bottle caps.

I hope I may be forgiven, then, when I admit to feeling indifferent to the question of the "meaning" of an Anatsui, when I confess that meaning is not what I hope to find in it. It is not meaning that has kept this work in mind for me, which is why arguments that attempt to settle on a meaning (and Anatsui's own testimony) have not and will not figure prominently in what I have to say about the work. It cannot be terribly difficult to see why: such arguments seem crucially at an angle to the force of my direct encounter with the object. The direct and immediate experience of the movement from gold to trash, representation to matter, figuration to literality feels like a call to acknowledge what is simply there in front of me (rather than what ought to, wants to, or used to be there)—a call to acknowledge the force of the literal that issues from the bottle caps themselves.

It's gold. . . . No, it's trash. It's bottle caps. . . . No, it's artwork. We have seen effects like this before and called them gestalt. Jonathan Crary proposes that in gestalt ("the indeterminacy of an attentive perception") the capacity of our senses to generate forms leads us to attribute to artworks "qualities that are unrelated to the qualities of their individual sensory components."[13] The effects given off by an Anatsui can certainly be understood in terms of gestalt, the oscillation between aluminum debris and gold leaf generating an endless series of forms (Ghanaian kente cloth, *adinkra* funeral cloth, any "cloth" you might perceive).

It's gold. . . . No, it's trash. It's bottle caps. . . . No, it's artwork. Again, we could turn to gestalt to make sense of this oscillation, but there always seems to be an undertow, or gravitational pull, in one particular direction, an incessant drive toward the literal. The perpetual oscillation

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between *what the artwork is* and *what it is not* feels like a lingering, a detention. But why should the artwork linger here? Why should it want to detain me here—and me, you?

I have some explaining to do. My task is twofold. First, and obviously, I must explain what it means to begin here. Why begin with an artwork at all, especially one that has no representational content, makes no obvious or direct reference to history, and can be said to lead one back to slavery only by way of the most oblique and recondite path? The second task is to explore what kind of thought happens here. What sort of inquiry is the work itself attempting to instigate? What sort of thinking is it doing or inviting us to do? What thoughts are we inviting ourselves to have? Why choose to deepen one's critical attachment to a work that one knows is likely to lead (and leave) us here, in a vision of its own self-eclipsing denial? And why should I (why should anyone) long for this precise experience of denial, to seek out the arc of an experience that gathers waste, congeals it into a form (or identity) where the goal was always to occasion that form's dissolution? What sort of problem or challenge could such willingness to self-abnegate solve? Who gains from—what is gained by—the headlong tumble into such precarity?

Theodor Adorno proposed that artworks "immolate themselves" in the rush "toward their perdition." He writes in *Aesthetic Theory*, "They go over into their other, find continuance in it, want to be extinguished in it, and in their demise determine what follows them."[14] Anticipating the point somewhat earlier, with Max Horkheimer, he would specify that mimesis involved, not the artwork's imitation of the world, but its approximation of it (the capacity to *sich anschmiegen ans Andere* [to mold itself to the other].[15] *Sich anschmiegen*: Adorno effectively represses the demand of language that mimesis always be a mimesis *of* something, and embraces the idea that critique might express itself in a mimesis *onto* something (*an*, "onto" + *schmiegen*, "to nestle, snuggle up to"): mimesis as cuddling; mimesis as spooning.[16]

I seek a critical comportment that embraces these forms of mimesis, conspires with the world in this way, and in the process bases the case for a non-sovereign form of critical subjectivity on the idea that art thinks. By "art thinks" I do not mean that art contains propositional content; nor do I mean that it offers an analogy for what someone does when engaged in critical thought. Rather, following a line of argument set forth by Hubert Damisch, Ernst van Alphen, and Georges Didi-Huberman that "works of

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art appear to full advantage only if we deal with them as ways of thinking," I mean that artworks perform, in one way or another, an intellectual or philosophical project.[17] The artwork, in this theory of form, points reflexively to its own internal complexity. It can be considered a reflection, not in the passive sense of a mirror image, but in the active sense of an act of thought.

The works that command my attention in this chapter consist of surfaces that point reflexively to their own, internal complexities so that they can also be said to offer their own form of critical understanding and, in that sense, to be the very medium in which thought happens. These works are having thoughts regarding illusion and dissolution, failure and immurement, shattering and creativity. Each gives off perceptual effects that are fleeting, withheld, or marginal; each takes up a self-consuming form in which it strives to either close itself off or use itself up.

On thinking like a work of art: hold the phrase in tension with an idea of what it might mean to "think like a work of film" (to think and, more importantly, to feel our relation to history as an auratic thickness, a felt authenticity experienced as withheld or lost presence).[18] "Aura": the term is, as we know, Walter Benjamin's and refers to the "spiritual deposit" that every handmade artifact receives from its maker, which mass-produced objects lack, and yet it is *a deposit that in many ways becomes cognizable to Benjamin only at the moment of its disappearance or loss*.[19] No cinema, no aura. No reproduction, no deposit. As he writes in "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility":

> In even the most perfect reproduction, *one* thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art—its unique existence in a particular place. It is this unique existence—and nothing else—that bears the mark of the history to which the work has been subject. . . .
>
> [Various circumstances of technological reproduction] may leave the artwork's other properties untouched, but they certainly devalue the here and now of the artwork. . . . [In] the work of art this process touches on a highly sensitive core, more vulnerable than that of any natural object. That core is its authenticity. The authenticity of a thing is the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from its origin on, ranging from its physical duration to the historical testimony relating to it. . . .
>
> One might focus these aspects of the artwork in the concept of the

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> aura, and go on to say: what withers in the age of the technological reproducibility of the work of art is the latter's aura. . . . The social significance of film . . . is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic side: the liquidation of the value of tradition in the cultural heritage. . . .
>
> What, then, is aura? A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be.[20]

What, then, is aura? As I phrased it, it is a felt authenticity experienced as withheld or lost presence.

I will have more to say in the following chapter about the formative influence of Benjaminian historical formulae on recent melancholic work on race and slavery. For now, I want only to avail myself of a stratum of symmetry between the filmic and the historical in Benjamin's thought—that is, between his logic of auratic emergence (as demonstrated earlier) and his understanding of history as a "pile of debris" (in the ninth of his "Theses on the Philosophy of History"). "Benjamin's 'pile of debris,'" Alan Liu writes, "precisely disintegrates the 'aura' he theorized in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.'"[21] I would substitute the verb "declines" or "conjugates" for "disintegrates."

Paul Klee's watercolor *Angelus Novus* (1920) inspires Benjamin's ninth thesis:

> A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

How does this "pile of debris" inflect or parse "aura"? How has it come that for Benjamin this painting essentially conjugates ideas that were originally cinematic? Much rests on the transformation effected by the thesis itself.

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The thesis narrates a substitution, an insertion—the insertion of history into the space that yawns before the angel, at "his feet" or, in the place where we stand, as it happens, when facing the picture. The watercolor occasions, on further reflection, a series of glances, a precise set of geometric bearings from which Benjamin's theory of history is taken to emerge. "He is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating." "His face is turned toward the past." "He sees one single catastrophe." Benjamin gazes upon Klee's *Angelus Novus* and imagines that he is looking at the Angel of History; the Angel of History looks back at him (Benjamin) only to *see* "wreckage upon wreckage" accumulate in a "pile of debris . . . in front of his feet," bearing witness to the horrors of history; we, the viewers, gazing upon Klee's angel, readily accept its transformation into the Angel of History and, consequently, our own turn as heirs to Benjamin's melancholy critique. In the thinking of Alan Liu, it is now time for us to immerse ourselves in history's "pile of debris" (and note the filmic vocabulary): "The task of cultural criticism today is to take some of the burden off the individual Benjaminian angel by revolving our observer's camera angle hemispherically around so that we view his stance from the back, framed against—in the act of confronting—history."[22] Wherever we stand, history holds the place of an absence, whether it is the absence projected in the thesis's fabulation of the painting's content or, accepting that fabulation, our view onto history's "pile of debris," which is necessarily blocked by the angel's back. It is all a matter of shifting camera angles: "Benjamin's 'pile of debris' precisely disintegrates [conjugates, parses] the 'aura' he theorized."[23]

On thinking like a work of art: a phrase born of a desire to move *beyond* the project of "complicating" and "immersing" ourselves in history:

> The strenuous (rather than facile) act of *freeing* ourselves from the complicated history we are immersed in or, phrased another way, of choosing ethically to be emancipated from historical context through the very act of allowing ourselves to be so fully and deeply absorbed in that context that we discern the alternative pathways between past and future emergent from its complexity. . . . At this core level . . . *the only thing that registers is a break in the tight, clenched little history of our selves*; and the most accurate statement of that break is a method (like a grammar or a syntax we would ourselves not naturally speak) that enacts a certain alienation or remove from ourselves.[24]

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This coveted alienation would entail a gesture best parsed as a kind of doubled movement: away from the "clenched little history of our selves" and into a language we would not naturally speak.

My beautiful elimination: a two-way verbal pun in which that movement is experienced as a subservience before the artwork, in which that transformation is worked out as self-dissolution; an attempt to enact that undoing as a kind of reading of the artwork, not an interpretation or contextualization of it, but a description that allows one to inhabit it.[25] Detained and distracted by a number of artworks, I want to explore what it means simply to allow for this visitation by contemporary art, making the case for the value of a criticism that is watchful of its own self-importance by exploring what it means to think "like" a work of art (what it means for a critical project to nestle up to and assimilate the aesthetic values and sensibilities one espies in a work of art—what it means to think of critique as accommodation). On this account, I shall turn repeatedly to works of art that, in my understanding of them, strive to forge critical possibilities by way of a kind of apocalypticism, or self-eclipse, appearing to take on a self-consuming form by attempting to either close themselves off or use themselves up. The works call us to practice a kind of self-dismissal or *black ascesis*: "The work that one performs on oneself," as Foucault put it, "in order to transform oneself or make the self appear which, happily, one never attains," significance falling on that anticipation of failure, of a self that never appears.[26] (I have more to say about that failure in a moment.) These artworks are having thoughts that cultural critics ought now to be having but seem reluctant to embrace.

We must begin to think like artworks.

Our Loss

The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning.

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There is little denying the extent to which critical inquiry into slavery and black culture has assumed a melancholy cast of late, or the extent to which, for as long as the melancholy affective history project has prevailed in cultural criticism, many have questioned its validity as a ground for politics and called for its supersession. As early as 1972, Orlando Patterson admonished in "Toward a Future That Has No Past" that "the

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Blacks of the Americas . . . must abandon their search for a past, . . . [must] transcend the confines and grip of a cultural heritage, . . . becom[ing] the most truly modern of all peoples—a people who feel no need for a nation, a past, or a particularistic culture, but whose style of life will be a rational and continually changing adaptation to the exigencies of survival, at the highest possible level of existence." Later, in *Poetics of Relation*, Édouard Glissant called for "the right to opacity for everyone" and for a cultural criticism willing to moderate its epistemological ambitions, because, as he understood the relation between ethics and epistemology, "to feel in solidarity with [the other] or to build with him or to like what he does, it is not necessary for me to grasp him." And more insistently, Wendy Brown warned in *States of Injury* that our "present past . . . of insistently unredeemable injury," where the habit is to frame that injury as epistemologically necessary and ontologically grounding (as in some way "ours"), this present past comes into conflict with the very urgent need "to give up these investments"—to divest from our "wounded attachments"—if we are ever to pursue an emancipatory democratic project. The limits of the historiographical project rooted in affective attachment to past suffering have been evident for some time.[27]

In my own prior attempt to establish the authority of the slave past in contemporary black life, the goal was "to interrogate rigorously the kinds of political claims that can be mobilized on behalf of the slave (the stateless, the socially dead, and the disposable) in the political present."[28] What is the time of slavery? Is it the time of the present? What is the story about the slave that we ought to tell out of the present we ourselves inhabit? These are some of the questions I (and my co-author, Saidiya Hartman) sought to address. In taking up these questions, we were concerned to elaborate neither "what happened then" nor "what is owed because of what happened then" but, rather, the particular character of slavery's violence that appears to be ongoing and constitutive of the unfinished project of freedom.[29] I have felt the urge of late to dissent from my own, earlier investments in this approach and to question the epistemological frame this view of history compels on me, not least a tort historicism that views slavery as a site of wrongful injury.

A way to construe injury under common law, tort derives a sense of the proper value of an individual by identifying "an incident that interrupts the value" that person would have had "in the most plausible projection of his future as a direct extension of his past."[30] Tort's restoration of the

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subject assigns value to the person by assigning property to her, both in all things that are obviously property and in extrapolations from that property (potential earnings, psychological distress, reputation, and so on). In a tort claim, Frances Ferguson writes, "The notion of value is converted into a version of property, so that past possession seems the crucial means of asserting a claim to value. Tort law, for all its attentiveness to the significance of omission as well as to positive action, fails to provide a sense of potential value apart from a perceived past."[31] Tort binds us to two principles: (1) the idea that claims for the future must be based in history and the past; and (2) the requirement that one go back and look for the injury that interrupted the subject's march toward his or her future and try to recover the subject who existed *before* the injury. When it is made the basis for a traumatic model of history, this epistemology holds that our birth into relation, our admittance to the social order, is the result of an injury from which we have yet to recover; that the social is "historical" in the sense of being structured by a present past of suffering and injury so that, for me to understand myself today, I must necessarily believe that I was someone else (or potentially someone else) in the past; that the person I was before my wounding can in fact be known, and the scholar's recovery of that knowledge paves the royal road to a kind of tolerance or repair of damaged life. These sorts of historical and political investments (the acquisitive urges, strong claims making, perfective activity) have been hard-baked into the structure of agonistic critique.

I am most keen to find a way around the dark brood of "negative allegory" that has typified the melancholic turn, an obsession with "displacement, erasure, suppression, elision, overlooking, overwriting, omission, obscurantism, expunging, repudiation, exclusion, annihilation, [and] denial."[32] I am interested in the way such figures sustain an effort to determine political goals according to a model of representation. In this regard, melancholy historicism feels to be navigating an impasse for which (once again) we have Hegel largely to thank. It is Hegel who, in *The Philosophy of History*, taints Africa as unfit for history, as the repository of an "Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit" motivated by frenzy rather than ideas and thus inaccessible to thought.[33] Yet it is Hegel who, in a precisely contrary spirit in *Philosophy of Spirit* (and elsewhere), by way of his famous accounts of the "struggle for recognition" and the "dialectic of master and slave," enshrines the struggle for recognition as the only dynamic that makes the social world intelligible, for it is through a dependence

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on the other that one comes to "be."[34] Patchen Markell argues in *Bound by Recognition* that the pursuit of recognition expresses an aspiration to *sovereignty*; the politics of recognition involves us in efforts to escape the condition of non-sovereignty.[35] These efforts have more likely been thwarted than advanced by the recent turn to melancholy, for melancholy, by engendering an illusion of sovereignty in the acknowledgment of sovereignty's negation, in this way "celebrates our capacity for mastery by locating it *where it was not*."[36] In similar manner, Anita Sokolsky maintains that in melancholy, "The only audience who counts—the one whose loss has precipitated the melancholy—cannot or will not hear the protest that without it is not worth mounting," and this appeal to representation has the odd effect of transforming melancholy into an affect that "claims the prestige of an affliction which cannot be meliorated."[37]

The struggle for recognition, the making of an appeal, the longing to have one's protest be heard: a long-standing effort to wed politics to appearance is captured in these phrases. The black tradition has not always been about these concerns with appearance—or, better, not every corner of the black tradition has been concerned with appearance in this way, committed to an ideal of the social structured around a sense of mutual acknowledgment. That numerous incidents of loss in the history of the African diaspora don't appear to harbor such ideals warrants our interest. These exceptions have often been classed under the rubric of *the black radical tradition*.

Chapter 7 of Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* is, at a mere five pages, the shortest but, I believe, most important chapter of that book, for it is there that he provides the dispersed origins of that tradition. These origins suggest that it may not always serve us to conceptualize the social as ideally structured around a sense of mutual acknowledgment.[38] Loss in the black radical tradition simply does not serve these conceptions of appearance and recognition.

Origins of the black radical tradition include:

1 The moment in 1856 when the Xhosa prophetess Nongquawuse convinced her followers that the ancestral spirits told her that the Xhosa should slaughter all their cattle and destroy their crops (the repository of all of their wealth), in return for which the spirits would banish their British occupiers into the sea. Her millennialist prophesy would result in a cattle killing of

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such apocalyptic proportions that three-quarters of the Xhosa nation would die of the resulting famine.[39]

2 The states established by the enslaved Africans, mulattoes, and poor whites who throughout much of the seventeenth century escaped into the Palmares, a region of steep and precipitous mountains on the coast of Brazil, where they established settlements, a republic consisting of smaller *quilombos*, and a king with the power to negotiate treaties with the colonial governor of the State of Pernambuco. Fully aware that a forensics was being deployed to follow them, *palmaristas* would abandon and burn their settlements to the ground every time the Portuguese approached, melting away into the surrounding forest—their state reclaimed by wilderness; their society leaving no perceptible trace of itself.[40]

3 The moment in 1915 when rebels in the British colony of Nyasaland struck valiantly, though futilely, against their colonial overlords when they heard the following entreaty from their leader, John Chilembwe, a millenarian Christian minister: "We have determined to strike a first and a last blow and then we will all die by the heavy storm of the whiteman's army."[41]

These are a few of the roots from which the black radical tradition emerges, and each resists being understood in terms of a desire to bring about positive social change, resists translation into the terms of class conflict or individual resistance most common to Western rationality—that is, "The individualistic and often spontaneous motives that energized the runaway, the arsonist, the poisoner." These origins provide evidence, on the contrary, of a "very different and shared order of things," of a tradition founded on a "very different historical role for consciousness than was anticipated in Western radicalism."[42]

With violence "turned inward" rather than directed at their oppressors, these rebels, Robinson explains, "lived on their terms, they died on their terms, they obtained their freedom on their terms," and they "defined the terms of their destruction."[43] What lends this tradition its "radical" accent is as much the inwardness of the violence as the violence itself, the tradition's actualization through self-abnegation rather than against it. But as a politics (if politics is what we want to call it), such communities sought not to achieve a positive set of social outcomes (e.g., the attenu-

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ation of the objective power of the enemy, the overthrow of slavery, the actualization a new world). Instead, they prioritized "the renunciation of actual being for historical being," the community's successful mobilization "against its material aspect."[44]

Evidence of the black radical tradition seems to have been recondite, more felt than seen, its presence more intuited than witnessed, its actualization more paradoxically present than empirically given. In the black radical tradition, Robinson asserts, activity was focused on "the structures of the mind," where defeat or victory were largely "internal affair[s]"—it was a tradition that "more easily sustained suicide than assault."[45] The people stake their claim on and as community in the moment of its dissolution—an ethics (a far more accurate term, in my view) committed to "the integral totality of the people" against their material aspect. In Robinson's summation, this ethics involved a "shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality."[46]

What kind of tradition is this?[47] By what logic does it become possible for acts of self-destruction, self-renunciation, inwardness, and collective disappearance to "preserve" the collective being? What is that?

Some observers, knowing the level of violence the situation warranted, and knowing too who ought to have been its proper recipient, dismissed those who chose the route of self-immolation as an "outlandish people." Although this description was intended to disparage and dismiss, it seems in fact to be the most accurate.[48] Robin D. G. Kelley sees the change inspired by the black radical imagination as having affinities with the surreal and surrealism, and I would accept his invitation to view an aesthetic as crucial here.[49] Victory and freedom make their appearance in disappearance, the tradition sustaining a kind of negative capability. There is an essential opacity to the black radical tradition, an "imagination" amenable to neither the *utopianism* of a revolutionary consciousness nor the pure *negativity* of a black nihilism.

The black radical imagination inspires the urge to find other ways to articulate loss. This project requires a return to questions of appearance and belonging, but not from the side of slavery and the violence of the archive but, rather, from a desire to puzzle out why we attach so fervently to objects that are beneath the threshold of appearance. Toward this end, I have found Stanley Cavell's queries into the psychological dimensions of skepticism supremely helpful, and following a line of argument in *The*

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Claim of Reason, I would observe that the agon of wrestling with the failure, resistance, or impossibility of something that was lost to history making an *appearance* often carries with it fears and desires about social *acknowledgment*.[50]

I mention Cavell because no one has been more committed than him to exploring how the problem of appearance gets infused with the need for acknowledgment, which line of thought can help us to think a bit more clearly and critically about the habit of positing a return to appearance from archival oblivion as a salve for damaged life. Rei Terada summarizes Cavell's project on "the skeptic" (described by Terada as one "who seems to care inordinately about appearance and reality"), writing, "Interpreting the mutually irritable conversation between the skeptic and her or his—almost always, his—interlocutors, Cavell explains that the skeptic is perceived as wanting something fundamentally unreasonable, something more than conditions on our planet can provide. Cavell interprets the skeptic's language as a request for social acknowledgment in the guise of a failed epistemic statement. In his account, skeptical scruples about appearance and reality transmit fears and desires about interpersonal understanding: '*acceptance* in relation to objects' corresponds to '*acknowledgment* in relation to others.'"[51]

"'Acceptance in relation to objects' corresponds to "acknowledgment in relation to others.'" Cavell, by his own admission, connects this failure to accept the given with an inability to acknowledge or accept the human condition.[52] I view the Cavellian formulation otherwise, taking the correlation between appearance and acknowledgment as axiomatic—that is, assuming he means their relation not to be causal but, rather, to specify two poles of a philosophical entailment. The formula in this regard is more of a heuristic: it provides a way to understand how our attachment to objects that are beneath the threshold of appearance bears the weight of various modes of belonging. I propose that the correlation has something to teach us about a concern with appearance that persists in work on race and slavery.

Both Terada and Cavell mean by "acceptance" that moment when the skeptic no longer disputes the givens of the phenomenal world, a moment that, forever foreclosed from arrival on account of his dissatisfaction, nevertheless carries both his hope and his fear of acknowledgment in the final instance, of the end to his "antagonism toward a world that

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prevents [him] from joining [his] own being."[53] As is the case when the melancholic looks upon the world, this moment of acceptance never arrives for the skeptic.

The best one can do, Terada argues, is to take "vacations" from the coercive demand for one's acceptance by cultivating what she calls "phenomenophilia," or a practice of looking away—"looking away at the colored shadow on the wall, or keeping the head turned to the angle at which the sunspot stays in view."[54] The phenomenophile feels particularly drawn to perceptions that seem marginal to normal appearance because they seem, in Terada's words, "to figure the possibility of fleeting relief from the pressure to endorse . . . the world 'as is.'"[55] We become attached to "transient perceptual objects" that fall beneath the threshold of normal appearance, Terada observes, "because only they seem capable of noncoercive relation."[56] My own readerly impulses are phenomenophilic, in that regard, as evident in the works that I have assembled here, all of which involve fleeting and withheld perceptions and thus clear a path toward the "vacations" from a demand for acceptance that Terada inspires in a way that invites us to think differently about loss, and, as it happens, race and relation.[57]

We return to Anatsui.

Epiphanic Shimmer: El Anatsui

> What is it about the trompe l'oeil of appearance and reality
> that gets this job of tacit world-criticism done so well?
>
> REI TERADA, *Looking Away*

It's gold. . . . No, it's trash. It's bottle caps. . . . No, it's artwork. I described this oscillation as a movement between what the artwork simply is and what it is not, which is another way to say that an Anatsui is a work of trompe l'oeil.

The most fundamental claim that one can make about trompe l'oeil painting is that it predicates a mistake. Trompe l'oeil, in the words of Walter Benn Michaels, "[reproduces] in the perception of representations the physiology of perceiving the objects they represent."[58] John Haberle's *U.S.A.* makes that clear (plate 4). Mistake is trompe l'oeil's categorical imperative and persists in the experience of any Anatsui, but arguably not in the way that the tradition of trompe l'oeil painting has prepared us to

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understand. *Fading Cloth*, as a work of trompe l'oeil, reproduces the mistake general to the form but solidly *inverts* the terms of that mistake, for where trompe l'oeil wants you to mistake it for an object in the world, and not to see it as art, an Anatsui, inversely, wants you to mistake it for art and not see it as an object in the world. Or to put the matter in the affirmative, trompe l'oeil painting looks like an object in the world, although it turns out just to be art, while an Anatsui looks like a work of art, though it turns out just to be another object in the world.[59]

It matters that the conundrum be phrased just so—that an Anatsui "looks like" a work of art rather than that is simply "is" one—for stating the matter in this way draws out two consequences to Anatsui's trompe l'oeil. First, it recognizes that, while the work invites us to linger between its two objects of attention, between trash and gold, it cannot itself be reduced to one or the other—what it is (bottle caps) or what it is not (gold). Instead, the artwork must be perceived in terms of the *form* that it takes—that is, as matter striving to "look like" a work of art.[60] Second consequence: if to perceive this object as simultaneously and irreducibly both what it is and what it is not we have to see it as striving to take on another *form*, as gesturing to be a "work of art" as such, we are forced to grapple with the way an Anatsui complicates what we mean when we say that a work of art is something around which we have *put a frame*. The curious thing is that an Anatsui both has a frame (has to have a frame) and doesn't have a frame.[61] The bottle caps confront you with the force of their literalization and in that way conduct you past their frame.

I have spoken of the artwork's trompe l'oeil effects, of a "literality" that circumvents the work's frame, with the express goal of addressing two concerns. I wish first to address a strain of critique that accepts the frame as dispositive of the artwork's politics; and second, to argue with a particular end to which this understanding of the frame as a politics has been put—that is, the critique of what Michaels, in *The Beauty of a Social Problem*, labels "the appeal of the literal."[62] First the acceptation, then the appeal.

Writing in the shadow of Immanuel Kant's Third Critique, critical theorists seem curiously burdened by the obligation to assert (and reassert) the artwork's frame as "decisive for aesthetics":[63]

> Jonathan Culler: "The frame is what gives us an object that can have an intrinsic content or structure . . . [and] makes possible the distinctions

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> of the analytic of the beautiful, between formal and material, pure and impure, intrinsic and extrinsic."[64]
>
> Stanley Fish: "Literature is language . . . but it is language around which we have drawn a frame, a frame that indicates a decision to regard with a particular self-consciousness the resources language had always possessed."[65]
>
> Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit: "Before they even begin to work, [painters] have already made their most confident gesture: the choice of a canvas that will contain their art, that will define their work *as* art by the distinctness of the frontiers between it and the untreated, unaestheticized world beyond it. . . . To make a frame is perhaps a way of announcing a belief in the possibility of a subject: in this privileged space, with its carefully drawn boundaries, something will take place."[66]
>
> Walter Benn Michaels: "The opposition between what can be framed and what can only be experienced is foundational. The removal of the frame means that in Minimalism there is nothing within the beholder's field of vision that 'declares its irrelevance to the situation, and therefore to the experience, in question . . . Everything counts—not as part of the object but as part of the situation.' . . . The point here is not that art cannot succeed in being as oceanic as the quarry; the point is rather that it's the act of containment that produces the concept of art. It is the 'container' (the frame) that makes the art because it is the frame that renders much of the experience of the beholder (his experience of everything outside the frame) and thus his experience as such irrelevant."[67]

These critics accept the givenness of the frame as an "act" that transfigures matter into form, an "act of containment" necessary for matter or the world to be engendered with a significance, a meaning. A founding gesture of the artist. An act of sovereign assertion. The frame, in this sense, is decisive not only for aesthetics but for politics.

Frame is processual. Frame indicates a decision. Frame constitutes a politics. It represents a "force" subversive of what Michaels calls "the appeal of the literal," an appeal that has long concerned him (about which more in a moment) and one that is experiencing a bit of a resurgence across a range of aesthetic and theoretical projects, from Tom McCarthy's

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enthusiasm for "sheer materiality"—a materiality observed in the breach in his novel *Remainder* by way of its narrator's misguided financial and psychic investment in "reenactments" (Michaels writes, "They turn the world from a place where people are who they are and do what they do into a place where who they are and what they do has 'significance'")—to proposals by Sharon Marcus and me respecting "surface reading," where our impatience for allegorical reading is accompanied by a call for criticism to take up the project of description, stopping short of delving more deeply in pursuit of meaning (a claim Michaels takes to be correct but in only a limited way).[68]

This literalist turn is fueled by an enthusiasm for what McCarthy (after Simon Critchley) calls letting "matter matter" and echoes an earlier turn in the visual arts away from modernism toward minimalism, a turn toward "literalism" that Michaels and Michael Fried have been interested in since Fried's seminal "Art and Objecthood." As Fried writes on that turn:

> To the literalists [Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Tony Smith, and Carl Andre], what mattered or ought to matter were not the relationships within a work of art, as in modernist painting and sculpture, but the relationship between the literalist work and the beholder, as the beholder was invited to activate (and in effect to produce) that relationship over time by entering the space of exhibition, approaching or moving away from the work (or, in the case of Carl Andre's floor pieces, literally walking on them), comparing changing views of the work with an intellectual comprehension of its basic form, and so on.[69]

What matters in the case of literalist art is the encounter with "an object in a situation—one that, virtually by definition, *includes the beholder.*"[70] Literalist art tries to occupy a position in which artwork and beholder are no longer separated by a frame. Literalism always involves "the removal of the frame" and partakes of a desire "that nothing should be framed," and these are the mistakes it shares with trompe l'oeil.[71] Such are the grounds of the literalist espousal of objecthood, and thus, for Michaels, here is the rub: *letting "matter matter" is not possible with any artwork, for with anything that is framed and not part of the infinity that is the natural world, one has to grapple with meaning.*[72] To the extent that we want the literal, then, in the view of Michaels and Fried, we can have the *punctum* ("a

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kind of ontological guarantee" of antitheatricality).[73] "The *punctum*," Michaels writes, "turns the photograph from a representation—something made by someone to produce a certain effect—into an object—something that may produce any number of effects, or none at all, depending on the beholder."[74]

The echoes here are to Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, of course, where he distinguishes between a photograph's *studium* and its punctum. The studium refers to what the photographer tries to get you to see through the act of framing, the social and political legibility of all aspects of *what* has happened or is portrayed. Barthes writes, "I invest the field of the *studium* with my sovereign consciousness."[75] The punctum, for its turn, refers to the wounding detail that, only upon having been framed, establishes a direct relationship between the viewer and the object photographed. Punctum "rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me," Barthes writes. "A photographer's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)."[76] The punctum's "attraction consists precisely in its being by definition something that is in the photograph, despite the fact that the photographer has not himself meant to put it there."[77] It is unintentional and thus (in the phrase made famous by Fried) antitheatrical, for reasons it should not be hard to see: "If you don't (consciously or unconsciously) mean to be doing something, you can't possibly be doing it *for someone*."[78] The punctum's presence depends on the frame, on the act of framing, but it spills over the edge of that frame to the extent that it exists in excess of the photographer's intention or meaning. Piercing, pricking, bruising: the punctum is that which within the work speaks precisely to the presence of the *non*-worked, the accidental or non-intentional that interrupts the work's discursive and historical unity.[79] Piercing, pricking, bruising: Barthes's vocabulary gives us to understand the punctum as a precondition of non-sovereignty.

I said that the curious thing is that an Anatsui both has a frame (has to have a frame) and doesn't have a frame. Let's restate that. The curious thing about a work such as *Fading Cloth* (plate 3) is that its punctum (the prick or wound of thwarted expectations) precedes Anatsui's act of framing—or, better, the punctum is internal to the bottle caps themselves, their striving to "look like" a work of art in some ways precedes their being part of one. Abandoned by the side of the road, the bottle caps await someone's encounter with them, and Anatsui, encountering their punctum, oddly

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fails to mention it as one of the things that, to quote his own words, "went through my mind when I found the bag of bottle tops in the bush." The bottle caps announce their own difference from themselves by way of their shine. Framing is part of the internal structure of the trash itself, a sort of systole and diastole whereby the fragments both remove themselves from the flow of the material world and dissolve themselves back into it. It startles to consider the similarities between Anatsui's roadside encounter and Jacques Lacan's anecdote of the sardine can.[80]

You were right to hear a bit of the elegiac in my description of the trompe l'oeil mistake: *trash is the before and after of the artwork*. This way to describe the mistake gives us to understand that what is of value here, what may be of irreducible significance, is a process whereby the work *denies its own representational aspect*—where it gathers waste, congeals it into a form (or an identity), when the goal all along was to bring about that form's dissolution. This isn't merely clever. It isn't a move in the game of modernism. It's much more than that. It's a way of finding beauty, losing it, and, rather than getting attached to the loss, attaching instead to the movement from gold to trash. (Because of their self-consuming frame, the bottle caps, in their relation to the artwork, exhibit the qualities of "termite art"—of art that "goes always forward eating its own boundaries."[81])

Through its perpetual metamorphosis, *Fading Cloth* fakes its own beauty, walks you *back* from form to matter as a way to walk you *through* the work itself. Confronting you with intensity and shimmer, the work would appear to want to affirm its beauty, but the perceptual drift back to trash that it affords presents another possibility entirely. Confounding the relation of before and after, cause and effect, the work wants you to see that there is beauty in the world, that that beauty has been there all along, and that we are able to see that beauty inherent in the fragments of the material world on account of their being taken out of it and placed in the proper frame. But to the degree to which the work succeeds in getting you to see that its beauty is ubiquitous, that it is actually *un*framed and part of the infinity that is the material world, the irony is (and this is why this work is the real thing) that it sets the conditions for its own obsolescence, for its ultimate irrelevance. It is beauty itself that, in the final instance, "eats away" at the boundaries of the work and smooths the path toward its disintegration. Beauty is a force for erasure.

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In the split second when you recognize that your perception has been a mistake, when time dilates just enough to open up a bit of space between what you thought was gold and what you now recognize as trash, the form of the artwork disappears, and the bottle caps (for a brief moment escaping that form) return themselves to the world. In that trompe l'oeil blink of an eye, the artwork ceases to exist; it forces you to lose sight of its form, and what have disappeared along with this form are all of the symbolic "links" it was said to sustain. The connection to Africa. Gone. The slave trade. Gone. Liquor. Gone. The West Indies. Gone. Liverpool. Gone. What remains is one's presentness before a matter that quivers, flickers, and shimmers without you, without being pushed.[82] Frayed, fragile, denied the privilege of not being in the world because always already dented by the world. A world in which *Fading Cloth* has achieved what its name suggests—and faded away—is the very world that the work itself invites you to imagine. To see the beauty to which this work of art directs your gaze, in short, one would actually need a world without art.

Immurement: Mark Bradford

> But they crossed, they survived. There is the epical splendor.
> Multiply the rain's lances, multiply their ruin,
> the grace born from subtraction as the hold's iron door
> rolled over their eyes like pots left out in the rain,
> and the bolt rammed home its echo, the way that thunder-
> claps perpetuate their reverberation.
>
> So there went the Ashanti one way, the Mandingo another,
> the Ibo another, the Guinea. Now each man was a nation
> in himself, without mother, father, brother.
>
> DEREK WALCOTT, *Omeros* (XXVIII: 25–33)

I would describe the works that draw my interest as queer objects—queer in the sense that they feel inadequate to sustain the representational claims made on their behalf, queer in the sense that the work sets itself up to fail and, in producing its own failure, proves adequate to the appearance-in-disappearance that is the crux of the black radical tradition.[83] In my effort to understand how an artwork might afford such a form of de-realized social relation, how it may be the only means of making those relations apprehensible, I have found Leo Bersani—specifically, his essay "Sociality

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and Sexuality"—supremely helpful.[84] Bersani observes that contemporary criticism frequently works on the assumption that relations are grounded "in antagonism and misapprehension," which gives rise to a reactive politics focused on the past where the best one can hope for is the "transgressive reversal" or "antithetical reformulation" of social hierarchies.[85] For Bersani, this is the critical habit of psychoanalysis; it applies, as well, to habits of conceiving racial relation in the style of thought I have been calling "melancholy historicism." Homosexuality, on the contrary, Bersani, following Michel Foucault, associates with "new relational modes" that are for the most part "unforeseen." Positioned "slantwise" in the social fabric, the homosexual introduces an always "improbable" set of relational possibilities: "The diagonal lines he can lay out in the social fabric allow these virtualities to come to light."[86] Such relations can be arrived at not adaptively nor transgressively but only by taking a foundational approach to relationality—that is, by way of a search for beginnings. Yet this birth of relation is not historical and cannot be said ever to have existed ("There was never any moment when we were not already in relation"); it therefore cannot be recovered. A "genealogy of the relational . . . a certain threshold of entry into the relational": this "moment" is so purely hypothetical that it can be arrived at only through the *performance* of antirelationality.[87]

To Bersani's way of thinking, abstraction in art makes this performance happen. The nearly "unpunctuated whiteness" of a Turner canvas, the uniform darkness of a Rothko: a will to abstraction epitomizes the erasure of figurality that the entry into relation demands. It is as if "the lines of movement in space that art represents could, as it were, be ontologically illuminated as they almost disappear within a representation of their emergence from nothing." Bersani continues: "Origination is designated by figures of its perhaps not taking place; the coming-to-be of relationality, which is our birth into being, can only be retroactively enacted, and it is enacted largely as a *rubbing out of formal relations*. . . . If art celebrates an originating extensibility of all objects and creatures into space—and therefore our connectedness to the universe—it does so by also inscribing within connectedness the possibility of its not happening. Relationality is itself related to its own absence."[88]

Bersani requires a figure of non-relationality to project the "still improbable" forms of connection that homosexuality augurs. A figure of non-relationality describes the form of the improbable that interests me here—the negative sociability spawned by the black radical tradition—for

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it is this appearance-in-disappearance that contemporary black art's "rubbing out" of formal relations seems intent on making possible.

In the canvases of Mark Bradford one can find an invitation to this project of self-divestiture, one embedded in the surface's actively working out of a crux, a critical thought happening in its very form.

In a Bradford work such as PARATE (plate 5) much of the critical activity is given over to textual fragments drawn from the accumulated detritus of the artist's South Central Los Angeles neighborhood. The fragment in Bradford triggers a dialectical process. On the one hand, it introduces a logic of part and whole that encourages a recovery of the fragment's past, but on the other hand, it defies and resists this desired historical recovery by reminding us that the putative "more" to which it points can never be recovered or fully experienced. Fragment corresponds not to a dynamic of part and whole, but to notions of disturbance, interruption, performance—it is "a question of function, a philosophical concept, a manifestation of a theory . . . a self-labeled 'thought.'"[89] Fragment frustrates, deranges, and disrupts the project of historical reconstruction. A Bradford canvas can thus be understood to have taken on its history in the form of the fragments it has had embedded, encrusted, and enfolded within its surface, and that surface, by ensuring our failure to get either outside of or beneath it, by demoting to inconsequence anything that is not it, forecloses the possibility of its being conceptualized as a surface that hides a depth accessible to thought. To phrase this in the language of formal relation, a Bradford canvas, often consisting of a great deal of text, attempts to forestall any further textualization of its surface, inhibiting its appropriation by those projects that would "ad[d] an explanation" to it or "pu[t] it into a frame" as a way to wrap up its meaning.[90] The work strives to close itself off, in short, and this is how it fails.

To fully appreciate the fragment's performativity, we must see the artist's material practice as an expression of it. Bradford builds his canvases by first gathering up various kinds of found paper, such as advertisements from the underground black economy, comic book pages, concert announcements, wheat-paste posters, advertising copy, album covers, and the like. He soaks this paper in water and other agents, rendering the rigid materials pliant. Finally, he adds further bleaching agents, caulking, plastic mesh, mason's string, polyester cord, packing cord, and other materials to generate effects of relief within the surface itself. Once the surface

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hardens, acquiring its bulk and solidity, Bradford then power sands the result to reveal the hidden strata underneath.[91] Let me add this: there is no appreciating a Bradford canvas independent of this violence against the semiotic order, no mere looking at the work outside the struggle to perceive how its effects have been made to come about: scraping, sanding, purging, and erasure as painterly performance. The work commands you to see and experience its effects in light of the forms of obliteration that have caused them to appear: a "grace born from subtraction," to recall the words of Walcott.

In *Paris Is Burning* (plate 6), the artist has taken a series of cardboard advertisements for Superdry jeans, lined them up horizontally, and attacked them with a belt sander to reveal the stenciled (and misspelled) phrase "FUCK STRAIGT PEOPLE." The ghostly traces of the original advertisements suggest a palimpsest, but in something of a visual paradox, the stenciled letters appear both to be on the same surface plane as the sheets of Superdry ad copy and to be the negative space created where a different type of print copy has been allowed to come through an overlying surface. There is a layer of found paper sandwiched between the layer that is closest to the viewer and the one on which everything else hangs, and this inner layer provides the negative relief that the eye needs to read the stenciled message ("FUCK STRAIGT PEOPLE"). But whatever writing that paper may have had imprinted on its surface, as language it is now obscured and indecipherable, forever lost to us.

There is a metaphor struggling to assert itself here, one central to recent critical theory, which it will be my intention to suppress. With a deconstructive genealogy in Jacques Derrida's writing "sous rature" and a psychoanalytic one in Sigmund Freud's "Mystic Writing Pad," the metaphor of text as palimpsest (L. *palimpsestos*, "scraped clean or used again") has come to mean that "the authority of the text is provisional, the origin is a trace" and the idea that a wax slab imprinting itself on the layer of paper signifies that "no consciousness is possible without the unconscious reaching out to the receptive apparatus."[92] The metaphor has its roots in the image of writing on parchment, "writing material or manuscript on which the original writing has been effaced to make room for a second writing," the previous writing bumping into and shaping the reading of the next layer of writing, though these figurations of surface and depth have done their part to muddle conceptual thought.[93]

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On the observation that Bradford's surfaces consist less of multiple layers of writing than of multiple layers of paper, I would propose that we see these surfaces less as palimpsests than as structured according to a logic of immurement (*immure*: L. *mūrāre* 'to wall'; to shut up or enclose within walls; to imprison; to confine as in a prison or fortress). *What if we saw the surfaces themselves as part of a process of building a history, of archiving fragments from our everyday world and then walling them up, sealing them off, imprisoning them, and entombing them within layers of paper?* How does the politics of the artwork shift if, rather than a palimpsest, we thought we were looking at a deliberate act ofimmurement?

In *A Truly Rich Man Is One Whose Children Run into His Arms Even When His Hands Are Empty* (plate 7), one begins to see what is made available by a structure of immurement. As the belt sander clears away the various layers of the painting, we recover not so much an underwriting as an under*painting*—or, rather, not paint per se but a writing that has been turned into paint through the very act of erasure.[94] What was originally "print" finds itself transformed into "paint"; what was once a language has been drained of its semantic content. In this manner, in this movement back through the surface via erasure and obliteration, the work is not so much recovering a history, repairing a sense of damaged relation, or reconstructing writing and syntax, as it would if it were a palimpsest. Rather, it is drawing forth new relations, ones signaled by the image's transformation into something that resembles a map or a bird's-eye view of a city, in neither case corresponding to any territory currently in existence and thus unnavigable for sure. The canvas maps, in a way, Foucault's "improbable . . . new social relations"—itineraries never before seen that the eye now has occasion to follow.

Once sandpapered, the surface will occasionally reveal orphaned bits of writing, words that appear to have been part of some proposition or advertisement or sentence: broken syntax, orphaned phonemes, solitary syllables (plate 8). To understand the fragment's performance, we might take our cue from Mieke Bal: "As we look—teased by the representational illusion of the bits of glossy magazine—and try to hold the object each of them carries as its past before it was torn up, and as we try to surround it with a projected narrative that gives it meaning, *we fail*."[95] There is every hint that these fragments may find completion in what exists just beneath the surface, but everything that suggests the possibility of more depth is cut off from you, and as soon as you attempt to supplement for missing

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depth by attempting to link the fragments to a missing context, *you have left the work and therefore failed*: failed in the sense that it is quite impossible to "hold the object" on a scale larger than the object itself without that entailing a venture at reading far past the edges of the fragment, and thus past the limits of the work. The whole purpose of the work, it seems, again, is to help you to fail.

Accept Bradford's canvases as structures of immurement rather than palimpsests and it becomes hard to understand their purpose as one of returning to the plane of appearance something that has been lost. Rather, the accent seems to be on what is occasioned by loss, by disappearance, for when I stand before one of these canvases, dazzled by this resurrection of print into paint, I feel enjoined to imagine a relation to the written word that would not involve signification or the working out of meanings. I feel invited to rethink my relation to the written *world*—to rethink relationality as such—a thought experiment that feels "improbable" because it is so fundamental.

A Bradford canvas instigates and directs an inquiry into what it is saying by "holding in reserve the power to defy, resist, and derange the very process of discovery it engenders."[96] These are its conditions of aesthetic immersion. But even if I were able to resist the work's power to derange, even if I were able to restore all these fragments to their myriad historical contexts in a way that told a narrative of the origin of the work of art, and in a way that made that repressed and forgotten history "appear," the ineluctable demand spawned by the sheer beauty of its surface would still seem to be, Why should any of that matter?

Shattering: Gwendolyn Brooks

I said earlier that this book has its genesis in the encounter with a resistance within the dominant strain of Americanist literary criticism on race to calls to renounce the critical attachment to suffering and grievance that figures such as Édouard Glissant, Wendy Brown, and others have urged on the field. The resistance arises from fears that the admonition sound painfully close to a Nietzschean call for black Americans to simply "forget" the past, or a sense that it just seems impertinent to counsel expiation when a certain "shattering" experience defines the condition of being black. In Gwendolyn Brooks's "Boy Breaking Glass," shattering is precisely the point:

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BOY BREAKING GLASS

To Marc Crawford
from whom the commission

Whose broken window is a cry of art
(success, that winks aware
as elegance, as a treasonable faith)
is raw: is sonic: is old-eyed première.
Our beautiful flaw and terrible ornament.
Our barbarous and metal little man

"I shall create! If not a note, a hole.
If not an overture, a desecration."

Full of pepper and light
and Salt and night and cargoes.

"Don't go down the plank
if you see there's no extension,
Each to his grief, each to
his loneliness and fidgety revenge.
Nobody knew where I was and now I am no longer there."

The only sanity is a cup of tea.
The music is in minors.

Each one other
is having different weather.

"It was you, it was you who threw away my name!
And this is everything I have for me."

Who has not Congress, lobster, love, luau,
the Regency Room, the Statue of Liberty,
runs. A sloppy amalgamation.
A mistake.
A cliff.
A hymn, a snare, and an exceeding sun.[97]

Two speakers: the boy of the title and a narrator. *Two voices:* one somber and dispassionate; the other ecstatic, intense, hortative. *Two moments in time:* a present of social inequality, beyond the pale of Congress, Hawai-

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ian vacations, the Statue of Liberty, and a slave past invoked by way of the "cargoes" that dangles at the end of the third stanza and "the plank" whose edge threatens at the start of the next. *Two objects:* poem and glass. *Two acts:* the writing of poetry and the breaking of glass.

The poem, by opening up these gaps and fissures, raises the question of relation, of separation as a condition of relation. What are the relations between the positions that the poem establishes between past and present, boy and narrator, poem and broken glass? What form of relation is adequate to bridge these gaps?

Marc Crawford, a writer and editor of the literary journal *Time Capsule* and the person to whom the poem is dedicated, invited Brooks to write a poem about inner-city blacks surviving "inequity and white power."[98] Brooks wrote "Boy Breaking Glass" against the historical backdrop of the riots that rocked major American cities during the late 1960s—specifically, the events of the long, hot summer of 1967. Some of Brooks's most sensitive critics, finding the force of this history hard to ignore, read the poem not only as a record of violence against personal sovereignty, but as an attempt to repair that violence. R. Baxter Miller writes, "The sensitive narrator loves the Black boy because his art suits his socialization. . . . His aesthetic, a paradox, is both revolutionary and reactionary, since it *resurrects* for the future that humanism *lost in the past*."[99] By the logic of this reading, the poem's agenda is reparative: the move to aestheticize the countless glass storefronts destroyed during that turbulent summer bridges the many social and temporal gaps represented in the poem itself.

But on return to those gaps, I am surprised by how stubbornly they resist reparative suture. I might imagine the poem as a *conversation*, in light of its two distinct voices, but nothing feels particularly dialogic about what unfolds, as the speakers appear to talk past rather than to each other. There is some suggestion in the fourth stanza's reference to "grief" and "loneliness" that a *shared melancholy* might serve as adequate ground for their relation, but even here the boy strikes a note that sounds more like a critique than a defense of melancholy: "Nobody knew where I was and now I am no longer there." *I am no longer there.* This feels like a very pointed and barbed riposte, an effort to point out the folly of locating mastery "where it was not" or where we can't have it, or of staging an appeal for one who, "no longer there," either "cannot or will not hear the protest."[100] Do me this one favor, the poem seems to ask: do not base your relation to me or to my boy on a sense of recognition, on some assumption

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that our pain is shared. "Each to his own grief, each to / his loneliness and fidgety revenge." There feels to me to be one last possibility, the *pedagogic*, with the narrator redirecting puerile and misdirected energy toward more productive arenas and pursuits (out of "a sloppy amalgamation" and toward the "sanity" of "a cup of tea"). If anything, the poem fails to repair the world, and its energy flows in the opposite direction, from shattered glass back into the poem itself.

Allan Grossman's thoughts on what he calls "virtual poetry" and "the bitter logic of the poetic principle" provide an aid to thought here.[101] A poem is virtual, in Grossman's argument, because there is an unbridgeable gap between what the poet wants the poem to do and what it can actually do, and it is structurally foredoomed, or "bitter," because of this virtuality. "The lyric poet is moved to make a poem because she is dissatisfied with the human world, the world of representation. But the stuff of poetry, language, invariably reproduces the structures it aspires to replace."[102] The poet's wish is to get beyond the finitude of the given, of history, but that song of the infinite is always compromised by the finitude of its terms. "*Bitter* is the sentiment of undecidable conflict," then, "between the will to (re)build the human world, and the resistance to alternative (heterocosmic) making inherent in the materials of which any world must be composed."[103] A poem is thus "always a record of failure because you can't actualize the impulse that gave rise to it without betraying it."[104] Terminally prone to such failure, a poem can do what it does only *to itself.*

Brooks's "broken window" looks to be doing precisely this sort of work.[105] Certainly, the broken window serves as the poem's foundational "cry of art"; it is what has inspired the wish to rebuild the human world (the first line of the poem says as much). But the shattering it precipitates moves *through* the poem like a stain or a metabolic enzyme, fracturing the chains in the poem's syntax along the way. I will have much more to say about that amalgam of stuff in the poem's closing lines, but first I must address what brings that heap about: the movement of the broken window's shattering, or again, specifically, its metabolic undertone as enzyme.

If one accepts syntax as the circulatory system of the verbal artifact, a precondition for the fluidity of sound and sense, it is hard not to see those colons in the first stanza producing a particular effect:

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Whose broken window is a cry of art
(success, that winks aware
as elegance, as a treasonable faith)
is raw: is sonic: is old-eyed première.

There is something conspicuous about these colons, a failure to mask that they've stepped in for the commas that ought to reside in their place, and colons substituted for commas do a more forceful job of regulating (just short of arresting) the flow of sound and sense, slowing them down, breaking them up. The movement is peristaltic (colons are colonic). Moving on to the third stanza, one has a sense that the hendiadys of "salt and pepper" has had its spine broken; what was a unity has had its parts strewn across the surface of the stanza by a proliferating series of "ands." The assonance between "night" and "light" finds those sonic effects dispersed, as well, as if "night" has been instructed to find another place to reside in the poem—or again, in the fifth stanza ("Each one other / is having different weather"), where the first line makes syntactic promises the second line can't keep, to form a kind of syllepsis. A note and a hole.

"I shall create! If not a note, a hole / If not an overture, a desecration." The boy announces a creative aesthetic that reads like some long-undiscovered black law of thermodynamics—a vision of art as neither more nor less than energy transformed. Creation and destruction, making and unmaking differ in degree rather than kind, and thus neither classification nor definition is an appropriate tool of assessment. Rather, what matters are the shifts in degree that represent perspective. Brooks's poem commands attention within the current argument on two accounts. First, it invokes slavery, but without melancholy, insistent in its refusal of connection and empathy, classification and judgment. Second, the poem is unbiased in its insistence on broken glass as art *and* trash, "note" *and* "hole," and the insistence on the irreducibility of broken glass suggests the refusal of black culture to resolve itself into any particular sense ("overture" or "desecration"). This is not classification and definition but perspective, hovering, adjacency.

I espy in Brooks's poem an attempt to abide the overdetermination of the object by first conjuring that object *in the only way that a poem can*—a broken glass whose every aspect, from its objectness to its brokenness, it is alone the *poem's* to conjure—and then, by a curious twist, failing to remain sovereign over that object. Perhaps even more curi-

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ously, the poem not only conjures an object to effect its own undoing. It plays out that undoing (that non-sovereignty) in submission to an object that can barely be said to exist. The poem conjures a "broken window" that is an object only to the extent that it has been converted into a "syntactical substance," one that is most material when it is deranging the poem itself.[106] More an imaginary object than a real one, the broken window has strongest affinities with the "mistake" (if one were to choose from the elements of the amalgam to which it gives rise), sharing with it the insolidity of an abstract noun that has no reference in the real and, in that way, like a mistake, forming at best a sort of theoretical or hypothetical object. A note and a hole. It is hard for me not to think that the poem's work is to imagine an object and then, subjecting itself to that object's shattering effects, relish in the plethora of aesthetic possibilities to which that act (disintegrating in the extreme) gives rise—a mistake, a cliff, a hymn, a snare, an exceeding sun. "A sloppy amalgamation." The poem seeks to get you attached not to the loss in fact, but to the movement, an act of divestiture or what it announces as the "runs"—the movement from monumentality to amalgam, the enzymatic movement of broken glass through the poem itself, a *metabolic* movement that makes and unmakes the poem. The poem issues an invitation to want *all* of the aesthetic possibilities opened up by its shattering form and asks of me, the critical me, only if I can bear to have a method that honors the overdetermination of the object—all of the possibilities afforded once the fragments of its "broken window" embed in that "exceeding sun" (the poem able to preserve and transform that energy by observing its own internal law of thermodynamics).

I would wager that Brooks settles on the adjective "sloppy" not in judgment of the boy and his act of creation, but out of a desire to suggest mere adjacency, as if to promise a proximity arrived at without any critical intervention or aesthetic judgment. Either would produce orderings that, if not sloppy, would at least have their own discernible logic, as if to suggest that running indiscriminately between these objects is life's dessert, a movement adequate to the goal of surviving "inequity and white power." The "success" of this "cry of art," in other words, is to leave us in that space of adjacency, where "broken glass" has replaced itself with "a sloppy amalgamation"; an object has replaced itself with a plurality of objects. The question that should present itself most urgently at this juncture is why the maximalism of hortative rhetoric and heroic gestures should resolve

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in what feels like a relatively humble laying out of objects. In short, *how can we explain such minimalism?*

From Watts to Ferguson, the cliché of black rage often has been, "They're only hurting themselves."[107] The poem "Boy Breaking Glass" operationalizes this claim and shifts it to a different register. The aesthetic turn here is not, however, a mere empty formalism; it is, rather, an affective reworking, an immanence, transforming reading into an ascetic practice of self-emptying.

You may sense where this is heading.

It is my view that "Boy Breaking Glass" anticipates—from within the very crucible of a political ferment that would nurture a contrary set of historiographical and political impulses—what some, in reference to recent literary critical trends, have called "the incrementalist turn," a critical turn toward minimal variations, fleeting perceptual experiences, and small nonevents "below or marginal to normal appearance" that figure the possibility of "fleeting relief from the pressure to endorse what [Immanuel] Kant calls the world 'as is.'"[108] This attunement is in fact a reattunement, as the critics annexed to this turn, who generally are allergic to the immodest and melodramatic claims of agonistic critique, intend to reverse "the maximalist claims of transnational and transchronological turns, which seem at times to assume the literalism of a direct political, or emancipatory, impact on the world or even past worlds" (or, at the very least, to run on the belief, as I put it elsewhere, "that to study [the] past is somehow to intervene in it").[109] Ripe for inclusion in this critical moment are the "exercises in minimal affirmatives" that make an appearance in the late work of Roland Barthes and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick—"vindications of a right to demand little," in the words of Anne-Lise François, which one discerns in Barthes's emphasis on the noncommittal ("of leaving one's force in place, without directing or finalizing it") in *Le Neutre*, and Sedgwick's "laying out" or enhancing of the range of critical responses to aesthetic objects (beyond received styles of perfection, demystification, or transgressive reversal) in *Touching Feeling*.[110]

Perhaps nothing better illustrates what we might gain in embracing Brooks's "sloppy" adjacency than Sedgwick's turn, in *Touching Feeling*, toward planar relations that are *beside* rather than behind, beneath, or beyond. Sedgwick sensed late in her career how the prevailing style of ideology critique would frequently project a topos of depth followed by a drama of exposure. A successful reading exposed either the "residual

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forms of essentialism lurking *behind* apparently nonessentialist forms of analysis" or the latent and "oppressive historical forces hiding *beneath* or *beyond*" manifest aesthetic content.[111] Behind, beneath, beyond. Such spatializations of thought have tended to underwrite a dualistic thinking it has been hard for critique to shake: cause and effect, subject and object, presence and absence, manifest versus latent, surface versus depth, and so on. The term "beside," Sedgwick argues, offers a way out of this critical cul-de-sac, because "a number of elements may lie alongside one another, though not an infinity of them."[112] "Beside" presents a fund of resources, "compris[ing] a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping, and other relations."[113] The additive and accretive prevail in the open-source program of "beside"—its goal is "to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self."[114] These exercises intend alternatives to the well-trodden paths of agonistic critique: its acquisitive urges, perfective ambitions, and imperatives (under the banner of suspicion) to expose concealed truths. Sedgwick presents "besideness" as critical comportment: as one of her more sympathetic and astute observers notes, it is a critical posture that wishes to occupy neither "a position of superior vantage, looking down at art; nor [one] of inferior vantage, looking up to art."[115] It is a comportment that is "not *about* art" at all, but "*inside* art"—a comportment that involves thinking *like* a work of art.[116]

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view of Work in Progress," in Michel Foucault, *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 262.

72. Theodor W. Adorno, "Toward a Theory of the Artwork," in *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 243.

73. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Odysseus presents as cultural progenitor of the idea of mimesis as assimilation and contiguity, for in bartering his way through the threats presented by the various deities and monsters he encounters along his way he survives these threats by cunningly adapting to them. The gods, in turn, in agreeing to the terms of barter, "are over thrown by the very system by which they are honored." Thus, in Odysseus's encounter with Polyphemus, his two contradictory responses, of both answering to his name, and disowning it, function in essence as one: "He acknowledges himself to himself by denying himself under the name Nobody; he saves his life by losing himself." Odysseus "abases himself." In him, "the self does not constitute the fixed antithesis to adventure, but in its rigidity molds itself [*sich anschmiegen*] only by way of that antithesis: being an entity only in the diversity of that which denies all unity . . . Odysseus loses himself in order to find himself." What is true for the epic hero is true for the work of art—and, to my way of thinking, for the critic; see Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1997 [1944]), 47–49, 59–60.

74. Michel de Certeau, "Vocal Utopias: Glossolalias," *Representations* 56 (Autumn 1996): 31.

75. Terri Snyder, "Suicide, Slavery, and Memory in North America," *Journal of American History* 97, no. 1 (June 2010): 50–51.

76. Constantin Fasolt, *The Limits of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 143.

77. *The Report from a Select Committee of the House of Assembly, Appointed to Inquire into the Origin, Causes, and Progress, of the Late Insurrection* (Barbados: W. Walker, 1818).

78. Edwards, "The Taste of the Archive," 970.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 1

1. Jonathan Curiel, "At the de Young, a Stunning Work of Recycled Bottle Tops," *SF Weekly*, July 30, 2010, accessed April 22, 2013, http://blogs.sfweekly.com/shookdown/2010/07/at_the_de_young_a_stunning_wor.php. The work Curiel describes, *Hovor II* (2004), hangs in the De Young Museum in San Francisco.

2. Holland Cotter, "A Million Pieces of Home," *New York Times*, February 8, 2013, accessed February 11, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/10/arts/design/a-million-pieces-of-home-el-anatsui-at-brooklyn-museum.html.

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3. Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Discovering El Anatsui," in *El Anatsui: When I Last Wrote to You about Africa*, ed. Lisa M. Binder, (New York: Museum for African Art, 2010), 63. The work Appiah describes is *Sasa* (2004).

4. For an outstanding take on the attraction to light in contemporary African diasporic art practice, see Krista Thompson, *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

5. Appiah, "Discovering El Anatsui," 63.

6. Cotter, "A Million Pieces of Home."

7. Curiel, "At the de Young, a Stunning Work of Recycled Bottle Tops." The epiphanic signals the presence of something like a categorical imperative, a response everyone *ought* to have to the object—effects produced not for any particular person or by any particular object, but by its matter. A *categorical* imperative because any individual perceptual experience of the object, to be perceptual, must carry with it the suspicion that it is a property of the object, both evidence of its autonomy and an assertion of that autonomy. Perception is itself the artwork's medium. The suggestion is that the experience is not in fact (or even uniquely) mine but rather impersonal, consisting of a perspective that can account for me and for you, and for everyone and no one in particular. Hence, I account for the experience of no *particular* object in these opening paragraphs, refuse to specify a when or a where of this encounter—hence, too, the second-person "you," who is neither simply me (because who would care?) nor "the viewer" or "the subject" (because how would you know?).

8. We might describe an Anatsui as "ready-made" or "found object" art, although the artist demurs from describing his works in the language of modernism, preferring the less resonant art-history term "repurposed." The "ready-made," a term coined by Marcel Duchamp, described an object that possesses a certain aesthetic autonomy, an object complete in itself whose plasticity has not been altered by the artist. Anatsui's emphasis is less on autonomy than on exhaustion, for "repurposed" implies a sense that the material has reached the end of its use value and has been frozen or immured within the artwork: See Lisa M. Binder, "El Anatsui: Transformations," *African Arts* 41, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 27, 36; Brandon Reintjes, "Installing Anatsui: The Politics of Economics in Global Contemporary Art," master's thesis, University of Louisville, Kentucky, May 2009, 45.

9. Lisa M. Binder, "Introduction," in *El Anatsui: When I Last Wrote to You about Africa*, ed. Lisa M. Binder (New York: Museum for African Art, 2010), 18.

10. Robert Storr, "The Shifting Shapes of Things to Come," in Binder, *El Anatsui*, 62.

11. Storr, "The Shifting Shapes of Things to Come," 62. Yambo Ouologuem, *Le devoir de violence* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1971).

12. Storr, "The Shifting Shapes of Things to Come," 57–62.

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13. Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 9, 155. For example, in Georges Seurat's pointillist *Parade de cirque* (1888), "The representational features of the painting (the figures, the architectural setting) have a perceptual coherence that is unrelated to the individual touches of color out of which they are constituted." The three musicians to the left of the composition take their shape from dots of orange, blue, and yellow-orange paint, but these discrete points of color "have nothing in common with our experience of those figures suffused in a shimmering hazy violet." In gestalt, the sensory apprehension of a form "alternate[s] temporally with a perception of more elementary sensations": Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 156–57.

14. Adorno states on the artwork's irrelevance and incompleteness, "Each artwork, as a structure, perishes in its truth content; through it the artwork sinks into irrelevance, something that is granted exclusively to the greatest artworks. The historical perspective that envisions the end of art is every work's idea. There is no artwork that does not promise that its truth content, to the extent that it appears in the artwork as something existing, realizes itself and leaves the artwork behind simply as a husk": Theodor W. Adorno, "Toward a Theory of the Artwork," in *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013),180, 241.

15. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1997).

16. Adorno's mimetic project is "intended to anticipate a new non-dominating mode of relation to inner and external nature": Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 11. The natural world presents a surfeit of models of this type of mimesis (see the introduction, footnote 73, for the one exception). Examples include the chameleon who "always taking on the color of its surroundings . . . never seems to be 'itself'"; the witch doctor who "imitating the wild animal in order to appease it . . . attempt[s] to become part of the same order from which the threat emanates"; and homeopathic and other types of inoculation in which the patient receives a drug "that causes symptoms resembling those of the disease being treated": see Michael Cahn, "Subversive Mimesis: Theodor W. Adorno and the Modern Impasse of Critique," in *Mimesis in Contemporary Theory: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, vol. 1, ed. Mihai Spariosu (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1984), 54. The anthropologist Michael Taussig describes Adorno's project as a "sensuous" mimesis: Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 44–47.

17. Ernst van Alphen, *Art in Mind: How Contemporary Images Shape Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 2. Largely drawing on theories of the artwork's autonomy indebted to Adorno, Hubert Damisch and Ernst van Alphen argue for a view of the artwork as "an act of thought." Together with Georges Didi-Huberman, they challenge a core axiom of the discipline of art

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history—"that the meaning of art can only be formulated historically [and that an] artwork, therefore, is always an expression of the historical period or figure that produced it": Van Alphen, *Art in Mind*, 2. I mean to court the same skepticism in this chapter's argument. Damisch maintains that it is impossible to possess the "period eye" of another time in history (the term is attributed to Michael Baxandall) and that "works of art appear to full advantage only if we deal with them as ways of thinking": see Yve-Alain Bois, Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, and Hubert Damisch, "A Conversation with Hubert Damisch," *October* 85 (Summer 1998): 9. See also Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009).

18. On film and "thick media effects" as prisms for literary historicism ("how we might shoot [poetry] as a film"), see Alan Liu, "Contingent Methods," in Alan Liu, *Local Transcendence: Essays on Postmodern Historicism and the Database* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), esp. 13–19.

19. "A unique handmade object receives from its maker a *spiritual deposit* that Benjamin calls 'aura.' Objects mass produced by machine lack this aura. . . . The aura is the artifact's historical trace, the footprint that it leaves in time; this mark is erased when it can be replaced by a new copy at any moment": Aaron Kunin, "Artifact, Poetry as," *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Roland Greene (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 88.

20. Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 21–23.

21. Liu, *Local Transcendence*, 18.

22. Liu, *Local Transcendence*, 19. Liu also writes, employing more filmic vocabulary, "From the later nineteenth century on, new linguistic, graphic, photographic, filmic, and other media not only updates 'as it really was' into a distinctly modern form of reverie but also provided a new platform for critique. We might instance imagism, cubism, the New Typography, film montage in the style of Sergei Eisenstein, Russian Formalism, the New Criticism, and structural linguistics. All these movements set out in one way or another to make dialectical critique immanent on thick media effects—for example, by making defamiliarization, irony, paradox, and arbitrariness palpable in imagery, picture surface, collage, montage, or signifiers": Liu, *Local Transcendence*, 13.

23. As shall become clear shortly, this chapter makes a case for *punctum* (rather than aura) as historical paradigm.

24. Liu, *Local Transcendence,* 20, 23, emphasis added.

25. Mark Doty writes, "Description is an ART to the degree that it gives us not just the world but the inner life of the witness": Mark Doty, *The Art of Description: World into Word* (Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2010), 65.

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26. Michel Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 137, emphasis added.

The double movement of "extinguishment and potentiation" that Elizabeth Povinelli takes as necessary for the creation of "a new social form" would be one way to articulate what I am after here. If I were reading alongside Wittgenstein, I might describe this project of self-divestiture in the language of my "poverty"—that is, the perception that the world "exist[s] in a process of decline . . . beyond recovery by morality" (mine or anyone else's) and that therefore one is to make a virtue of one's secondariness, one's responsiveness, one's capacity merely to read. If I were reading alongside Emerson, I might identify it with his "ontology of dislocations"; the shaking, sliding, and falling in his prose through which the rupture of personal identity is achieved: see Stanley Cavell, "Declining Decline: Wittgenstein as a Philosopher of Culture," in *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Wittgenstein after Emerson* (Albuquerque, NM: Living Batch, 1989), 77; and Branka Arsić, *On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 170.

27. Orlando Patterson, "Toward a Future That Has No Past: Reflections on the Fate of Blacks in the Americas," *Public Interest*, no. 27 (1972): 60–61; Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 193; Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

28. Stephen Best and Saidiya Hartman, "Fugitive Justice," *Representations* 92 (Winter 2005): 5.

29. Best and Hartman, "Fugitive Justice," 5.

30. Frances Ferguson, *Pornography, the Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 38.

31. Ferguson, *Pornography*, 38–39.

32. Liu, *Local Transcendence*, 162.

33. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 98.

34. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Philosophy of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 111–19.

35. Patchen Markell, *Bound by Recognition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 10–17.

36. Leo Bersani, "Sociality and Sexuality," *Critical Inquiry* 26 no. 4 (Summer 2000): 646.

37. Anita Sokolsky, "The Melancholy Persuasion," in *Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism*, ed. Maud Ellmann (New York: Routledge, 1994), 129.

38. Cedric Robinson, "The Nature of the Black Radical Tradition," in Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 167–71.

39. See Jeffrey B. Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856–7* (Bloomington: Indiana University

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Press, 1989), Jennifer Wenzel, *Bulletproof: Afterlives of Anticolonial Prophesy in South African and Beyond* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

40. Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 132–35; R. K. Kent, "Palmares: An African State in Brazil," *Journal of African History* 6, no. 2 (1965): 161–75.

41. Robert I. Rotberg, ed., *Strike a Blow and Die: A Narrative of Race Relations in Colonial Africa by George Simeon Mwase* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 48–49.

42. Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 68, 168–69.

43. Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 170–71.

44. Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 168.

45. Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 168–69.

46. Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 171.

47. David Scott feels skeptical that it is one when he asks, "What makes us think that we can string these words together?" about the critical commonplace "the black radical tradition": see David Scott, "On the Very Idea of a Black Radical Tradition," *Small Axe*, no. 46 (March 2013): 1–6.

48. Robinson takes the phrase "outlandish Africans" (Robinson, *Black Marxism,* 169–70) from Gerald Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 18. Black radicalism reads as "outlandish" in a quite literal sense of reflecting the consciousness of those who remembered another land, those with a superior moral claim on another "home," and, significantly in this regard, Robinson fails to draw a single example of the black radical tradition from the North American context, which absence suggests that creolization effectively snuffed out this revolutionary consciousness.

49. A surrealism *avant la lettre* in Afro-diasporic culture recognized "the imagination as our most powerful weapon"; and the Europeans who would claim the name realized that "entire cultures had methods of thought and communication that transcended the conscious": Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon, 2002), 159–60. See also Franklin Rosemont and Robin D. G. Kelley, eds., *Black, Brown, & Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2009).

50. Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 454.

51. Rei Terada, *Looking Away: Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction, Kant to Adorno* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 2. See also Stanley Cavell, "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*," in *Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 39–124.

52. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 454; Paul Standish, "Skepticism, Acknowledgment, and the Ownership of Learning," in *Stanley Cavell and the Education*

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of Grownups, ed. Naoko Saito and Paul Standish (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 80.

53. Bersani, "Sociality and Sexuality," 646.

54. Terada, *Looking Away*, 4. Erving Goffman's sense of "awayness" also resonates with Terada's "looking away," although her thinking is more phenomenological than sociological: a "kind of inward emigration from the gathering [that] may be called 'away'" to which "strict situational regulations obtain": Erving Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings* [New York: Free Press, 1963], 69). See also Mark Seltzer, *The Official World* (Durham. NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 166–69.

55. Terada, *Looking Away*, 3–4.

56. Terada, *Looking Away*, 3–4.

57. I claim for this chapter—indeed, for the entire book—a very local (and quite personal) habitation that approximates what the literary critic Darieck Scott refers to as a "politics without defense," which he defines as a politics "that assimilates to itself racial identities and the history that makes them, knowing and naming the injustice of those identities and histories but choosing not to battle against them but rather to let them, as it were, flow through the self—even overwhelm the self—and yet become transformed." This is an identity "without the customary defenses against history": Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 245–46.

58. Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 162.

59. I thank Jennifer Ashton for this observation.

60. My claim concerning "striving" assimilates two counterintuitive statements regarding painting and resemblance. The philosopher Nelson Goodman observes that where a painting "denotes" the object it represents, it "resembles" other paintings. "A Constable painting of Marlborough Castle," he writes, "is more like any other picture than it is like the Castle, yet it represents the Castle and not another picture—not even the closest copy." Or, in Michael Leja's paraphrase, "A painting necessarily bears a much stronger resemblance to any other painting than to whatever it depicts." See Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), 5; Michael Leja, "Touching Pictures in William Harnett," in Michael Leja, *Looking Askance: Skepticism and American Art from Eakins to Duchamp* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 133.

61. Adorno writes, "Artworks organize what is not organized": Adorno and Tiedemann, *Aesthetic Theory*, 251.

62. Walter Benn Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 85.

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63. Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Critique after Structuralism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 193. For a pivotal moment in this critical tradition, see Jacques Derrida's discussion of the *parergon* in Jacques Derrida, *La Vérité en peinture* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978), 63, 71–73.

64. Culler, *On Deconstruction*, 193.

65. Stanley Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 52.

66. Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 93, 105.

67. Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 90, 93. The internal quote is from Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 155. Elsewhere, Michaels writes, "What determines the picture as a picture is the establishment of its frame, which will be essential not only to the unity of the work . . . but to the very idea of art": Walter Benn Michaels, "The Force of a Frame: Owen Kydd's Durational Photographs," http://nonsite.org/feature/the-force-of-a-frame.

68. Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem*, 75–77, 198 n. 11. See also Stephen Best, Sharon Marcus, and Heather Love, "Building a Better Description," *Representations* 135 (Summer 2016): 1–21.

69. Michael Fried, "Barthes's *Punctum*," in *Photography Degree Zero: Reflections on Roland Barthes's "Camera Lucida,"* ed. Geoffrey Batchen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 156.

70. Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 153.

71. Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier*, 90; Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem*, 98.

72. That infinity is essentially what Bersani and Dutoit mean by "the untreated, unaestheticized world beyond."

73. Fried, "Barthes's *Punctum*," 148.

74. Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem*, 17.

75. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 26.

76. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 26–27.

77. Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem*, 46–47.

78. Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem*, 15–16, emphasis added.

79. I thank James Duesterberg, Jean Thomas Tremblay, and Lauren Berlant for their generous and generative discussions of Anatsui's trompe l'oeil as it relates to Barthes's *punctum* and for calling me back to think more deeply about the "act" of framing as both explicitly theorized in *Camera Lucida* and unconsciously (though no less powerfully) operative in recent examples of the New Materialism.

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80. Lacan, as a young intellectual, seeks to escape the life of the mind by joining a crew of fishermen in Brittany . One fisherman, Petit-Jean, points to a sardine can floating in the water, winking and glittering in the sun, "a witness to the canning industry, which we, in fact, were supposed to supply." Joking, he says to Lacan, "You see that can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn't see you!" Though the joke was at Lacan's expense (he was so "out of place in the picture" he could not be seen), he gets the last laugh by reading in the joke the logic of the *gaze*: "If what Petit-Jean said to me, namely, that the can did not see me, had any meaning, it was because in a sense, it was looking at me, all the same. It was looking at me at the level of the point of light, the point at which everything that looks at me is situated": Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 95.

81. In Manny Farber's formulation, such art "feels its way through walls of particularization, with no sign that the artist has any object in mind other than eating away the immediate boundaries of his art, and turning these boundaries into the conditions of the next achievement." Farber directs his scorn at a particular kind of artist who, in thrall to the "sin of framing," takes small-scale formal achievements and squanders them "in pursuit of the continuity, harmony, involved in constructing a masterpiece . . . , filling every pore of a work with glinting, darting Style and creative Vivacity": Manny Farber, "White Elephant Art and Termite Art" (1962), in *Negative Space: Manny Farber on the Movies*, expanded ed. (New York: Da Capo, 1998), 135.

Anatsui arguably traffics in a similar aesthetic practice. Known for viewing curators and installers as collaborators with whom he shares the authorship of his work, Anatsui insists that the form of any particular object not be viewed as immutable and that it be seen only as the temporary expression of a set of "raw materials"—that is, swatches that can be organized differently each time a work is displayed. (Anatsui says, "I never dictate to people how to display the work—though they're full of interpretational possibilities. You can display the pieces to arrive at all kinds of other meanings": quoted in Gerard Houghton, "The Epitome of Freedom," in *Il mondo vi appartiene*, ed. Caroline Bourgeois [Milan: Electa, 2011], 90.)

82. "It comes to us, with no work of our own; then leaves us prepared to undergo a giant labor": Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 53.

83. Heather Love has recuperated "the strain of failure that runs through all modernism" for the critical project of queer theory: see Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 56. See also Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011. Other forms of the queer object that serve a project of de-realization are Daniel Tiffany's "lyric substance" (a lyr-

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icism that points to "the obscurity of its particular medium") and Rei Terada's "looking away" (an attachment to "mere" appearance, to "transient perceptual objects" that are "below or marginal to normal appearance . . . because only they seem capable of noncoercive relation"): Daniel Tiffany, *Infidel Poetics: Riddles, Nightlife, Substance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 55–56; Terada, *Looking Away*, 3–4.

84. Bersani, "Sociality and Sexuality," 641–56.

85. Bersani, "Sociality and Sexuality," 648–49.

86. Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," 136, 138.

87. Bersani, "Sociality and Sexuality," 642.

88. Bersani, "Sociality and Sexuality," 643, emphasis added.

89. Camelia Elias, *The Fragment: Towards a History and Poetics of a Performative Genre* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), 4.

90. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 148.

91. Bradford's technique bears some affinities with the technique Max Ernst called *grattage* (graphic frottage), which involved the vigorous scraping and partial removal of dry paint, an early (some consider it the earliest) instance of which is his painting *Forest and Sun* (1927), currently in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago.

92. On the deconstructive palimpsest, see the translator's preface by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), xviii. On the Mystic Writing Pad, see Richard Galpin, *Erasure in Art: Destruction, Deconstruction, and Palimpsest*, 1998, chap. 3, para. 9, www.richardgalpin.co.uk/archive/erasure.htm.

93. H. W. Fowler, F. G. Fowler, and J. B. Sykes, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1976). Palimpsest was often called on to explain "the ways in which the subject is written and overwritten through multiple and contradictory discourses": Bronwyn Davies, *A Body of Writing: 1990–1999* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira, 2000), 138. It allowed one to see how the essential and pre-discursive self once imagined by humanism was in fact "still there as one amongst many writings," continuing to take up space and thus shape our interpretation of the self-as-process: Davies, *A Body of Writing*, 138. However, since one image it might confer is that of an *original* writing on a blank parchment, the metaphor could also "hold in place the idea that there is an original prediscursive self . . . that is shaped through discourse": Davies, *A Body of Writing*, 138. There is nothing to stop a reader from reading the metaphor in this way; in fact, such a reading seems inevitable in the situation in which surface and depth are taken to be the terms of a binary, surface is held to "overwrite" or hide depth either behind or beneath it, and depth is understood as ideally expressed in the blankness of the parchment. Palimpsest proved a defining metaphor in the post-structuralist genealogy that shaped me. It provides

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a topos of surface and depth that I have felt was in need of rethinking: see Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction." *Representations* 108 (Fall 2009): 1–21.

One of the more compelling attempts to rethink the surface-depth binary appears in Foucault's discussion of *surfaces of emergence* in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. In chapter 3, "The Formation of Objects," Foucault attempts to get a handle on what he calls the "rules of formation" of a discourse—in this case, madness, in which, upon a certain chronological break, a variety of objects, such as behavioral disorders, sexual aberrations, and intellectual deficiencies, congealed into a single register. "Surface of emergence" describes that which is "susceptible to deviation"—that is, "normative," possessing a "margin of tolerance" and "threshold beyond which exclusion is demanded": Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 41. Foucault's description of how madness appears in their midst of these surfaces of emergence is both interesting and memorable. He writes, "In these fields of initial differentiation, in the distances, the discontinuities, and the thresholds that appear within it, psychiatric discourse finds a way of limiting its domain, of defining what it is talking about, of giving it the status of an object—and therefore of making it manifest, nameable, and describable" Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 41.

Note here that, in his attempt to describe an order of appearance, Foucault links it not to a logic of disappearance but, rather, to a kind of movement across "distances . . . discontinuities [and] threshold[s]." When he asserts that the discourse of psychiatry "*finds a way* of limiting its domain," that it recoils against its own expansion, the personification of emergence as self-abnegation highlights the extent to which the forces at play here are internal to the surface, and not external to it.

What might we observe of this movement? First, none of it sounds like the excavation or exfoliation that might be appropriate to the layered strata of a palimpsest. Second, in all of this recalcitrant recoil and fumbling across discontinuities and thresholds, one ought to hear the crinkling and folding of a surface layer onto itself, a surface that is infinitely folded and thus comes to contain its own depth. It is here that the Foucauldian fold starts to acquire some of the characteristics of surface that "Surface Reading" meant to accentuate—its intricacy, multiplicity and involution. See also Stephen Best, "*La Foi Postcritique*, on Second Thought," *PMLA* 132, no. 2 (2017): 337–43.

94. Paper will be obliterated in such a way that the revealed color suggests a singular planar surface. String or cord will trace the shape of letters, but when it is sanded, it just as easily obscures as reveals that shape. Neon polyester cord (from Home Depot)—red, orange, yellow, yellow-green, or deep blue—combines with a silicone caulk (also from Home Depot) that, whether it is white, black, or clear, reveals its own color when it is sanded while obscuring the color of the

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cord it hides underneath: see Richard Shiff, "Move with Chance," in *Mark Bradford* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 77.

95. Mieke Bal, *Lili Dujourie—Early Works, 1969–1983* (Munich: Kunstverein München, 1998), 126, emphasis added.

96. Elias, *The Fragment*, 190.

97. Gwendolyn Brooks, "Boy Breaking Glass," in *In the Mecca* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 36–37.

98. Marc Crawford, quoted in D. H. Melhem, *Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and the Heroic Voice* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1987), 176.

99. R. Baxter Miller, "'Does Man Love Art?' The Humanistic Aesthetic of Gwendolyn Brooks," in *Black American Literature and Humanism*, ed. R. Baxter Miller (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1981), 107–9, emphasis added.

100. Sokolsky, "The Melancholy Persuasion," 129.

101. Allan Grossman, *The Long Schoolroom: Lessons in the Bitter Logic of the Poetic Principle* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 15–16.

102. Ben Lerner, comment on Allan Grossman, "You're a Poet; Don't You Hate Most Poems?" *The Believer*, accessed 23 June 2015, www.believermag.com/exclusives/?read=interview_lerner.

103. Grossman, *The Long Schoolroom,* 16.

104. Lerner, comment on Grossman, "You're a Poet."

105. Grossman takes *lyric* poetry to be singularly beset by such "bitterness," but I find such effects of the virtual in Brooks's free verse as well. My sense of recursion and the involute in "Boy Breaking Glass" echoes Hortense Spillers's reading of *Maud Martha*, which, in her assessment "prepares the way for . . . the stunning poetry of *In the Mecca*." *Maud Martha*'s title character engages in a "kind of displaced fable-making [in which she] might be seen as the 'true poet' of the narrative and the writer herself the 'imitator' of it": Hortense J. Spillers, "'An Order of Constancy': Notes on Brooks and the Feminine," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 136–37.

106. According to Daniel Tiffany, poetic materialism is rarely founded on the problematic of the object. Instead, it fashions a new (self-standing?) phenomenalism on the construction of some type of "lyric substance"—that is, on the conversion of its poetic "objects" into a riddling substance that defies the intuitive laws of objects: Daniel Tiffany, *Toy Medium: Materialism and Modern Lyric* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Tiffany, *Infidel Poetics.*

107. Brooks writes, "'But WHY do These People offend themselves?' / say they who say also 'It's time. / It's time to help / These people'": Gwendolyn Brooks, *Riot: A Poem in Three Parts* (Detroit: Broadside, 1969), 19. See also Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, DC: Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, 1965), also known as the "Moynihan Report."

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108. Seltzer, *The Official World*, 165–68. Terada, *Looking Away*, 3–4.

The accent on the minor and the given can be felt across a broad range of practices and fields of inquiry, with one center of gravity in literary and cultural studies: Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading"; Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France, 1977–1978*, trans. Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Heather Love, "Close but Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn," *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 371–91; Heather Love, "Close Reading and Thin Description," *Public Culture* 25, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 401–34; Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Terada, *Looking Away*; Alex Woloch, *The One versus the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

109. Seltzer, *The Official World*, 166. Stephen Best, "On Failing to Make the Past Present," *Modern Language Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (September 2012): 454.

110. All quotations from Anne-Lise François, "Late Exercises in Minimal Affirmatives," in *Theory Aside*, ed. Jason Potts and Daniel Stout (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 35, 45–46, 45. See also Elizabeth Anker and Rita Felski, eds., *Critique and Postcritique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

111. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 8.

112. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling,* 8.

113. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 8.

114. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling,* 8. I detect a desire to explicate a similar set of critical resources in what Wayne Koestenbaum calls "fag limbo"—which, upon his wry assimilation of the word "fag" to its original meaning, "fatigue," describes a sensibility that involves disidentification and critical fatigue, an inability (in his words) "to think through anything but the materials right now in my room, wherever and whatever my room might be, whether bubble or cell or gallery or mausoleum or website": Wayne Koestenbaum, "Fag Limbo," in Wayne Koestenbaum, *My 1980s and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 197.

115. Koestenbaum, "Fag Limbo," 200.

116. Koestenbaum, "Fag Limbo," 200. A masterly example of thinking like a work of art is T. J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006).

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