Toward a Black Feminist Poethics

The Quest(ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World

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What is a literary critic, a black woman critic, a black feminist literary critic, a black feminist social literary critic? The adjectives mount up, defining, qualifying, the activity. . . . What do these categories tell anyone about my method? Can one theorize effectively about an evolving process? . . . What are the philosophical assumptions behind my praxis? I think how the articulation of a theory is gathering place, sometimes a point of rest as the process rushes on, insisting that you follow.[1]

In 1981, Barbara Christian asked: "What are the philosophical assumptions behind my praxis?" Here I am borrowing her comments, made in the context of crafting a black feminist critique in the early 1980s, to consider how a Black Feminist Poethics might go about this task.[2] Would the poet's intention emancipate the Category of Blackness[3] from the scientific and historical ways of knowing that produced it in the first place, which is also the Black Feminist Critic worksite? Would Blackness emancipated from science and history wonder about another praxis and wander in the World, with the ethical mandate of opening up other ways of knowing and doing? To both questions, this paper provides one provisory answer: Yes. From without the World as we know it, where the Category of Blackness exists in/as thought—always already a referent of commodity, an object, and the other, as fact beyond evidence—a Poethics of Blackness would announce a whole range of possibilities for knowing, doing, and existing. For releasing Blackness from the registers of the object, the commodity, or the other would halt the trial of Trayvon Martin's killer before it is added to the already huge library of racial facts and precedents that authorize racial violence. For the acquittal of George Zimmerman must force us into radicalizing the task and target the very mode of representation, and its philosophical assumptions, that provides those meanings to Blackness—and its signifiers, like the hoodie—which justify Trayvon

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Martin's killing and of so many other Black Persons, before and after.

How to describe the task? What is the Black Poethic Intention? Is it an ethics, which, instead of the betterment of the World as we know it aims at its end? What kind of radical program would address simultaneously all the three dimensions of the political—namely the juridic, the economic, and the symbolic? What follows is not a description of such a program. My intention, like the poet's, is not to define and delimit the scope of decolonization. I do no more than to provide an outline of the general—and for this reason hopelessly vague—questions and questionings demanded by the project, which are signaled by the quotes that serve as title for each section. Each section builds on the previous one to produce a reading of the onto-epistemological grounds of Category of Blackness, designed to clear the terrain moved by the urgency to confront authorized and justified total violence (of the police and the courts), to reclaim, to demand the restoration of the total value the colonial architectures have enabled capital to expropriate from native lands and enslaved black (and African) labor. My first move is to review the figuring of the commodity, in a consideration of colonial expropriation, through a different take on the historical materialist reading of slavery. Against the conventional view that places slavery in the prehistory of capital, I make a case for the acknowledgement that the total value produced by slave labor continues to sustain global capital. Next, I divide this reading of the onto-epistemological grounds of the World as we know it into two sections. In the first, I return to an engagement with the figure at the center of our juridic and economic texts, the *Subjectum,* paying particular attention to how Time has been deployed to sustain it. In the second, I turn to the World as we know it with a reading that seeks to expose how the Category of Blackness already carries the necessary tools for dismantling the existing strategies for knowing, and opening the way for another figuring of existence without the grips of the tools of scientific reason. Finally, the last session is primarily a speculation on a Feminist Poethics of Blackness, which includes the outline of a description of existence without the tools of universal reason, and the narratives of science and history that sustain the transparent trajectory of the subjects of universal reason and of its grip on our political imagination.

> *The tropical earth is baked hard by sun. Round every "carry" of land intended for cane it was necessary to dig a large ditch to ensure circulation of air. Young canes required attention for the first three or four months and grew to maturity in 14 of 18 months. Cane could be planted and would grow at any time of the year, and the reaping of one crop was the signal for the immediate digging of ditches and the planting of another. Once cut, they had to be rushed to the mill lest the juice became acid by fermentation. The extraction of the juice and manufacture of the raw sugar went on for three weeks a month, 16 or 18 hours a day, for seven or eight months in the year.*[4]

In the first chapter of *The Black Jacobins,* C. L. R. James collapses the distinction between property and labor when describing the conditions of acquisition, the uses, and the treatment given to the enslaved African

labor in the plantations of the Americas and West Indies. What he calls a "regime of calculated brutality and terrorism"[5]—namely slavery, which is a dimension of the colonial juridic-economic architecture—necessitated total violence for the extraction of the total value, that is, expropriation of the productive capacity of the conquered lands and enslaved bodies. Beginning with slavery is crucial precisely because a most profitable effect of the tools of scientific reason, which produce the Category of Blackness, is precisely the occlusion of the relationship between the enslaved labor and the owners as a sort of juridic arrangement that does not belong in capitalist relations, which are mediated by contract[6]—and which it does capture through the juridic concept of property. For in the same statement that articulates how slavery allows for the expropriations of the total value produced by chattel labor, Karl Marx disavows any consideration of how enslaved labor, as producer of surplus value that is the blood-nourishing capital, participates in the accumulation of capital. "The price paid for a slave," he states, "is nothing but the anticipated and capitalized surplus-value or profit, which is to be ground out of him. But the capital paid for the purchase of a slave does not belong to the capital, by which profit, surplus labor, is extracted from him. On the contrary. It is capital, which the slaveholder gives away, it is a deduction from capital, which he has available for actual production. It has ceased to exist for him, just as the capital invested in the purchase of land has ceased to exist for agriculture."[7] Among other things, historical materialist or critical racial descriptions of slavery approach slavery in the ethical register, in which it is first and foremost the opposite of freedom.[8] Focusing on or reducing colonial production to property (of lands and slaves) occludes the economic character of the expropriation of the enslaved labor productive capacity, thus designing analytical models that read slavery outside of the actual workings of the capitalist mode of production. Precisely this violent analytical gesture, the occlusion of the economic relationship—that is, the erasure of the expropriation of the total value produced by slaved labor in accounts of capital accumulation—is exposed in C. L. R. James's chapter, "The Property," in which he describes slavery's relations of productions as ones mediated by calculated total violence.

Historical Materialism, however, is just one (though the most glaring because of its grip on the radical imagination) site in which occlusion of colonial expropriation takes place. To be sure, racial knowledge—which was manufactured at the time Marx and Friedrich Engels were writing—has performed its assigned task impeccably. For the account of racial subjugation produced by the tools of raciality consistently reproduce the occlusion (the closing to consideration at the level of the concept) of the colonial (juridic, economic, symbolic) architectures for the expropriation of the productive capacity (the productive potential) of occupied lands and enslaved bodies. Put differently, because racial knowledge transubstantiates (shifts them from the living to the formal register) what emerges in political relations into effects of efficient (scientific reason's) causality, its critical tools fail to register how the total (past, present, and future) value expropriated is in the very structures (in blood and

flesh) of global capital. For such an understanding of total value requires a suspension of the view that all there is is in Time and Space, as appropriated in by the tools of universal (scientific) reason, the radical force of Blackness lies at the turn of thought—that is, Blackness knowing and studying announces the End of the World as we know it.[9] My point is that the known and knowable World and our critical intellectual tools modeled after the Category of Blackness consistently reproduce the effects of efficient causality. Stuck in the always already there (of) Thought—as reproduced in concepts and categories—where the Category of Blackness (like other social categories), because it refigures formalizations (as laws, calculations, or measurements), arrests Blackness's creative potential (that which slavery has never been able to destruct), boycotting the impact of the exposure of violence (symbolic and total), which is, as Barbara Christian has engaged so brilliantly, the Black Feminist Critic's recurrent task.

Toward the end of the World produced by the tools of reason, the Black Feminist Poet peers beyond the horizon of thought, where historicity (temporality/interiority), framed by the tools of universal reason, cannot but yield violence. When recalling how Blackness's signifying force thwarts our attempts to expose the immorality of the total violence that ensured the expropriation of the productive capacity of the enslaved Black body—which occurred in the scenes of terror she does not describe and the daily scenes she does—Saidiya Hartman presents a challenge to the Black Feminist Critic facing the task of thinking with Blackness.[10] Because neither Space nor Time, our fundamental descriptors of the World, seem to be immediately retrievable from universal reason's rather limited stance before the World, Blackness's capacity to signify otherwise—beyond universality and its particular arrangement of Space and Time, but also away from transcendentality (self-determination)—invites a consideration of the possibility of knowing without modern categories. Precisely such ability, in which Nahum Chandler, Fred Moten, and Alexander Weheliye find a path to an account of an always already-mediated being that rather than obscuring the glassy and transparent grounds of the (White) Subject denounces the fallacy upon which it rests its authority.[11]

How the Category of Blackness protects the Subject's claim to universality and transparency becomes evident when one attends to the sociological account of racial subjugation occludes slavery's relations of production and with this tames the radical potential Blackness hosts.[12] Two theoretical tools of the sociology of race relations—theory of racial and cultural contacts' and the race-relation cycle—perform the task of occluding slavery in account of racial subjugation. They do so by writing the effects of colonial (juridic, economic, symbolic) architectures of expropriation of the productive capacity of natives' lands and Black and African bodies as effects of the naturally (according the notion of the survival of the fittest) violent encounter between racially different collectives.

Let me describe it briefly. When describing the causes of racial subjugation, the tools of racial knowledge derived from these tools of scientific universality create a dialectic of death when they transmutate (a) the

racial subaltern's economic dispossession, which is the outcome of colonial expropriation, that is, the outcome of a juridico-economic relationship, and (b) the effect of whites' moral defect (race prejudice or racial beliefs that fuel racial exclusion [discrimination] and obliteration) which is a natural (explained by the theory of racial and cultural contacts and the race-relations cycle) reaction to (c) the racial other's racial difference, that is, their natural deficit (as their "strange" and inferior physical and mental traits give rises to race prejudice, racial beliefs, or racial ideologies).[13] By disappearing the first term (out of colonial expropriation) in the causal relation it establishes between the other two (moral defect and natural deficit), this account of racial subjugation occludes the political (juridico-economic) relationship (colonial expropriation), which was the condition of the encounter of these strangers in the colonies of the American continent. As noted earlier, a consequence of this prevailing account of racial subjugation is the lack of adequate historical materialist or critical racial tools that address the role of slavery in the accumulation of capital, how colonial-imperial domination was a constitutive of the juridico-economic architectures of capital. All that is left is the thesis that colonialism import only to primitive accumulation, but its mechanisms of expropriation of total surplus are not an integral part of the proper capital.

Now while Blackness when an index of a social situation consistently and continuously never fails to signify slavery, it also exposes the ways in which the expropriated enslaved African's productive capacity continues to produce surplus value in the global present. More, in spite of this endless expropriation Black (symbolic and economic), labor has not vanished (as the scientists of man once predicted and hoped).[14] For beyond capital—and its colonial, national, and imperial architecture—Blackness signals the creative capacity, which is a quality only apparent when one contemplates the World as Plenum and not as Universe.[15]

How can these two faces of Blackness be reconciled without a return to the theme of (historical or biological) essence? For the Black Feminist Poethics, a moment of radical praxis acknowledges the creative capacity Blackness indexes, reclaims expropriated total value, and demands for nothing less than decolonization—that is, a reconstruction of the world, with the return of the total value without which capital would not have thrived and off which it still lives. By reconstruction, I should emphasize, I do not mean reparation or a restitution of monetary sum that corresponds to that which mercantile and industrial capital have acquired through colonial expropriation since the sixteenth century. Decolonization requires the setting up of juridico-economic architectures of redress through which global capital returns the total value it continues to derive from the expropriation of the total value yielded by productive capacity of the slave body and native lands. Before we can even conceive on how to design these architectures, we need another account of racial subjugation, for the one we have cannot comprehend a demand for decolonization, that is the unknowing and undoing of the World that reaches its core. Before we can collectively design the framework for reconstruction, we need first to follow Blackness

as it signals that knowing and doing can be released from a particular kind of thinking, which is necessary for opening up the possibility for a radical departure from a certain kind of World.

How to bring to End the representation of the World, from/in which this dialectic makes sense? In the following pages I will elaborate the invitation this question hosts, in two steps—by revisiting the Subject and by offering a commentary on the World. Emancipating Blackness from the World, then, requires that knowing and doing be emancipated from Thought, unhinged from the many ways in which Thought—the said seat of the universal—is limited, constrained, and arrested by Truth.

> *After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world that yields him no true self-consciousness but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world.*[16]

When W. E. B. Du Bois imagines double consciousness in his account of the spiritual strivings of Black Folk, he suggests the possibility—one which Nahum Chandler explores toward its global import,[17] and Alexander G. Weheliye toward an account of the subject without the universal/particular distinction[18]—that black existence in modernity supersedes the possibilities Paul Gilroy maps—in which the double-in-double consciousness is refigured in terms of demands for fulfillment or yearnings for transfiguration.[19] Taking the engagement with the Enlightenment a bit further than Gilroy might precipitate the shift in focus consciousness to the double—a first step toward emancipation, that is, Blackness unhinged from self-consciousness. Released from the core of Thought—always in excess of the objects and subjects it creates—Blackness is available to a Black Feminist Poethics, as it charts a terrain by asking Black Feminist Critique to review its Categories, rearrange its project, and interrogate the very premises of its craft, without any guarantees that the craft itself will survive the exercise.

My task here is to signal a few—three, to be precise—points of interrogation, which might, just might, land at the End of the World. The first, which I discuss in this section, is self-consciousness itself, the Subject—the thing that thinks, the thing that thinks itself and the World, only as effects of Thought, universal reason's productive tool. After the Subject, I move on to the World, Descartes's *res extensa,* there where Blackness as a Category, trailing the destiny of all other tools of scientific reason, comprehends human existence in a frozen slice of interpretation of Space and Time. Following this initial mapping is an invitation to collapse the *Subjectum* and its mundus, to un-organize, un-form, un-think the world, towards the *Plenum,* there where existing—like it has always done—chases away the dominant fantasies of a kind of knowing that can only determine itself if with iron hinges of universal reason.

How many ways are there to ask the question of the subject? Fred Moten's path begins with resistance, but staying with the Object arrests the question of the Subject for Blackness.[20] I am ultimately threading the terrain carved by the Subject-Object distinction,

that is, modern representation—hopefully hovering over any settlement that would preempt the question of the Subject. Nonetheless, I try to arrest both questions—of the Object and the Subject, that is—because the Object bears the marks of a complication—as does the commodity. Lindon Barrett has explored the commodity in an interrogation of the notion of value (of the worker and the worker).[21] Fanon has dealt the ontological aspect of the Object's complication, which, though a figure of knowledge, has extended and colonized the whole of existing things, whether or not they are under the scrutiny of universal reason's tools, which belong to the Subject alone. For this reason, before I get at this effect, which is the core of the racial dialectic, I return to that Truth, which the tools of raciality are deployed to protect, namely that Time remains the privileged dimension of knowledge and being.

Whence the World? When raising the question of Blackness to the World, no matter if of the Subject or the Object, the Black Feminist Poethicist learns that the World itself cannot be taken for granted; she is Black and Female, much like the Black Feminist Critic names herself with Categories that announce the task Barbara Christian intimates has become life itself. The World—as well as the Categories we employ to describe it—emerge in Time, that is, already, even before the questions of Existence and Being are posed, they are seized by the *Subjectum* and his Territory.

> *I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.*[22]

When I choose to start the engagement with the World with Fanon's statement on Black Ontology, his placing the Black Man among Objects, as another Object, I want to make it unmistakable that this Black Feminist Poethics' engagement with the Quest(ion) of Blackness, the question that unravels the racial dialectic, has no qualms with thingness. To be sure, the hope is that the End of the World will emancipate the Thing from Categories (strategies of particularization) as well as from anything that resembles an attempt to give it an Essence (of the teleology of Spirit or the flow that is Duration), whether or not it is modeled after time.[23] For what I am highlighting here is the fact that categorization functions in an ontological context governed by Time. That is, while I agree with Sylvia Wynter in that the task involves "unwriting of our present normative defining of the secular mode of the Subject,"[24] I do not think that its effect, "the de-structuring of the principle of Sameness and Difference," suffices. That "principle of Sameness and Difference" (as Michel Foucault stated and Sylvia Wynter agrees), which prevails in the modern episteme (that is, post-Enlightenment thought), is indeed consistently reproduced in our Categories. Foucault, however, stops at the point that with his own investment (his interest in the rules and focus on interiority) in the kinds of Western thinking (because there were others) the moderns decided to claim. The World of Categories, as I claimed above, is always already in Time, of Time. And Time, as one can verify reading Henri Bergson and Martin Heidegger, has managed to survive the critiques that disavow scientific reason's attempts to answer the question of the Being of Man, the Sub-

ject, the Human. For this reason, I find that the principle of Sameness and Difference in either its religious or biological formulation is an insufficient point of departure for the question of Blackness. For this reason, I am convinced that a radical departure, one that does not stop at the critique of the formal table of sameness and difference, is in need.

In outlining the terrain of a Black Feminist Poethics, I shift the focus from the Formalization (Categorization) of Time—which is where critical engagements from Literature and the Humanities tend to begin—to a consideration of the Temporalizing of Forms (as Categories). For without an examination of the World that seeks to expose how Time works through our Categories, the racial dialectic will stay safe. Let me return to it: the Category of Blackness transubstantiates a juridico-economic effect into a moral defect, that is, as noted before, in the description of the dialect of death, sociology of race relations place white's unbecoming (racially informed) ideas and practices as the cause of racial subjugation. The question is, how can an economic effect be explained as the cause of a moral defect?

Natural history's Table of Man deployed the principle of difference and sameness, but did not necessarily produce those as eternal. For the effects of time were not a concern of this project of knowledge, which coined the racial categories used to this day. For Georges-Louis LeClerc de Buffon, Johann Blumenbach and others, the traits they observed and were the basis for their classification were not original or eternal, but only superficial responses to climate. For the science of man's statement that these observed Sameness and Differences, the basis for their racial classification, were quasi-eternal followed Charles Darwin's scientific version of the Temporalizing of Forms, which describes the latter as the outcome of universal reason's perfecting project, in Time. Let us not forget, however, that Temporalizing itself predates Darwin. Two famous philosophical renderings of the Temporalizing of Forms are J. G. Herder's and G. F. W. Hegel's appropriation of a product of natural history, their notion of "races of man," a classifying table that deploy bodily and territorial differences to mark the differences/sameness between human populations across the planet. With a description of History and the workshop of Time, the stage of human self-development, Herder rejects of formalizations of Natural History, which remained the basis of Immanuel Kant's and other Enlightenment philosophies. His account of Human History is "the progress in the inclination of the human species," which begins in the static-stuck "Orient" (p. 276).[25] Though in each of the "historical" moments he names, Herder notes the effect of the geographical circumstances, his privileging of the notion of development puts the focus on how each people's interior qualities—throughout time—allow them to overcome earlier human achievements. Hegel's version differs much in terms of content, especially in terms of the productive force he found behind Human History. He replaces Herder's Mother Nature with [Father] Spirit, a gesture that further apprehends the World as the Exhibition Hall of an entity that belongs in time, an interior thing. There he finds that Spirit had not, and most certainly would not, done its work on African minds and territories, for the Negro lacked the ideas that registered the Spirit's

presence. Hegel's is then a slightly different notion of development, one which posits the Spirit as the final cause for the actualization (in the World) of a people's interior capacities. Still, it is the notion of development that allows Herder and Hegel to transform the World into the Workshop of Time. To this day it remains a major descriptor of economic conditions and consistently links it to a certain frame for assessing the effectiveness of decisions, actions, and programs. For today, global capitalism continues to expropriate land resources (rare minerals such as platinum) and labor (miners) of African countries while blaming their governments' unbecoming practices (corruption) for their populations' extreme economic dispossession.

As a descriptor of the world, of persons and the places they live in, the Category of Blackness is not the chosen signifier for development; in fact, it often represents the antithesis of progress. To be sure, when deployed it names an arrested development, the effect of its articulation as a category of the analytics of raciality, the one which Frantz Fanon critically targets when describing a failure to enact the phenomenological experience. Du Bois's articulation of this racial temporality, as Chandler recalls, steered him "to produce a description of an original sense of being in the world, but to elaborate a sense of being that in itself could not be reduced to some simple essence, of either the past or of a future."[26] This exorbitance, to use Chandler's word, afforded Black Folks a "second sight," which I think exposes the Subject's dependence on Time and its interiorizing effect over the World. When Blackness returns the Necessity of Time to the Subject, it recalls that the World and its Categories thrive in the contingency of Existence shared by the Subject of Whiteness and its Racial Others.

> *When the poet travels to the ends where there is no country, he opens with the more deserved relations, in that space of an absolute elsewhere in which each can attempt to reach him. . . . The relation does not consent to the footpaths of traditions, but surfaces impure from all chaos lived there and by all illuminated. To be born into the world is to be aware, to suffer, to feel the energy of this share, heavy to carry, stern to say.*[27]

Exposing Time as it is inscribed in the onto-epistemological tools that sustain the Subject recalls its worldly-ness without the primacy of temporality. Born into the world, Édouard Glissant states, the Subjectum is immediately caught in constitutive relationships, which point to an "absolute elsewhere," another place which is not his—of Man's or of its late twentieth-century ethical rendering, the Human's. Framed in such a humble position, pre-posed by (before and toward) Man, a Poetic engagement with humanity begins with affectability (relationality, contingency, immediacy), and can only announce the constitutive relation. Between the past and future, the old and new, asking the question of the World, toward the End of the Subject's apprehension of it, interrupts the desperate reaction—of the questioned—before a Time seemingly caught in a deadly knot. Born into a World it cannot claim as its own, the Subject participates in the eternal present; oscillating, vibrating, as if stuck: in/to the World, the Time of the Subject be-

comes a here, a position, a context that all but ignores the story of change, of progress, or development. Time as a here violates the most basic truths of history and science, as imagined by the Western philosophical tradition exemplified by Kant and Hegel, for instance. Temporality as a here, nevertheless, also resonates with the most basic assumption of modern knowledge, with the view introduced in modern philosophy by Kant that Time is nothing else but a pure intuition, a tool of the senses, which allows the understanding—that region of the mind where knowing (as reflection) takes place—to grasp as form that which occurs in the world, in the mind itself, in interiority.

If the World has and has not changed; if it is always all at once, if it is no longer the playground of Time, interiority itself cannot but be located; it too becomes a here, a place; in space, a position from which the World might be engaged. That is, Time has no priority in the quest for the Being of that which is in the World. Further, as the privileged Subject of History and Knowledge (Heidegger's sole entity that asks the question of being) is a thing of Time, of temporality. In sum, the Subject, the historical entity, the interior/temporal thing, becomes a place, located in space, nothing more than the name for a position in the World of Space and Time. Nevertheless, from without Time, as a Category assembled in the Stage of Science (exteriority/spatiality), Blackness releases the Subject into the World to put an end to the World of Time where the racial dialectic makes sense. However manner one decides to go about accomplishing the task—releasing the Subject, Man, to the World, and from Time—it would have to begin with a fracturing of Hegel's and Marx's versions of dialectics itself, and its sequestering of Space in the unfolding of Time.

Elsewhere I speculate that the work of the Category of Blackness is revealed in racial violence, which exposes it as a referent "The Thing."[28] When Hegel names Negroes "objects of no value," he gives more than a philosophical endorsement of the juridic-economic architecture of slavery. Recall that his statement belongs to the philosophical program that transformed Kant's account of knowledge into the "Play of Desire"—the one in which development (the spirit's self-realization) is the effect of productive violence—a rendering of efficient causality and its description of Existence (namely Phenomenology), in which the World becomes the Subject's shop, at once a workroom, a factory, and a trading room. Hegel's statement then collapses three orders of value—symbolic, ethical, and economic—where "Negro" becomes a name for: (a) an object of Hegel's philosophical and later scientific Knowledge; (b) an other of the Subject (that is, of the one who already "attained consciousness of his freedom"); and (c) a commodity "enslaved by Europeans and sold to America."[29] Why to halt the Play of Desire, the ontological rendering of efficient causality? Because without Desire, the object, the other, and the commodity dissolve; thus released from the grips of the *Subjectum,* the World is emancipated from universal reason, and other possible ways of knowing and doing can be contemplated without the charge of irrationality, mysticism, or idle fantasy.

Ending the grip of Time restores the World anew, from the position Blackness registers—that is, the halted temporality that

preempts recognition and opens the World as Plenum,[30] becomes a *Canvas Infinita,*[31] where the Subject figures without Time, stuck in the endless play of expression, with the rest of us. Without Reflection (the distinguishing attribute of Kant's subject of knowledge) and Recognition (the final moment of Hegel's subject of morality), both the account of poesis that creates the World as the product of the Subject's Desire (that is, its auto-actualization) and the account of ethics that demands that the World become the fulfillment of this Desire (its actualization) become unwelcome. In the Plenum, Refraction, as everything mirrors everything else in the "Play of Expression," becomes the descriptor for Existence, as what exists becomes only and always a rendering of possibilities, which remain exposed in the horizon of Becoming. A Black Feminist Poethics becomes here in a World imaged as endless Poethics: that is, existence toward the beyond of Space-time, where The Thing resists dissolving any attempt to reduce what exists—anyone and everything—to the register of the object, the other, and the commodity.

> *We might well ask if this phenomenon of marking and branding actually "transfers" from one generation to another, finding its various symbolic substitutions in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiating moments.*[32]

Not long ago, in the 1970s and 1980s, Feminist Critics engaged in a project that aimed at the end of the World of Man, the Subjectum, from within but mostly against existing critical programs, such as historical materialism and Black Thought. Historical materialist feminist interventions exposed how capital could only have survived with a division of the juridical and the economic moments that protected the juridic-economic subject of freedom in the domestic/private domain. When doing so, they reunite the (Human) Body and the World, both of which sites of extraction of surplus value—in the reproduction of labor (Silvia Federici) and nature turned into raw material (Carolyn Merchant).[33] Feminist interventions, which much like Radical Black Thought, heed C. L. R. James's statement that the task of black studies is the dismantling of Western thought, moved to design ethical and epistemological programs that released the enslaved and the black body from the grips of commodity, while at the same time exposing how violence enabled the expropriation of the productive capacity of slave and Black male and female bodies while the figuring of the thing as commodity interrupted the radintial Blackness holds.

Toward a Black Feminist Poethics, with Hortense Spillers, we must face slavery "as high crimes against the flesh, as the person of African females and African males registered the wounding" and "think of the 'flesh' as a primary narrative."[34] That wounded flesh, the inscriptions of the calculated violence registers what the Category of Blackness hides, living-dead capital profiting from expropriated productive capacity of enslaved bodies and native lands. Her confronting question, questions Time and the World it sustains. Framed in a position that refuses the World of Man, pre-posed by (before and toward) Man born in the world, the Feminist Black (racial) Critic becomes in material affectability (relationality, contingency, immediacy). With this gift, the Black Feminist

Poet moves on ignoring the past and future, the old and new, asking the question of the World, toward the End of the Subject's apprehension of it, interrupts the desperate reaction—of the questioned.

Along the way, my imagination finds inspiration in what has confused physicists thought the twentieth century—a reality they encountered through failure, as their instruments of (production of) knowledge failed to translate appropriately what they captured. Perhaps the best positive statement they have provided is the indistinction between matter-energy, which means that not necessarily (though some have read it this way) that matter has now been liberated from gravity (as Hegel said it was prisoner) and can move in the high spheres of form and spirit. What Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, Schrodinger's wave-function collapse, and Bell's non-locality tell us is that all these elements that form everything in the universe, the content of every body, everything solid, heavy, extended, to use the conventional descriptors, is constituted by something that cannot be described by the lexicon of physics (which are very much still the same Kant was considering when assembling his program); whatever can be said about what is happening to the object (particle) at the level—even the fact that it exists at all—can only be said after measurement, which raises the question of the possibility that it did not exist beforehand; and also whatever it is and not is, it is immediately and instantaneously tied to any other particle it has been in contact at any point before measurement, which basically with everything since all the particles in the universe have been around since the Big Bang, and were in very close contact immediately after it. There are several implications deriving from this description of everything. I have decided, as I said already a few times, to image this reality as "The Thing," that aspect of it Kant said should not interest knowledge, and which Hegel transformed in the content of Spirit.

Like it had done to many contemporary theoretical physicists, this track also takes me to Leibniz, from whom I gather elements for imaging the World without Space and Time—Pistolleto's *Canvas Infinita,* where instead of Hegel's bondsman, the *Subjectum* confront the dead (native and slave) as always already been part of the past, present, and future history of capital. Without the limiting of the Kantian and the Hegelian program—which hold human existence and the world hostages of a mode of knowing that cannot justify itself without Space-time, refigured as the conditions through which universal reason ensures the subject's distinction, it is possible to image history[35]—what has happened, what happens, and what has yet to become—without the separation and determination of efficient causality and its categories/forms.

After the End? Virtuality, Transusbstantiality, Transversability, and Traversability

Without the laws and forms of universal reason, and its formulations of Space and Time—that is, the figuring of the World as a Plenum inspires a description of the existence as marked by virtuality: matter imaged as contingency and possibility and rather

than necessity and determinacy.[36] African American science fiction writer Octavia Butler images in her novels characters whose existence is marked by the significance—the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual pains—of existing in bodies that have not delinked from the plenum. Female black bodies, however, whose existence is marked by the determinations of capital, raciality, and heteropatriarchy. Let me briefly comment on her characters—Dana of Kindred,[37] Anyanwu of Wild Seed,[38] Olamina of Parable of the Sower[39]—to give you an idea of the kinds of description that just become available if "The Thing" guides our imagination. In these and other of her novels, I find descriptors of virtuality—namely transubstantiality, transversality, and traversality—that signal the kind of imaging of the World announcing a Black Feminist Poethics. Such imaging emerges out of a materialist reading guided by "The Thing," Hegel's "indifferent, passive universality, the Also of the many properties or rather "matters"—[40] that is, something that which in everything does come before consciousness and its tools because it is no longer once it is apprehended in Space-time.

Each of her characters exists painfully aware of what the transiting between virtuality and reality (the world described by the tools of scientific reason) entails, as all three live in the world without the protections of Space-time, but with all its limitations. For Dana, virtuality allows her to travel to antebellum Maryland to save her white slave owner-ancestor. Through that she could live the life of a female slave (including beatings) and contemplate the contradictions of her own life in 1970s California. What she does is traverse the linear time, efficient causality imposes onto our connections of Time, the one that remains in the historical materialist categories, which prevent us from appreciating how slave labor and native lands live in capital. Not without a cost. For the fixities of Space-time take different figures, including the wall where her arms get stuck in her last return from the past, after having stabbed her ancestor/master when he tried to rape her. When near or in the sight of another person who is experiencing strong emotional or physical sensations, Lauren Olamina cannot but feel exactly what they feel. Now her empathy is such that there is no distinction between real or fake: If someone fakes their pain, she feels it; and if someone dies of a physical wound, she can die with them. For this kind of transversability—the at-once crossing of physical and emotional lines of separation, real and imagined—to be imaginable, one needs to contemplate at a level at which everything can become and that such becoming and not affects anything or anyone else. Not less painful is Anywanu's life, even if she has the ability to shape-shift into any other animal form as well as to heal hers and others' physical wounds. Her metamorphic abilities are more than a mere shift in form; it is one of substance through which she changes both form and content, as when returning to her own shape, or after curing someone, she holds in her flesh/body what/how the other person or animal also is.

All three descriptors, to be sure, could be applied to all three stories, as what they mark is precisely movements possible because of the connections that precede time and space, but which operate in time and space: transversability assumes the exis-

tence of lines that run parallel but which can be transversed by another line—which might as well be an indentation in the fabric Space-time—through which the "Play of Express" efflux; traversability, the moving back and forth to different points in time, assumes linear causality, the existence of different points in time, but does not obey its limitation, which is efficient causality, that is, the idea that an effect cannot precede a cause—Dana saves her ancestor's life when he was three and she was twenty-seven, and by saving his life then assured her own existence later; transubstantiality, finally, becomes a possibility as Anywanu breaks through the formal lines of space inscribed by our categories (of body, of species, of genus). Beyond transpassing these forms, her flesh also becomes what her body had changed in to or healed; such can only be imagined because in her flesh there is already a possibility that she might have existed or could as dolphin for instance.

Note that these descriptors are not meant to name or determine something, which would be nothing more than a rehearsal of the moves of the philosophers of universal reason, in its historical and scientific stages. They are guides for the imagination. When virtuality guides our imaging of political existence, then the only significant political demand is Reconstruction: the end of state-capital is the demand for the restoration of total value expropriated trough the violent appropriated of the productive capacity of native lands and slave labor. Forging Existence, without the separability imposed by the categories that name the task Barbara Christian describes, a Black Feminist Poethics—inspired by Octavia Butler's female characters—reads Blackness to expose the ruse of Reflection and Recognition, the yielding of the self-contained and coherent image of the Subject, which necessitates and lives off the translation of the historical effects of the colonial architectures that allowed the expropriation of the total value produced by native lands and slave labor (juridico-economic effect) into the mental (moral and intellectual) deficiencies (natural lack) signified by the Category of Blackness every time it is articulated to justify otherwise untenable deployments of racial violence.

Endnotes

I would like to thank Alex Weheliye for his comments and suggestions to earlier versions of this essay.

1. Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspective on Black Women Writers* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1985), pp. 9–10.

2. The Black Feminist Poethics is developed in Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Notes Towards the End of Time* (London: Living Commons, 2014).

3. Certain terms and phrases have been capitalized to place their accepted commonsense meanings under scrutiny. Further, throughout the text I use terms that may not be familiar to the reader, such as universal reason, Spirit, and *Subjectum,* but are part of the lexicon of modern philosophy and/or critiques of modern representation (including the one I advance in Silva [2007]) inspired by contemporary continental philosophy.

4. C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), p. 10.

5. Ibid., p. 12.

6. In all three, but in particular in the first volume of Marx's *Capital,* there are too many deploy-

ments of "slave labor" as a metaphor to capture the degree of exploitation on wage labor. This is a gesture that has many effects, including a de-authorization of any consideration of slave labor as another dimension of the capitalist. In addition to undermining the neat duality that captures the fundamental relation of production—capital versus wage labor—a consideration of the enslaved as labor would also require a departure from the statements of the science of man, which were contemporaneous with Marx's own. Much of the work here and in other texts is the move toward a Marxist critique of Marx's appropriation of slavery as a signifier of (a metaphor for) unfreedom.

7. Karl Marx, *Capital,* vol. 3 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), p. 809.

8. For articulations of slavery and property in critical race theory scholarship, see Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property," in Kimberle Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, and Keith Thomas, eds., *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement* (New York: New Press, 1995), pp. 276–291.

9. Note that the argument here is not that colonial expropriation has exhausted the creative capacity of lands and bodies but only their present and future capacity to produce and reproduce (as dead labor) surplus, that which is the soul and blood of capital. For creative capacity as registered in Black existence resists: as Black Study, it is rebel, with no end, plan, pause, or policy (Stefano Harney & Fred Moten [2013], *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study.* Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, p. 67). The significant move here is to distinguish between to modalities through which capital ensures its own survival, which are: (a) exploitation—appropriation of surplus value yielded by wage (contract) labor, which has been described by Marx and (b) expropriation—appropriation of the total value yielded by dominated (through total violence, that is, occupation of land and enslavement of person) labor.

10. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

11. Each of them retrieves in Blackness the possibility of considering the (White) Subject without Hegel's (Chandler), Kant's (Moten), and both (Weheliye) postulates that it is the only determinant (universal) and referent (particular) in signification. For the particular ways in which each of these authors deploys Blackness as a descriptor of a subject-in becoming from within against the Category of Blackness's apprehension of the "content" of Black Existence, see, respectively, Nahum Chandler, *Toward an African Future—Of the Limit of the World* (Living Commons, 2013); Frederick Moten, *In the Break* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), and Alexander G. Weheliye, *Phonographies* (Duke University Press, 2005).

12. See Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race,* 2007, specifically Part II, for definitions of strategy of particularization, strategy of intervention, strategy of engulfment. For a discussion of this radical potential, which is its being a referent to "The Thing": see Silva (2013).

13. For a detailed reading of the sociology of race relations see Silva (2007), especially Part 2.

14. For an introductory discussion of how value is expropriated of the symbolic labor of Category of Blackness, see Chakravartty & Ferreira da Silva (2013) *Accumulation, Dispossession, and Debt: The Racial Logic of Global Capitalism—An Introduction.* In Paula Chakravartty and Denise Ferreira da Silva (eds.) *Race, Empire, and the Crisis of the Subprime* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

15. The core of the distinction here is that productivity is a signifier of Quantity. For a discussion of Quantity and the other three categories of the understanding (Quality, Relation, and Modality). In Silva, *Notes Towards the End of Time* (2014), I elaborate this argument, which explores the differences between Leibniz's description of the universe as an infinite and contingent (see footnote

30), deeply interconnected assemblage of things, and Newton's description that apprehend the it as constituted by solid and moving things (bodies) subjected to the abstract rules (laws of motion).

16. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin, 1989).

17. Nahum D. Chandler, *Toward an African Future—of the Limit of the World* (London: Living Commons, 2013).

18. Alex Weheliye, *Phonographies,* p. 66.

19. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic. The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

20. Frederick Moten, *In the Break.*

21. Lindon Barrett, *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

22. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), p. 82.

23. Silva, *Notes Towards the End of Time* (2014).

24. Sylvia Wynter, "The Ceremony Must be Found: After Humanism," *boundary 2,* Vol. 12/13, Vol. 12, no. 3—Vol. 13, no. 1, *On Humanism and the University I: The Discourse of Humanism* (Spring–Autumn, 1984): 19–70, 22.

25. J. G. Herder, *Philosophical Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

26. See Nahum Chandler, "Of Exorbitance: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought," *Criticism 50,* no. 3 (2008): 345–410, 369.

27. Édouard Glissant, *Poetic Intention* (Callicoon, NY: Nightboat Books).

28. Denise Ferreira da Silva, "To Be Announced: Radical Praxis or Knowing (at) the Limits of Justice." *Social Text* 31 (Spring 2013): 1–114.

29. Here is the full quote: "Negroes are enslaved by Europeans and sold to America. Bad as this may be, their lot in their own lands is even worse, since there a slavery quite as absolute exists; for it is the essential principle of slavery, that man has not yet attained a consciousness of his freedom, and consequently sinks down to a mere Thing—an object of no value." G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (Kitchener, Ontario: Batoche Books, 2001), 113.

30. "For Leibniz, "everything is a plenum, which makes all matter interconnected":

> In a plenum every motion has some effect on distant bodies, in proportion to heir distance. For each body is affected, not only by those in contact with it, and in some way feels the effects of everything that happens to them, but also, through them, it feels the effects of those in contact with the bodies with which it is itself immediately in contact. From this it follows that this communication extends to any distance whatsoever. As a result, every body is affected by everything that happens in the universe, to such an extent that he who sees all can read in each thing what happens everywhere, and even what has happened or will happen, by observing in the present what is remote in time as well as in space.

G. W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989), p. 221.

31. In 1962, Pistoletto articulates this reading: "On the one hand the canvas, on the other the mirror, me in the middle. One eye looking at the canvas, the other at the mirror. Staring at the two objects intensely they gradually become superimposed. My mirror image transfers itself to the canvas while remaining in the mirror and the canvas transfers itself to the mirror, becoming one and the same thing" (http://www.macba.cat/en/architettura-dello-specchio-0659).

32. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics,* 17 (2), 1987: 67.

33. See, for instance, Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia,

2004) and Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989).

34. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," p. 67.

35. Imaging here has the sense proposed by Walter Benjamin's:

> It is not that what is past casts its lights on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what have been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, *image is dialectics at a standstill*. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been and the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural [*bildlich*]. Only dialectical images are genuine images—that is, not archaic—images. *The image that is read*—which is to say, the image in the now of its recognizability—*bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous moment on which all reading is founded*.

(Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* [Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 263, my emphasis).

36. This take on virtuality also draws from Giles Deleuze's description of the "plan of immanence," also inspired by Leibniz. See "The Actual and the Virtual," *Dialogues II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 149–150.

37. Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004).

38. Octavia Butler, *Wild Seed* (New York: Warner Books, 2001).

39. Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Warner Books, 2000).

40. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 69.