Bad Education

Why Queer Theory Teaches Us Nothing

Lee Edelman

Bad Education

A series edited
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For Joe,
Always

And in memory of Lauren Berlant,
my coeditor on Theory Q,
my collaborator on *Sex, or the Unbearable*,
and, above all, my beloved friend

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Contents:

We all love to instruct, though we can teach only what is not worth knowing.
—ELIZABETH BENNET in Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*

We place no trust in altruistic feeling, we who lay bare the aggressivity that underlies the activity of the philanthropist, the idealist, the pedagogue, and even the reformer.
—JACQUES LACAN, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience"

It is better to fail in teaching what should not be taught than to succeed in teaching what is not true.
—PAUL DE MAN, "The Resistance to Theory"

To impose the same "Evil Spirits" on the white man and on the black man is a major error in education. If one is willing to understand the "Evil Spirit" in the sense of an attempt to personify the *id*, the point of view will be understood.
—FRANTZ FANON, *Black Skin, White Masks*

Preface:

As I prepare to send this book off to press in the last week of June 2020, two recent events in the United States compel me to add this brief preface. That fact might seem surprising insofar as *Bad Education* argues for a structural understanding of queerness and not, like much current work in the field, a primarily historical or ethnographic one. Without minimizing the value of scholarship that traces the cultural, political, legal, medical, erotic, affective, and communal experiences of those whom contemporary discursive regimes increasingly describe as *queer*, this book, like my earlier work in queer theory, reads queerness in the context of Lacanian psychoanalysis and de Manian rhetorical theory. While revising those two conceptual frameworks through a sustained encounter with queerness, it also puts them in dialogue with recent theorists of Afropessimism who draw on, extend, or respond to those psychic and linguistic inflections of the social. Notwithstanding their many profound and consequential differences, these critical perspectives share a common approach to political and ethical questions that centers, mutatis mutandis, on the subject's Symbolic determination. To that extent, though never divorced from the pressures of current events, they conceive those events as effects of a structure that demands an account as rigorous as those that engage its local expressions. Each produces a distinctive take on the "human" as linguistically determined, but both affirm an indissoluble link between politics and ontology, where the latter, which interrogates the order of being, follows from the subject's linguistic formation and the former contests the ontology of the "human" to define and control a community.

Given this book's commitment to thinking queerness in such a context, how could contingent historical events have generated this preface? To answer that question, let me sketch those events and suggest their relation to each other. Insistently, through the early weeks of June, protesters, first in the United States and then around the world, took to the streets in anger over the killing of George Floyd, an African American man accused of passing a fraudulent $20 bill and murdered on May 25, 2020, while being taken into police custody. Despite his urgent calls for assistance (like so many Black Americans before him, his appeal—"I can't breathe"—was in vain), Floyd died of cardiopulmonary arrest induced by the force of a policeman's knee pressing into on his neck for an unendurable eight minutes and forty-six seconds, an act of brutality that continued not only after Floyd lost consciousness but also for almost a minute and a half after the paramedics arrived on the scene.[1] The depraved indifference of those who killed him rekindled already smoldering rage over the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, Philando Castile, Dominque Fells, Eric Garner, Balantine Mbegbu, Elijah McClain, Tony McDade, Riah Milton, Tamir Rice, Breonna Taylor, and hundreds upon thousands of other Black persons killed in acts of anti-Black violence either sponsored or tolerated by the state.

By mid-June, despite warnings against large-scale gatherings during the COVID-19 pandemic, the demonstrations, now stretching from coast to coast, had drawn crowds that were angry, diverse, and large, as well as largely peaceful. Responding to looting and property destruction on the fringes of the protests, however, government officials responded with force: the National Guard and law enforcement at the state and federal levels were mobilized to reassert control; President Donald Trump and Attorney General William Barr initiated and sanctioned violence against protesters gathered lawfully in Washington's Lafayette Park; and more than ten thousand protesters were arrested, while perhaps two dozen others were killed.

Amid all this, on June 15, the Supreme Court announced its decision in *Bostock v. Clayton County*. It determined, by a vote of six to three, that the Civil Rights Act of 1964, passed in response to earlier demonstrations against anti-Black terror and police brutality, made firing "an individual merely for being gay or transgender" unlawful because Title VII prohibits employers from discriminating on the basis of "sex."[2] Both the majority and the dissenting opinions invoked the "ordinary meaning" of *sex*: the former to assert that animus against lesbian, gay, and transgender individuals presupposes that certain "traits or actions" befit only a given sex, and the latter to claim a categorical difference between *sex* and *sexual orientation*.[3] Notwithstanding

Justice Samuel Alito's dissent, obtuse in its heterosexist gloss on dictionary definitions of *sex*, arguments about the meaning of that word did not determine the court's decision. The majority opinion asserted, instead, that however conservative one's definition of *sex* (and Alito's could hardly be more so: "the division of living things into two groups, male and female, based on biology"), discrimination on the basis of transgender status or sexual orientation necessarily rests on normative expectations about how sex should be expressed.[4] As such, it violates Title VII's prohibition on using gender stereotypes to discriminate in employment as determined by the court's decision in *Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins* (1989).

Articulating a widely held sentiment about this victory for gay rights, an analysis in the *New York Times* declared, "In many ways, the decision is the strongest evidence yet of how fundamentally, rapidly and, to some degree, unpredictably American views about gay and transgender people have changed across the ideological spectrum in less than 20 years."[5] Reinforcing this narrative of progress, the authors describe the decision as "the latest in a swift series of legal and political advances for gay Americans after several decades where gains came in fits and starts after the uprising at the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village helped usher in the modern gay rights movement."[6] Seventy years after the Mattachine Society was established to counter state-enforced animus against so-called sexual deviants; fifty-nine years after the Supreme Court refused Frank Kameny's request for certiorari after his firing by the Army Map Service on the basis of his homosexuality; fifty-six years after the Civil Rights Act was signed into law by Lyndon Johnson; and fifty-one years after the Stonewall rioters rose up against police abuse, the extension of employment discrimination protections to lesbians, gay men, and transsexuals could be greeted as proof of a "fundamental" change in America's social attitudes. At the same moment, however, and providing a different take on the linear progress of "change," Black Americans, more than half a century *after* they had won those same legal rights, were pushing the country, yet again, to confront its anti-Blackness.

In fact, the most "fundamental" change apparent in the wake of George Floyd's death has been the growth in the number of non-Black Americans beginning to see anti-Blackness as inherent in systems, not just individuals, including in the US political, legal, penal, and educational systems. The concept of structural racism has entered the popular conversation, but without any clear consensus on the nature of the structure to which it refers. A vast distance, for example, separates the "structured racism" articulated by Bobby Seale and other activists in the 1960s and 1970s from the discussions of

structural racism by theorists like Frank B. Wilderson III today. For those in the tradition of Black liberation, the "structure" in "structured racism" refers to control of the various institutions through which political power operates. Not only is Black liberation possible by changing who controls those institutions, but so, too, is multiracial cooperation in an anticapitalist context. In a 1988 interview, Seale reflects on that hope as expressed in the sometime alliance between the Black Panther Party and young, white opponents of the Vietnam War:

> The young Whites who did really get out in the streets demonstrated against structured racism. We saw that as a resource. . . . [A]nother aspect of our analysis was that we're talking about power to the people. We made a new analysis of what nationalism was about, Black nationalism. That, whatever Black unity we had, it was really a sort of a catalyst to help humanize the world and we were that catalyst here in Afro-America or Africa, that's what it was about. And that the world was composed of more than just Black folks, you know. So, the coalition aspect to us being what one defined as a minority United States of America, if the White community showed some split, then we should side with that aspect of the group that seemed to be or would act as friends to us.[7]

As remote from Seale's politics as it is from his moment, Ibram X. Kendi's *How to Be an Antiracist* shares, nonetheless, his liberationist hope. Kendi writes that while he "still occasionally use[s] the terms 'institutional racism' and 'systemic racism' and 'structural racism,'" he prefers "the term 'institutionally racist policies'" because he sees it as "more concrete."[8] Even more important than its concreteness, though, the phrase holds on to the possibility of "humaniz[ing] the world," as Seale expressed it, since policies are, by definition, more malleable than structures. This faith, which derives from what Kendi calls "our underlying humanity," constitutes the core of his argument: "We must believe. Believe all is not lost for you and me and our society. Believe in the possibility that we can strive to be antiracist from this day forward. Believe in the possibility that we can transform our societies to be antiracist from this day forward. Racist power is not godly. Racist policies are not indestructible. Racial inequities are not inevitable. Racist ideas are not natural to the human mind."[9] For those who might question this attachment to the "human" and its openness to transformation, Kendi has this to say: "The conviction that racist policymakers can be overtaken, and racist policies can be changed, and the racist minds of their victims can be changed, is disputed

only by those invested in preserving racist policymakers, policies, and habits of thinking."[10]

Nothing could be further from the theoretical argument that Wilderson presents. Emphasizing an insight central to Afropessimist thought as a whole, he declares, "*Blacks are not Human subjects, but are structurally inert props, implements for the execution of White and non-Black fantasies and sado-masochistic pleasures*."[11] By recognizing Blackness as external to the ontological framework of the human, Wilderson, building on earlier work by theorists like Ronald Judy, can identify anti-Blackness as inherent in the constitution of (human) being. It follows from this that politics can never escape the anti-Blackness that structures the human in the first place. Both Seale and Kendi, like Angela Davis, push discussions of racism beyond the trap of intentionality and individual guilt, leading to difficult questions about structural determination that remind us, in Davis's words, that "if we don't take seriously the ways in which racism is embedded in structures of institutions, if we assume that there must be an identifiable racist . . . who is the perpetrator, then we won't ever succeed in eradicating racism."[12] But in doing so they also insist that those structures, because they manifest themselves in human institutions, are therefore subject to change *by humans*. For Wilderson and others constructing the intellectual framework of Afropessimism, that very embeddedness in the human makes structural change impossible. Thus, Wilderson rejects the prospect of "coherent liberation campaigns" for Black subjects; Afropessimism, he writes, "describe[s] a structural problem but offer[s] no structural solution."[13] From within the precepts of Afropessimism such a solution cannot exist.

The meaning of *structure* has shifted here from the contingent power to shape and control particular institutions to an ontological imperative bound up with social organization as such. That imperative, as *Bad Education* maintains, grounds being in being meaningful, in conforming to the logic of thinkability that organizes human community. As the introduction argues by attending closely to a passage from *L'Étourdit*, the Symbolic's ontology arises, according to the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, through the exclusion of what he calls *ab-sens*, the nonrelation to meaning. Only this enabling subtraction of what, in itself, is subtracted from sense (even before there is a sense from which it could be subtracted), only this negation of a primal negativity, allows the ontology of the human through the language that differentiates culture from nature. To the extent that ab-sens, according to Lacan, is also what "designates . . . sex," its ontology-producing exclusion

makes sex external to meaning and being, simultaneously incomprehensible and ontologically impossible.[14] Unlike the sex whose definition Justice Alito can blithely cite, sex for Lacan pertains to the Real, to the beyond of signification where definition does not obtain.

As discussed in *Bad Education*, then, the sex that ab-sens would designate, a priori absented from being, gives way to sex as the difference that governs the Symbolic as *sens-absexe*, Lacan's term for the ontological order linking sexual difference to meaning. Sens-absexe permits signification precisely by absenting sex as ab-sens. It creates, with that negative gesture, the world that swells into being through words. Because sex as ab-sens is exorbitant to the logic of difference and meaning, however, it can have no name of its own. Only through catachresis can it indicate the state of nondifferentiation made unthinkable by sens-absexe, which consigns it to the void of nonbeing that enables being to be. To that extent, the sex foreclosed with the subtraction of ab-sens coincides with incest in psychoanalysis, where incest is seen as impossible either to cognize or to enact, constituting as it does, in Lacanian terms, the impossible Real of sex. Inconceivable in its radical nondifferentiation, incest figures, like sex and ab-sens, the exclusion that structures the Symbolic (as the order of language, ontology, and the human) and permits it to function as the reality procured by sens-absexe.

With this we may seem to have wandered far from the murder of George Floyd, but *Bad Education* argues, to the contrary, that this is the immutable structure to which "structural racism" finally refers. While acknowledging historical differences in lived experience, socioeconomic mobility, degree of precarity, access to power, and positioning in the cultural imaginary among those read as Black, queer, woman, trans*, or any other category of social (non)"being" collectively delegitimated as other than human, this book maintains that the stigma attached to such posited identities corresponds to their inflection (in particular communities and at particular historical moments) as embodiments of a negativity inassimilable to being, reflecting their figural status as personifications of ab-sens or of sex in its Lacanian (non)sense.

This claim may appear to privilege sex over other conceptual frameworks, like race, but only insofar as one confuses sex with the literalizations that (mis)represent it. *Sex*, in this context, does not refer to a conceptual formation at all but instead to what conceptual formation necessarily excludes. Lacan, to be sure, invites this confusion by naming as sex the nondifferentiation he attributes to ab-sens. But the movement from sex as negativity, as the nonbeing associated with the Real, to sex as the sexual difference on which the Symbolic seems to rest conforms to the logic of fantasy so rigorously theorized

in Lacanian thought—a logic that attempts to make sex make sense, to positivize its negativity, through the promise of sexual relation. Put otherwise: sexual difference, sexual relation, and the primal prohibition of incest make sex as ab-sens impossible, compelling it always to "mean" in the terms prescribed by sens-absexe. Those terms efface sex as the negativity of the primal nondifferentiation negated and replaced by sexual meaningfulness, which is what sexual difference "means": the libidinized constitution of the subject through difference that libidinizes difference as such, making difference always sexual and sexual difference the Symbolic's mandate that difference both "be" and be known.[15] We come, that is, to be beings through language, which extracts us from ab-sens while making ab-sens inconceivable in the topology of sens-absexe. Sex as determined by ab-sens, therefore, though catachrestically naming *non*being, will seem to signify, nonetheless, the ontological order that *means* and that thereby makes sex as ab-sens unthinkable. Though referring to the nondifferentiation pertaining to incest and ab-sens alike, the psychoanalytic notion of sex, as understood by Lacan, will always be confused with sex as the name for what, in fact, absents it: the differential structure of positive differences.

But sex is far from singular as a catachresis of nonbeing. This book insists on the myriad names by which sex as ab-sens can go, including, but never limited to, *queerness*, *Blackness*, *woman*, and *trans**. Like *sex*, these terms never wholly escape their connections to the substantive identities that appear to flesh them out: *the* queer, *the* Black, *the* woman, *the* trans person, *the* genderqueer individual. But they exceed these literalizations to name, or misname, that which "is" not. As the introduction explains more fully, there are two main reasons this book elaborates ab-sens through the figure of queerness . The first is its relatively loose association with any specific identity. Primarily applied to something perceived as "strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric," according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *queer* can refer to anything that thwarts, contradicts, or departs from a norm.[16] Even where its fluidity of reference, its resistance to taxonomic specificity, allows it to serve as a general rubric for nonnormative sexualities, *queer* so relentlessly challenges the boundaries of sexuality and normativity that no one can ever definitively succeed in escaping its connotative reach. Similarly, no one can fully secure it as a proper identity, either, insofar as it signifies diacritically in relation to a norm. What gets taunted as queer in a high school gym class in rural Louisiana may well look heteronormative at an academic conference in New York. By rejecting the positivity of *queerness*, or the prospect of owning it as an identity, I keep faith with its lexical history and its various social applications, something

less easily argued, perhaps, when prioritizing Blackness or woman, for example, as catachreses of ab-sens. But this book does not shrink from that latter claim; to the contrary, it gratefully acknowledges the feminist, Black, and non-Black scholars whose theoretical boldness sustains it. But given the entanglement of Blackness and woman with histories and identities more clearly defined (to others and themselves alike) than queerness, with its *determining indetermination*, I make my argument about sex and ab-sens by way of it instead. I am mindful of the political value, or strategic necessity, of affirming the specificity of delegitimated identities and of privileging their uniqueness. But the uniqueness of the histories those identities bespeak, and the differences in how they have functioned as embodiments of negativity, does not contradict their shared positioning precisely *as* such embodiments.

This leads to the second main reason for my choice. Queerness, even when transvalued by those who assume it as an identity, implies a disturbance of order, a nonconformity to prevailing logic or law, a glitch in the function of meaning. It retains the pejorative force it confers when it nominates something unusual or out of place: something not meant to appear where it does or not legible in its appearance. The negative associations of queerness speak to the subject's investment in the system of differences that called it into being in the first place and its intolerance of anything that puts its investment in the stability of those differences at risk. Our constitution through the language of sens-absexe conscripts our thought—our conscious thought—to that differential logic and commits us to its preservation in and as that thought. By fracturing the ontological consistency of what "is," queerness refutes the education in being—an inherently *aesthetic* education—that totalizes the empire of sens-absexe as a comprehensive and comprehensible unity. It insists on the outside of signification that make sens-absexe not all. Whatever asserts that incompletion by representing or embodying ab-sens, whatever appears to instantiate queerness in a given order by doing so, will be charged with promoting a bad education: one inimical to the survival and transmission of meaning required by what this book will call the pedag-archival imperative.

Despite the claims advanced in support of liberationist pedagogies, education is inherently conservative. Even in countering a dominant narrative or advancing a progressive position, it enshrines, preserves, and passes on a construction of "what is." Above all, it conjures the subject as an archive of sens-absexe. Whatever the content of an education, the pedag-archival law affirms the ontology of difference, ceaselessly imposing the conjoined imperatives

of knowing, meaning, and being. For just that reason, as this book shows, queerness *teaches us nothing* in two distinct senses of that phrase.

On the one hand, queerness adverts us to what ontology leaves out, if only by figuring—*within that ontology*—what that ontology excludes. It confronts us with a representation of what the Symbolic *posits* as nothing, as external to being or sense, lest ab-sens as the absence of differentiation make ontology nothing itself. The events that prompted this preface respond to an anxiety about human ontology induced by those figures whose presence insists that the world as it "is" is not all. After the Supreme Court announced its ruling in the case of *Bostock v. Clayton County*, for example, Archbishop José H. Gomez of Los Angeles, the president of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, lamented that the court, by altering "the legal meaning of 'sex' in our nation's civil rights law," was "redefining human nature." It did so, as he saw it, "by erasing the beautiful differences and complementary relationship between man and woman," which is to say, by undoing the sexual difference that absents ab-sens to establish meaning and, in the process, "human" being.[17] Similarly, in the wake of George Floyd's murder, when municipalities across the country authorized murals and street art meant to affirm that "Black Lives Matter," white Americans in places as heterogeneous as New York, Cincinnati, and Fresno defaced or attempted to deface them, often justifying their acts, when caught, with the counterclaim that "*all* lives matter."[18] For them, the "mattering" of Blackness seemed to violate "human nature"; they could register ontological totality only through the (literal) erasure of Blackness. Like queerness, that is, the Blackness that asserts a claim to human mattering can never enter the "all" that comes into being by excluding it. That explains why Calvin Warren, with whose thought my own work resonates, notwithstanding our serious differences, can write that "#Blacklivesmatter is *only* factual if it can reunite black life with a *valuable form*, a valuation determined by political calculus. But what if reuniting black life and form is impossible? What if blackness is always already dead, the 'perfection of death' as David Marriott would call it, so black life-form is but a fantasy? Can we think of blackness as incontrovertibly formless?"[19]

If my claim that queerness teaches us nothing gestures toward such a formlessness, toward the nondifferentiation that *incest*, *sex*, and *ab-sens* attempt to name, then it also acknowledges that queerness can teach us nothing of the sort. The same necessity that condemns us to designate the Real, the beyond of signification, only in catachrestic terms compels us to think nondifferentiation through the Symbolic logic of difference and merely to

imagine that we can imagine the nothing that is foreclosed as such from thought. *Bad Education* takes seriously the structural limit of language on thought, a limit that keeps us from thinking nothing, and so from thinking queerness—or, for that matter, Blackness, woman, trans*, incest, "sex," or any of the catachreses of ab-sens—*except* as posited and positivized in those made to embody nothing. To that extent, the beyond of meaning that these catachreses nominate functions in relation to the subject as irony functions in relation to language, undoing the legibility that is responsible for its production and evading every effort either to pin it down or to know it. Queerness can no more *present* us with nothing than the order of meaning can escape it.

By seeking to specify the consequences of that structural inevitability, *Bad Education* questions the recuperative possibility of progressive politics, including the progressive politics that represents itself as queer. By addressing the logic of exclusion inherent in Symbolic organization and the dependence of that organization on literalizations of figural identities, this book shows how queerness, in its status as a catachresis of ab-sens, exerts an ironic force incompatible with the aesthetic idealism that marks progressivism. A central strand of my argument poses such politics, and its philosophical underpinnings, from Plato to Alain Badiou, against the Lacanian psychoanalysis that insists on what politics, like philosophy, can never accommodate: the division of the subject, the Real of enjoyment, the insistence of the drive. These registers of negativity, as *Bad Education* suggests, correspond to the irony that interrupts every totalization of sense and that requires the designation of authorized readers—judges and courts among them—to assert the particular meaning of laws within a general law of meaning. Such readings, as in *Bostock v. Clayton County*, sublimate linguistic indeterminacy by *positing* the meanings they claim to discover—meanings they discover only by nullifying whatever contradicts them.

Thus, queerness, Blackness, woman, trans*, as catachreses of what "is" not, must ironize *Bostock v. Clayton County* as well as both of these formulations: "Black lives matter" and "All lives matter." Despite the "Q" included in the headline that appeared in the *New York Times*—"A Half-Century On, an Unexpected Milestone for L.G.B.T.Q. Rights"—*Bostock v. Clayton County* did not and could not advance "queer" rights. In extending employment protections to persons who are "homosexual or transgender," it merely continued the juridical dissociation of those categories from queerness. As the murder of George Floyd reminds us, though, juridical recognition does not put an end to the communal construction of abjected identities made to literalize nonbeing. In the same way that *Bostock v. Clayton County* said

nothing about a right to queerness (whatever that would mean) but could only contribute to the normalization of "homosexual or transgender" persons, so too can "Black lives matter" only be "factual," to borrow Warren's term, by divorcing Black lives from Blackness. In the context of progressive politics, the Black Lives Matter movement exposes how the "human" leaves Black lives out of its count. But it does so precisely to press a claim for inclusion in that count, for comprehension within the all, and so for the realization of what "All lives matter" (only) promises.

"Black lives matter" rightly mobilizes us in our current social reality, but it does so, and this is implicit in Warren's assertion as well, by reinforcing the ontological illusion of reality's comprehensiveness, by perpetuating its unsustainable claim to totalize what "is." No political transformation can alter or reduce the ontological violence in every word of "All lives matter." There can be no "all" without the "not all" inaccessible to thought; no life, no mode of being, without the nonbeing posed against it; and no mattering without the foreclosure of ab-sens, of what the order of meaning casts out. Wherever lives matter—and assuring that mattering is the matter of education—queerness, Blackness, woman, and trans* are always already excluded. And where Black lives, queer lives, women's lives, or trans* lives achieve legitimation, they will have ceased to signify in terms of queerness, Blackness, woman, or trans*. The events of this June exemplify the imperative of affording the shelter of meaningful being to those living negated identities. But they also remind us that meaningful being occasions those negations in the first place. That is the structural lesson that *Bad Education* attempts to unfold: the lesson that, *as* lesson, can only ironize what it teaches.[20]

—Brookline, MA, June 2020

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Introduction: Nothing Ventured:

Psychoanalysis, Queer Theory, and Afropessimism

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *to educate* means, in its earliest sense, "to bring up (a child) so as to form his or her manners, behaviour, social and moral practices." Only later does it signify "to teach (a child) a programme of various academic and non-academic subjects, typically at a school; to provide with a formal education. Also: to provide (an adult) with instruction, esp. in a chosen subject or subjects at a college, university, or other institution of higher education."[1] By twice referring to it within parentheses, these definitions remind us that *the child* is the exemplary object of education, lending even adults engaged in "formal" or "higher" education an implicit association with something that is not—or not yet fully—formed. Such formation (*formation* in French names a program of educational training or development) seeks to "elevate" the child, to bring it up, to raise it from animal existence to human subjectivity by bringing it into conformity with the logic of a given world. Jacques Lacan describes this process as "l'apprentissage humain," thus identifying it both as human learning and as learning to be a human.[2] Education reproduces, it passes on, the world of human sense by turning those lacking speech—*infans*—into subjects of the law. It inculcates not only concepts and values but also the language by which sensory impressions—otherwise fleeting, discontinuous, chaotic—congeal into a universe of entities that are formalized through names.

Building on the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, who focused on the basic or elementary structures affecting human relations, Lacan asserts from early on the key to a recognizable human order: "that the symbolic function intervenes at every moment

and in every aspect of its existence."[3] This Symbolic function, with its constitution of a signifying order, produces the subject within a world that appears accessible to comprehension.[4] Lacan insists on this point: "If the human subject didn't name things—as Genesis says was done in the earthly Paradise, with the major species first—if it didn't come to an agreement on this mode of recognition, no world of the human subject's, not even a perceptual one, would be sustainable for more than an instant."[5] Even the Lacanian Imaginary, then, though characterized by our attachment to images that afford a first glimpse of coherence and unity, relies on the Symbolic to imbue its perceptions with stability and duration. The shaping, survival, and transmission of a world thus depend on an education that brings us into being as human subjects by bringing us into, then bringing us up in, the order of the Symbolic.

The language that produces the subject within this order of signification, however, also installs an absence at that order's very core.[6] When Jean Hyppolite, attending one of Lacan's seminars, responded to the latter's account of the Symbolic by asserting, "We can't do without it, and at the same time we can't situate ourselves within it" (nous ne pouvons pas nous en passer, et toutefois nous ne pouvons pas non plus nous y installer), Lacan immediately agreed: "Yes, of course, naturally. It's the presence in absence and the absence in presence" (Oui bien sûr, naturellement. C'est la présence dans l'absence et l'absence dans la présence).[7] By embedding us in a reality given shape and persistence by Symbolic articulation, by names that impose relational systems on inconsistent Imaginary perceptions, language also enables us to generate the notion of something that escapes it, something that remains definitionally exterior to systems of meaning or signification. Alenka Zupančič puts this well: "Within reality as it is constituted via what Lacan calls the Imaginary and the Symbolic mechanisms, there is a 'place of the lack of the Image,' which is symbolically designated as such. That is to say that the very mechanism of representation posits its own limits and designates a certain beyond which it refers to as 'unrepresentable.'"[8] Only the Symbolic organization of a world allows something to be missing from it; only Symbolic reality creates the place for the lack of the Image, or for the thought of an absence in the system, and so for an encounter with the unnameable that Lacan names, nonetheless, as the Real. By producing the machinery for "symbolically designat[ing]" what escapes Symbolic designation, for conceptualizing, in other words, the place of something incompatible with the logic of meaning, the Symbolic allows for the thought of "nothing," of what possesses no being in the world, while making that nothing impossible to think

except in the form of "something." Education intends precisely that: the foreclosure of the nothing the Symbolic calls forth as its excess or remainder—a foreclosure that effectively makes something of nothing, reproducing the world as sense, while, correlatively, imposing on certain persons the burden of figuring nothing.

But what if education in its second moment, the one that the both the *Oxford English Dictionary* and common usage describe as "higher," insisted on the nothing, on the exclusion, that threatens to derealize the world? Could such an education resist the imperative of affirmation and reproduction? Could it think the insistence of nothing without attempting to redeem it? Philosophical engagements with the zero or the void, psychoanalytic accounts of the force of the Real, and political analyses of the social structures dooming certain lives to nonbeing: all have entered the curricula of the contemporary Western academy. Woman as ontological impossibility, for example, shapes the work of such prominent feminists as Luce Irigaray ("The question 'what is . . . ?' is the question—the metaphysical question—to which the feminine does not allow itself to submit"), Julia Kristeva ("On a deeper level, however, a woman cannot 'be'; it is something which does not even belong to the category of being"), and Catherine Malabou ("This assimilation of 'woman' to 'being nothing' perhaps opens a new path that goes beyond both essentialism and anti-essentialism"). Similarly, the antithesis of Blackness and being has shaped the thought (from Frantz Fanon forward) of many Black intellectuals, including Sylvia Wynter ("Blacks . . . have been socialized to experience ourselves in . . . negative being"), Jared Sexton ("Black lives matter, not in or to the present order of knowledge that determines human being, but only ever against it, outside the limits of the law"), and Fred Moten ("Blackness is prior to ontology . . . it is ontology's anti- and ante-foundation").[9] Meditations on the function of the void or the null set in the presentation of being, moreover, play crucial roles in my own work as well as in that of philosophers and critics such as Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Slavoj Žižek, and Alain Badiou.

Yet even as deconstructive, feminist, psychoanalytic, queer, and race-centered theories have entered the university, they've engendered violently negative reactions to their institutionalization, fueling the ongoing culture wars in the United States and abroad.[10] By addressing nothing's (non)place in any constituted order of thought, and thereby seeming to disturb metaphysics and social value alike, these, like the fields that house them (most often the humanities and social sciences), find themselves reduced by their opponents to the figural status of the nothing they engage. Excoriated for

debasing reality and truth (a charge leveled by the right-wing Norwegian mass murderer Anders Behring Breivik as well as by the "liberal" American cultural journalist Michiko Kakutani), these discourses refuse the normative paradigm of education as world transmission—as the preservation, mutatis mutandis, of reality as it "is."[11] They focus, instead, on what thought and education register as the unthinkable, as foreign to logic or sense. They promulgate a "bad education" by attesting to what Slavoj Žižek calls, in the course of a reading of Immanuel Kant, "the ontological incompleteness of reality itself."[12]

Lacan attributes that incompleteness to the Symbolic formation of the subject and the structure of the unconscious. In Seminar XI he remarks that "discontinuity . . . is the essential form in which the unconscious appears to us" and then wonders whether the "absolute, inaugural character" of that discontinuity can manifest itself only against "the background of a totality."[13] "Is the *one* anterior to discontinuity?" he asks; is there a unity, in other words, before the negativity that introduces the division, the "discontinuity" that characterizes the unconscious? He follows with this response: "I do not think so, and everything I have taught in recent years has tended to exclude the need for this closed *one*. . . . You will grant me that the *one* that is introduced by the unconscious is the *one* of the split, of the stroke, of rupture."[14] This inaugural rupture, prior to the "being" of the "one" that it would split, presupposes for Lacan no unified "background," no whole that precedes its division. He thus argues that "the first emergence of the unconscious . . . does not lend itself to ontology."[15] Indeed, the unconscious, as he puts it, "is neither being nor non-being" precisely because "what is ontic in [its] function . . . is the split."[16] That split, which makes possible all that appears, can never appear "in itself"; it possesses no "in itself" *to* appear but produces the appearance of the "in itself" through its primal division or negativity. Escaping containment by the either-or logic of "to be, or not to be," it opens an absence that Lacan rewrites as "ab-sens" in *L'Étourdit*. As the absenting of meaning from being, as the insistence of what can never be counted as part of any world, ab-sens has no place in the order of sense that assumes "the background of a totality" wherein being and meaning both depend on each other and prop each other up.[17]

Whatever disrupts that interdependence undoes, along with the world as we know it, the very *possibility* of a world by undoing the totalizing comprehension, the "closed *one*" that a world implies. But this occasions a seeming contradiction: construing the world as unknowable *still* gives the world a knowable shape; the predicate adjective affirms the world in our "knowing" it *as* unknowable. This torsion inheres in any attempt to sidestep the fusion

of world and sense and results in the problem that this book discusses as inseparable from "bad education." If the world induces a pedagogy that excludes what subtracts itself from sense—that excludes, therefore, what its structuring *as* a world makes unthinkable—then what sort of teaching could broach ab-sens, the negativity of subtraction, without recurring to the logic of sense and affirming a world once more? What education could ever break from the reproduction of meaning by which the world appears as self-evident and self-evidence appears as truth?

The very effort to think ab-sens, to conceive it as something outside the binary couple of sense and non-sense (where non-sense is always already trapped in the gravitational field of sense), denies its negativity so it can enter the house of sense, though that house that can never be its home. Lodged therein, it functions like any other signifier in the marketplace of meaning despite the fact that it gestures toward what that marketplace excludes. And the same thing happens to the ontological negations implicit in "woman" or in "Blackness." Despite their figural capacity to signal what being and meaning foreclose, both get substantialized as catachrestic names for identities shaped by and legible within the logics of being and meaning. The same necessity inheres in "queerness," which oscillates between its contemporary reference to nonnormative sexualities, sexual acts, or sexual identities and a nonidentitarian reference to any person or thing delegitimated for its association with nonnormativity.[18] All of these terms, and countless others, stand in for a violent break with the governing constructs of a world, a break with its (onto)logic. To that extent we might think of these terms as "nonsynonymous substitutions," the phrase by which Derrida describes the multiple figures to which différance gives rise.[19] Each attempts, like différance, to signal the intolerable rupture, the primal negativity, that permits the "being" of entities only through the cut of differentiation. But each, at the same time, sutures that break by figuring it in the form of an entity conjured *in order to be excluded*. If the knowledge value these terms accrue as names for social positions reinforces the order of sense, the terms themselves are placeholders for what has no place in that order at all: the ab-sens we encounter unawares and always at our own risk.

Such encounters take shape as obtrusions of the Real, temporary breaches in the structure of reality that flood the subject with anxiety.[20] No teaching could ever master this eruption or allow us to comprehend this Real; comprehension, after all, as the word makes clear, conflates the constitutive seizure, containment, or enclosure of a world with an act of understanding, of intellectual domination, that wrests it into shape. Comprehension affirms the

enclosure of a world to preclude the threat of ab-sens. The Real—necessarily divided between its status as a concept permitted by language (the concept of something inaccessible to language) and its status as a psychic encounter that undoes conceptual thought (by confronting the subject with the beyond of language that it literally *cannot* conceive)—provokes both the defensive fantasy of intellectual comprehension (which lets us produce a theory of the Real as a subset of theory in general) and the anxiety that voids comprehension, incompletes the world, and makes one "not-all." The ab-sens inseparable from the Real, therefore, partakes of the negativity associated by Guy Le Gaufey with the Lacanian *objet a*, especially in "its incapacity to receive any imposition of unity whatsoever, something in itself heavy with consequences for its being, if only from a Leibnizian point of view where every single being is, in the first place, a *single* being [*one* being]."[21] Ab-sens makes impossible both the oneness of being and the oneness of *any* being by incising in every entity the cut of a subtraction. With castration, primal repression, and the Lacanian formulae of sexuation lurking in the background as figures for this cut that frames being as always not-all, ab-sens leads us back to the confluence of sex and the unbearable, the terms with which Lauren Berlant and I broached negativity and relationality.[22] If embodiments determined by such categories as woman, Blackness, and queerness (among others) threaten to derealize a given order by exposing it as not-all, that not-all is always implicated in the Lacanian interpretation of sex, where *sex*, as in Lacan's well-known formula, "there is no sexual relation," names the radical negativity, the gap, that makes Symbolic comprehension impossible: the site where sex coincides with the primal subtraction of ab-sens.[23]

Lacan takes up this convergence in a crucial passage in *L'Étourdit*: "Freud puts us on the path of that which ab-sens designates as sex; it's through the swelling up [*à la gonfle*: that is, through the inflation or inspiration] of this sens-absexe that a topology spreads out where the word is determining."[24] At the heart of psychoanalysis, then, Lacan situates the entanglement of sex, as it is designated by ab-sens, with the words whose meanings (*sens*) yield worlds through what he refers to as *sens-absexe*. What sense can we make of this sens-absexe? How does the echo of *ab-sens* in *absexe* affect its signification? And why is the topology it unfolds associated with afflatus, inspiration, or engorging (*gonfler*)? By connecting *sens* (sense, meaning, direction) with the portmanteau term *absexe*, *sens-absexe* reaffirms the *sens* that was subtracted by the *ab* of *ab-sens*. It does so, however, only by putting *sex* in the place of subtraction (the place determined by *ab*): sex, that is, as complicit with and designated by *ab-sens*; sex as the pure negativity that enables meaning

but has none. With that act of designation (where to designate—*désigne*—already bears the signifier of signification, *signe*, within it), *ab-sens* posits sex as subtracted (*ab*) from the register of meaning (*sens*) at the very moment of inserting it into the signifying chain (by virtue of "designating" it).[25] Sex, understood as the positive difference between male and female beings, thus positivizes the negativity of ab-sens by positing "complementary" identities. So construed, sex nurtures fantasies of wholeness, union, and repair, but it possesses no positivity for Lacan, no sense before the subtraction from sense that constitutes ab-sens, no meaning and no existence from which sense has subsequently been withdrawn. The absenting of sense is originary and prior to sense as such; sex as designated by *ab-sens* quite simply "is" this primal subtraction, this inherent exclusion from being or meaning that libidinizes the mastery implicit in comprehending an order of things. Ab-sens as subtraction, excision, or cut makes possible the *designation* of sex by condensing the division or negativity sex "is" in Lacanian theory with the division that "is" articulation; such designation, however, dooms sex as ab-sens to the realm of the unthinkable at the very moment of making what we think of as sex accessible to thought.

The excluded negativity of ab-sens (as the cut that precedes, determines, and divides "the closed *one*") swells, through this designation of sex, into the topology of sens-absexe, the order of meaning generated by subtracting ab-sens from the sex that it designates. Once designated, that is, sex hardens into a positive identity and vanishes *as* ab-sens; it suffers, one might say, a subtraction from itself once situated in the topological field where, Lacan notes, "the word is determining" (c'est le mot qui tranche). Though "determining" can adequately translate *qui tranche*, a phrase that indicates the authority to decide or determine a situation's outcome, *qui tranche* refers literally to something that cuts or divides. *Sens-absexe* may operate with reference to a swelling up or engorgement (*la gonfle*), recalling the Lacanian phallus's *Aufhebung* when raised to its privileged position as signifier of the Symbolic order of meaning (sens), but it disseminates a topology wherein only the meaningless priority of the cut lets an entity appear as "itself." This cut, like the cut of castration, is what the phallus would positivize or flesh out. Indeed, the cut, one might say, *is* the phallus before its sublation swells out the world with meaning by cutting out or excising sex as ab-sens, as the absence of sense.

Alenka Zupančič reminds us that "the sexual in psychoanalysis is something very different from the sense-making combinatory game—it is precisely something that disrupts the latter and makes it impossible."[26] Sex, in other

words, neither conforms to nor underwrites any "sense-making" logic; it registers the ab-sens in being and meaning that follows from Symbolic articulation, and it speaks to an irreducible gap in the signifier/signified relation, a failure of either fully to seize or to comprehend the other. That's why Ellie Ragland can write, "The real . . . is what gives birth to contingency. . . . Indeed, the real appears in language as that which puts it askew, makes it awkward, uncanny. One could describe the presence of the real as the palpability of the unbearable."[27] The impossibility that Lacan refers to by announcing that "there is no sexual relation" corresponds to this Real that "puts [language] askew" and arises (from within the order of the Symbolic) as the ab-sens that the Symbolic can only *think* by turning it into sense.[28]

As Lacan explains in *L'Étourdit*, the *statement* of sexual relation takes the place of that relation itself, and the "two" sexes figure the will-to-meaning by which language calls forth worlds. "It's starting from there," he writes, referring to the fact that humans reproduce themselves first and foremost through speech, "that we have to obtain two universals, two 'alls' sufficiently consistent to separate out among speaking beings, . . . two halves such that they won't get too confused in the midst of intercourse or co-iteration when they get around to it."[29] Shaped by this fantasy of complementarity and its promise of totalization, sexual difference divides human beings into "two halves" or "two universals" (thereby naturalizing "male" and "female"). It thus disavows the Real of ab-sens, the meaningless division that this "difference" fills out with the meaningfulness of sex.[30] Kenneth Reinhard makes this point forcefully: "Lacan's argument . . . is not that there are men and women (but they don't have a relationship), but rather the converse: there is no such thing as a sexual relationship, and, as a response to that impossibility, *there are men and women*."[31] The lack of a sexual relation, that is, does not attest to some positive difference between men and women as living beings; to the contrary, sexual difference expresses the antagonism inherent in being itself—the antagonism that keeps being from ever fully being "being itself."

That antagonism betrays the insistence of the Real, which, like the Lacanian unconscious, pertains neither to being nor to nonbeing. That's why Alain Badiou can remark with reference to *L'Étourdit*, "Sex proposes—nakedly, if I may put it this way—the real as the impossible proper: the impossibility of a relationship. The impossible, hence the real, is thus linked to ab-sense and, in particular, to the absence of any relationship, which means the absence of any sexual meaning."[32] Ab-sens, by "designat[ing]" something as sex, puts it in the field of meaning while establishing that field itself as inseparable from the Real of sex as ab-sens. What we "know" as sex forecloses sex as senseless

negativity, as the unknowable cut or division that precedes the (id)entities that cut makes possible. Thus, sex as we "know" it, as sens-absexe, initiates a quest for sexual meaning while dooming that quest to fail. As the differential relations of words swell into the seeming substance of worlds, as the negativity of division and nonrelation yields to positivized sexual difference, the regime of sense establishes the topology of the subject. And it does so precisely by absenting ab-sens, to which, as sens-absexe attests, it nonetheless remains bound. Sens-absexe, after all, bears a quasi-mathematical relation to ab-sens: to the extent that ab-sens is what designates sex, sens-absexe could be read as *sens-ab*(*ab-sens*), bringing out in this way not only the entanglement of the two but also, through the chiasmus it generates, the linguistic self-enclosure by which sens-absexe excludes ab-sens. Foreclosed from Symbolic reality and inaccessible to sense, the absented Real of sex as ab-sens still insists in the topology of sens-absexe through incursions of unbearable anxiety or through the experience of jouissance, itself always shadowed by anxiety.

The unbearable thus reflects an encounter with the Real that shakes our sense of reality and short-circuits the totalizing comprehension that solidifies a world. Whatever exposes the order of being's status as not-all ("the woman," "the Black," "the queer"), whatever makes visible the ontological negations a totalized world demands, must assume the identity of negated being, thus embodying at once the Real as ab-sens and its translation, by way of sens-absexe, into figures constructed to "mean" the "nothing" that incompletes and dissolves "what is." As in Julia Kristeva's account of abjection, where the self acquires its identity by continuously expelling what it takes to be foreign to the self it would become, so ab-sens as ontological negation, as the negativity that *woman*, *Blackness*, and *queerness* (among other catachreses) can name, is cast out and rendered unthinkable by the world of sens-absexe.[33]

Our rootedness in that world compels an ongoing investment in its consistency, attaching us to the conjunction of being and meaning that encounters with the Real undo. As Justin Clemens writes, however, "'Being' arises as the consequence of an operation of sense, but founders as it does so, undermined by its own operations. . . . [T]he operation of meaning-making posits being, only to find both meaning and being are undone in and by that very positing."[34] Just as sens-absexe grounds meaning in what has no meaning in itself (the arbitrary and senseless differences of the signifying chain), so the Real makes vivid the aporia of being's having been posited. In the words of Alenka Zupančič, "The Real is not a being, or a substance, but its deadlock. It is inseparable from being, yet it is not being." Calling this aporetic deadlock

"the out-of-beingness of being," she explains that the Real "only exists as the inherent contradiction of being. Which is precisely why, for Lacan, the real is the bone in the throat of every ontology: in order to speak of 'being qua being,' one has to amputate something in being that is not being. That is to say, the real is that which the traditional ontology had to cut off to be able to speak of 'being qua being.'"[35] Such a gesture of cutting off, however, reintroduces what it means to excise: the division that precludes the closure of the one, thus making the one a back-formation from this very act of division. The primacy of the cut gets cut off, as it were, and banished from the world of sense. But the negativity of the cut that produces the one inheres in the one "itself." It divides the one both from itself and from its claim to being qua being, binding it to something other than itself and thus making it both a one minus (minus the very cut its being relies on) and a one plus (plus the excess of the cut that articulates it as itself). That cut, the mark of an articulation inseparable from the thing articulated, constitutes the presence of an absence, an incision that must be excised. Joan Copjec astutely frames this coincidence of excess and incompletion: "The fact that the One is paradoxical, always more than itself, is coterminous with the fact that it is less than itself, that is: that something has been subtracted from it. Something always escapes the One."[36] That something is the Lacanian ab-sens cut off and displaced by sens-absexe.

In such a context the experience of the unbearable, as I discussed it in dialogue with Lauren Berlant in *Sex, or the Unbearable*, follows from the blow to ontological stability struck by the "ex-istence" of the Real, where *existence* names the "out-of-beingness of being" excluded from the framework of reality for "being qua being" to be thought. And what ex-ists above all for the subject, bearing the stain of the unbearable within it, is the jouissance we can neither "achieve" nor "get rid of," as Slavoj Žižek observes.[37] Taking us beyond the pleasure principle, jouissance, in Lacanian parlance, makes us headless or acephalic subjects: not the willful agents we think we are but subjects of the drive.[38] If, as viewed from another perspective (that of the subject of the enunciation), this drive partakes of freedom (freedom from the desire that follows from our submission to Symbolic law), that freedom's subjective corollary (for the subject of the statement) is the experience of compulsion or lost agency, of what Lauren Berlant and I explore in *Sex, or the Unbearable* as nonsovereignty. As ab-sens is subtracted from reality to secure the Symbolic's ontological consistency, so jouissance, bound up with the Real as ab-sens, must suffer exclusion as well. It correlates, after all, with the death drive that threatens the subject of the statement, which is also to say, the philosophical subject or the

subject of rational thought. Such thought, in pursuing its project of thinking the purity of being, rightly described by Judith Butler as "disembodied . . . self-reflection," expresses a will for abstraction not only from the body but also, and even more urgently, from jouissance, the drive, and the Real.[39] It expresses the subject's desire to "be" without the cut of its own inconsistency, to be free of the negativity excluded as ab-sens but inseparable, therefore, from the subject produced by this very act of exclusion.

The alternative to this subtraction of ab-sens (and what it designates as sex), the alternative to the thought that philosophy privileges—and that all of us, as subjects of the statement, are fated to privilege as well—is not, from a psychoanalytic perspective, some embodied or materialized "sex." Such a positivized material presence would merely return us to the fantasy of the thing itself, to the Lacanian "closed *one*." Instead, psychoanalytic materialism emerges as antagonistic through and through. As Zupančič persuasively puts it, "This is . . . what 'the materialism of the signifier' amounts to. Not simply to the fact that the signifier can have material consequences, but rather that the materialist position needs to do more than to pronounce matter the original principle. It has to account for a split or contradiction that *is* the matter."[40]

To think the split as material—as the nonpositivizable matter from which ontology splits into being—and to explore how its negativity matters for the sexual (non)relation requires a willingness to encounter what ontology rejects: the libidinization of this splitting as expressed in the oscillations of the unconscious. This temporal rhythm enacts for Lacan the "*pulsative* function" of the unconscious, "the need to disappear that seems to be in some sense inherent in it."[41] This, of course, is also where he locates sexuality, which "is represented in the psyche by a relation of the subject that is deduced from something other than sexuality itself. Sexuality is established in the field of the subject by a way that is that of lack."[42] We might consider both the materiality and the materialization of this lack by returning to some figures of being's incompletion—"the woman," "the Black," "the queer"—whose exposure of a given world as not-all compels them to bear the unbearable weight of anxiety and enjoyment at once: let us call it the *enjiety* of ab-sens as encountered in the world of sens-absexe.

Consider, in this light, the place of "women" in the feminist rethinking of philosophy proposed by Catherine Malabou. Despite attending to plasticity as the potential in being that enables change, Malabou maintains that philosophy "cannot welcome the fugitive essence of women."[43] Drawing on the work of Luce Irigaray (but responding as well to Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva), Malabou associates women with an "excessive materiality"

that "transgress[es]the limits of ontology."[44] Women, to that extent, *have* an essence, but more than merely being fugitive, that essence *is fugitivity*. This leads Malabou to reject the prospect of imagining a feminist philosophy, arguing instead that "an ontology of the feminine would no doubt bear all the symptoms of the traditional ontology—that is, an exclusion of the feminine itself. As we know, the discourse of and on property, propriety or subjectivity is precisely the discourse which has excluded women from the domain of Being (and perhaps even of beings). I will refer to Irigaray again on this point: 'Woman neither is nor has an essence.'"[45] This fugitivity essential to woman that prevents her from having or being an essence recalls Lacan's pronouncement in Seminar XX, "There is no such thing as 'the woman,' where the definite article indicates universality."[46] He makes this point earlier in *L'Étourdit* when he refers to his graphs of sexuation to designate woman as not-all and so as a figure for ontological incompletion and the cut of division as such.[47] To the extent that woman, in Malabou's reading, succeeds in slipping ontology's net, she can function as a name for the split that separates ontology from itself. In contrast, were woman to claim a *particular* ontological definition, she would thereby repeat the "exclusion of the feminine," separating herself from her "fugitive essence," which ontology fails to capture.

But this "fugitive essence" also characterizes being, as Malabou notes while discussing Martin Heidegger: "Being is nothing . . . but its mutability, and . . . ontology is therefore the name of an originary migratory and metamorphic tendency, the aptitude to give change . . . whose strange economy we have . . . been attempting to characterize."[48] This strange economy of being—Malabou translates *befremdlich*, the adjective Heidegger attaches to being, as both "astonishing" and "queer"—proves unbearable for the tradition of philosophical thought insofar as it rejects the self-sameness on which identity depends.[49] "The whole question," as Malabou writes, "is of knowing if philosophy can at the end of the day cease evading what it has nevertheless never ceased to teach itself—the originary metamorphic and migratory condition. Even [Friedrich] Nietzsche, who came very close to this teaching, recoiled when faced with the radicality of ontological convertibility."[50] Malabou will repeat this claim when she tries to formulate the question to which her own thinking must respond: "*that of knowing if and in that case how it would be possible to grasp and endure, all the way and without the slightest compromise, the immense question of ontological transformability*."[51] The question is at once epistemological ("how . . . to grasp" or comprehend) and affective ("how . . . [to] endure" what the economy of presence *cannot* comprehend). If this strange economy is unendurable, if even Nietzsche recoils before it, is

it not because its "originary metamorphic and migratory condition" expresses the ontic discontinuity binding being to the gap within it, to the not-all propelling being through the pulsions of the drive? Or, to put this somewhat differently, is it not the acephalic subject whose emergence proves unbearable insofar as it supplants the subject of meaning responsive to the law of desire? Philosophy recoils from confronting ab-sens and the negativity of the drive insofar as they require it to confront its own relation to jouissance.

On the one hand, Malabou rejects the possibility of a feminine ontology even while resignifying ontology by linking it to the essential fugitivity of woman: "The feminine or woman (we can use the terms interchangeably now) remains one of the unavoidable modes of ontological change."[52] On the other hand, she recoils from the consequences her negativity entails. She celebrates plasticity, for example, in one of its major aspects, as "the annihilation of all forms," as something that, by "erasing the limits of what used to be 'our' bodies, *unbinds* us from the chain of continuation."[53] While this seems to suggest an openness to the disappropriation of selfhood, even to the point of a radical unbinding that implicates plasticity in the death drive, there remains in Malabou nonetheless a point of attachment that refuses the ontological negation such unbinding demands:

> Personally, I have discovered that it is totally impossible for me to give up the schema "woman." I cannot succeed in dissolving it into the schema of gender or "queer multitudes." I continue to see myself as a woman. I know very well that the word is plastic, that it cannot be reconstituted as a separate reality, and that, as I wrote in "The Meaning of the Feminine," "there is no reason to privilege the 'feminine,' or to name the crossroads of ontic-ontological exchange 'feminine,'" I know the feminine is one of the "passing, metabolic points of identity."
>
> Still, I believe that *the word "woman" has a meaning outside the heterosexual matrix*.[54]

Conforming as it does to the logic of the fetish, the formula for which she all but quotes ("I know very well" but "still"), this belief that Malabou cannot renounce, this point of consistency to which she adheres in spite of what she knows, should be recognized not merely as an attachment to the specific identity of "woman" but also (and even more crucially) as an attachment to the coupling of woman and meaning: "I believe that *the word 'woman' has a meaning outside the heterosexual matrix*."

Although Malabou will write that "it is necessary to imagine the possibility of woman starting from the structural impossibility she experiences of

not being violated, in herself and outside, everywhere," she wants, simultaneously, to preserve *this meaning of woman* from violation: "Anti-essentialist violence and deconstructive violence work hand in hand to empty woman of herself, to disembowel her."[55] For Malabou, it seems, this conceptual violence, stripping woman of the fullness of her being, of the specificity of her meaning as essentially open to the possibility of violation, erases woman as such, despite the fact that this very erasure reenacts "the structural impossibility . . . of [her] not being violated." But isn't this also to say that such violence (as Malabou "know[s] very well") subjects woman to the plasticity of being, to the perpetual process of becoming other that inheres in the "empty[ing]" of her selfhood? With her visceral image of "disembowel[ment]," Malabou insists on woman's positivity, on her meaning "outside the heterosexual matrix," even if, by affirming "the structural impossibility . . . of [woman's] not being violated," she designates woman as the site of a perpetual division, as the essentialized form of the cut that itself disembowels every positivity. Her refusal to submit woman's "meaning" to plasticity's unbinding begins when she fixes a limit to her own plasticity as a subject ("Personally, I have discovered that it is totally impossible for me to give up the schema 'woman'"), and it ends with her unyielding declaration of faith in what she acknowledges as a belief ("Still, I believe that *the word 'woman' has a meaning outside the heterosexual matrix*"). This is a belief to which Malabou clings, attempting to preserve an attachment to being that plasticity, like anti-essentialist discourse, puts at unbearable risk, even in the face of Malabou's identification of being *with* plasticity.

A similar resistance to plasticity as an imperative to unbinding arises when Malabou associates the pain of woman's ontological negation with the pain of writing her own dissertation under Jacques Derrida's supervision—a pain she attributes to Derrida's self-presentation as "a feminine or feminist Derrida," as one "determined to stigmatize and relentlessly critique the distressing comments about women and the female condition by traditional philosophers."[56] Indeed, before the publication of *Marine Lover*, Irigaray's reading of Nietzsche to which Malabou refers above ("Woman neither is nor has an essence"), Derrida, in his own book on Nietzsche, had written, "There is no such thing as an essence of woman because woman averts, she is averted of herself."[57] Citing his call in *Choreographies* for a "multiplicity of sexually marked voices," Malabou responds by demanding, "How could I bear for a man, even speaking in the name of women, 'as' a woman, to speak better than they could, for them, stronger and louder than them, their conceptual and political rights? How could I bear for him to recognize with sharper

acuity, sometimes with greater critical insight than they, their overexposure to violence?"[58] In this moment of unbearable enjiety, the feminist negation of traditional ontology (Derrida's speaking "as" a woman) entails a negation of woman's essence (the "they" for which he speaks). This, as Malabou's language makes clear, seems impossible for her to survive; it confronts her with the prospect of coming unbound "from the chain of continuation," which is also to say, from the signifying chain in which the subject is bound to meaning. However much the plasticity she champions disturbs the fixity of identities, including the identity of being, Malabou's will to identify woman as an ontological possibility, as the bearer of a meaning that anti-essentialist arguments "disembowel," reflects her attachment to a sense of woman incompatible with woman as ab-sens. "The choice of feminine recognizes precisely the *body* of woman, its morphology, the anatomy of her sex organs," she writes, suggesting that despite her elaboration of woman's "fugitive essence," that fugitivity remains the fixed property of a conservatively recognizable "woman."[59] She refuses, therefore, to "give up" her attachment to the couple formed by woman and meaning—a refusal that ontologizes woman in relation to the "violence [that] . . . confers her being" and that positivizes sexual difference as produced by sens-absexe.[60]

Now place beside this unbearable encounter with woman as (a figure for) ab-sens Ronald Judy's discussion of the "thanatology" that slave narratives enact. In response to Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s claim that "the slave narrative represents the attempt of blacks to *write themselves into being*," Judy maintains that such texts can produce the opposite effect. "With the first slave narrative," Judy asserts, the Negro "no longer is a transcendental abstraction, but has become a material embodiment of that which exceeds the boundaries of our reasonable truth."[61] As a supernumerary element, the African ruptures the coherence of reason by registering reason's subtraction from itself once its outside appears in its frame. By "exceed[ing] the boundaries of our reasonable truth" and gesturing toward ab-sens, the African figures a limit to thought and a threat to the world's consistency. The "Negro" serves to suture this wound, to positivize, by way of slave narratives, the African's unintelligibility. As Judy puts it, "What is really at issue in the writing of African American culture is not the humanity of the Negro . . . but the universal comprehension of reality, of what is and how it functions."[62] Symptomatizing the not-all of the "universal" one, the African in Judy's reading threatens a subtraction of sense from thought; the African, that is, obtrudes as the excess, as the noncoincidence with itself, that reveals *within* the "closed *one*" of reason the antagonism reason abjects in order to *become* itself in the first place. This ontological gap

or division, which the abjection of the "Negro" from the social repeats in a futile effort to refute, becomes visible in the irrational violence with which the embodiment of ontological negation is obsessively negated and cast out. Zupančič describes the Real as "that which the traditional ontology had to cut off to be able to speak of 'being qua being'"; Judy offers a parallel formula with regard to the ontology of the enslaved: "Heterogeneity is removed from reality as a flaw, an aberration of the universal and homogeneous totality of truth."[63]

By demonstrating access to Western reason, slave narratives may, as Gates suggests, represent an attempt by the formerly enslaved to write themselves into being; but, for Judy, that entrance into the ontological realm can never, in fact, take place. Referring to Olaudah Equiano's account of his capture, enslavement, and conversion, Judy proposes that in the very affirmation of his identity as a human, which demands above all "unification into oneness" to attain the "the state of being oneself," the African who had been enslaved succumbs to ontological annihilation or to what Judy calls "the negation of the materiality of Africa."[64] Rather than admitting its author into the register of ontology, "the slave narrative," Judy writes, becomes "a *thanatology*, a writing of the annihilation that applies the taxonomies of death in Reason (natural law) to enable the emergence of the self-reflexive consciousness of the Negro."[65] Instead of writing himself into being, Equiano, as this fatal dialectic suggests, writes himself into a fiction of meaning—a fiction of meaning *for the other* that turns ab-sens into sens-absexe: "The humanization . . . achieved in the slave narrative required the conversion of the incomprehensible African into the comprehensible Negro."[66] Only when recast in terms of such comprehensibility or sense can the material excrescence of ontology, the split or subtraction of ab-sens, become accessible to thought. Judy, committed to what he calls "a nonrecuperable negativity," one that "jeopardizes the genealogy of Reason," draws the unsettling conclusion that "to claim black agency is to claim the Negro."[67] In other words, it is to affirm identity through an attachment to intelligibility that requires negating the negativity of Blackness as figured by the "incomprehensible African."

Engaging and extending Judy's work, Frank Wilderson III draws a lesson from it that reinforces this point: "'Black authenticity,' is an oxymoron," he declares, "for it requires the kind of ontological integrity which the Slave cannot claim."[68] For the Black scholar, as Wilderson puts it, this "is menacing and unbearable," as unbearable as the idea of renouncing the meaning of "woman" is for Malabou. It gives rise, therefore, as in Malabou's case, to a form of disavowal: one evinced in narratives, as Judy writes, of "an emerging subjectivity's triumphant struggle to discover its identity."[69] The unbearable

Real of ontological negation, the ab-sens that undoes the oneness, the comprehensible *identity*, of the world, compels us to seek to preserve that world by affirming our oneness within it. Both the anti-anti-essentialist woman and the "comprehensible Negro" defend the world as comprehension from the assault of pure negativity. Wilderson makes vivid in his powerful text "the unbearable hydraulics of Black disavowal," which, he observes, is "triggered by a dread of both being 'discovered,' and of discovering oneself, as ontological incapacity."[70] With lacerating clarity he anatomizes "the unbearable terror of that (non)self-discovery always already awaiting the Black."[71]

This "ontological incapacity," in Wilderson's account, singularly pertains to Blackness, which finds no place in a Symbolic order that rests on it nonetheless. Drawing imaginatively on earlier work by Frantz Fanon and David Marriott, Wilderson observes that insofar as "slaveness . . . has consumed Blackness and Africanness, . . . it [is] impossible to divide slavery from Blackness."[72] Because "the structure by which human beings are recognized and incorporated into a community of human beings is anti-slave," Blackness remains, *and must remain*, excluded from the realm of humanity and the prospect of social being. But Blackness as ontological impossibility produces a specific type of being: "the Black," a sociogenetic identity defined by a specific "grammar of suffering."[73] Extending Fanon's assertion that "ontology . . . does not permit us to understand the being of the black," Wilderson proposes the necessity of differentiating "Black being from Human life."[74] He does so by reifying Blackness in the specificity of "the Black," who is, moreover, a figure of reification from the outset, "an accumulated and fungible object, rather than an exploited and alienated subject."[75] The Black, "who is always already a Slave," never rises to the status of "a subject who has either been alienated in language or alienated from his or her cartographic and temporal capabilities."[76] To the contrary, the Black remains for Wilderson "an object who has been positioned by gratuitous violence[,] . . . a sentient being for whom recognition and incorporation is impossible," insofar as "accumulation and fungibility" are the Black's "ontological foundation."[77] But while Blackness remains definitionally excluded from any Symbolic framing, excluded in its very essence from ontological possibility, only subjects *inhabiting* the Symbolic could posit, abject, or assume it. "The Black," then, pace Wilderson, would always "be" a Symbolic subject, one divided into subjectivity by having entered the linguistic order, but one consigned to figure what the Symbolic is unable to accommodate: the (Real) negativity of Blackness. Those read as materializations of the ontological impossibility of Blackness would share the quality of fungibility that Wilderson (with reference to Saidiya Hartman) associates

with Blackness itself. Incapable of ontological manifestation within the order of sense, unbound from the putative stability of Symbolic coefficients, Blackness would name what has no being, no identity, and no place. It would have no fixed phenomenal form but only a social and political one and would vanish in every positivity that substantialized or embodied it.

Wilderson, however, *does* attach a property to Blackness, one that particularizes the Black not only as excluded from subjectivity but also as *uniquely* excluded. That property, as it happens, coincides with Malabou's analysis of woman, for Wilderson reads the Black as distinctively "positioned . . . by the structure of gratuitous violence" and as "openly vulnerable to the whims of the world."[78] Recall in this context Malabou's words: "It is necessary to imagine the possibility of woman starting from the structural impossibility she experiences of not being violated."[79] In each case a specific entity in the world, a speaking subject acknowledged as human, though by no means universally, lays claim to the unique position of foreclosure from the field of human "being." Small wonder, then, that when David Marriott, characterizing Wilderson's work as situating "black suffering . . . [as] beyond analogy," declares that for Wilderson "there is always a desire to have black lived experience named as the worst" because "the black has to embody this abjection without reserve," his words echo Judith Butler's concern about the work of Luce Irigaray on which Malabou's feminism builds: "Is it not the case that there is within any discourse and thus within Irigaray's as well, a set of constitutive exclusions that are inevitably produced by the circumscription of the feminine as that which monopolizes the sphere of exclusion?"[80]

In each case specifying a *type* of being as, in its essence, nonbeing gives rise to similar problems. Wilderson's argument, for example, though more powerful than Marriott suggests, situates Black sentient beings outside the Symbolic order of subjects. It positions them *ontologically* as materializations of Blackness: essentially and foundationally excluded from the human. But Judy offers a more nuanced project, if no less devastating in its consequences: "to expose the catachresis at work in the biological misnomer of race, to read the Negro as a trope, indeed a misapplied metaphor."[81] The result of this tropological maneuver, for Judy, "is the exclusion of the African from the space of Western history, and the marginal inclusion of the Negro as negativity."[82] Two phrases merit attention here: "marginal inclusion" and "*as* negativity." The ontological foreclosure of Blackness produces a Symbolic subject to figure this lack of a proper place or name. Marriott phrases it precisely: "The black has to *embody* this abjection without reserve." Like woman, that is, the Black is a subject whose status *as a subject* is subject to doubt by virtue of figuring *within*

the Symbolic the ab-sens excluded *from* it. Wilderson rightly recognizes, then, that the logic of anti-Blackness, which is nothing other than logic itself as the syntactic imperative of making-sense, will persist in any social or political variation of the world. With good reason, therefore, his position calls for "a total end of the world."[83] But Black persons, despite the history that places them inextricably in relation to slavery, are not, in any given world, the singular or exclusive embodiments of ontological exclusion. If the "Negro," for Judy, permits the translation of African unknowability into the register of meaning, then "the Black," as a category of person, similarly functions as a catachrestic misnaming by which ab-sens, the void of meaning, gets raised up as sens-absexe, fleshed out in a positive identity that reinforces sense.

More than just "the Negro," then, must be read as catachrestic. *Queerness*, *woman*, *Blackness*, *trans**: these terms (like countless others that name the null set of a given order) emerge from the division between the negativity that inheres in division as such—the undoing of the world as unity, comprehension, or identity—and that division's positivization in the catachrestic name of a social being.[84] No list could include every figure for the world's dissolution as comprehension; were that possible, the world would emerge again as totalized, comprehensive. However endless the production of contingent figures for the unbearable, all spring from the inextricability of ab-sens and sens-absexe and thus from the insistence of the not-all that makes the sexual relation impossible. All are rooted in the ontological antagonism that structures the logic of sense by which we are divided into being: divided between the subject of desire and of the subject of the drive, where the former consigns the latter to the status of what is not.

For just that reason, and without denying other (mis)namings of exclusion, I primarily refer to queerness as the catachresis of this nothing, of this ontological negation. I say "for just that reason" because queerness, though linked (in contemporary discourse) to nonnormative sexual identities (and I want to insist on the contingency of that link and so on the impossibility of delimiting what queerness would "properly" name), invokes, as I wrote in *No Future*, the insistence of the drive and of jouissance.[85] Infinitely mobile as an epithet for strangeness, out-of-jointedness, and nonnormativity, queerness colors any enjoyment that seems to threaten a world. Such enjoyments, in the libidinal economy of a given culture's fantasy, may follow from *any* attribute, including, among others, race, gender, gender expression, sexuality, ethnicity, caste, class, religion, mental or physical ability, marital status, and educational background; the list could go on forever. In the words of Annamarie Jagose, "As queer is unaligned with any specific identity category, it

has the potential to be annexed profitably to any number of discussions."[86] Queerness, in this, shares with sodomy ("that utterly confused category," as Michel Foucault deemed it), a resistance to definition. Foucault describes "the extreme discretion of the texts dealing with sodomy" and the "nearly universal reticence in talking about it."[87] Constructing a valuable link between sodomy as it was understood in the Renaissance and what he then calls "sites of present confusion," Jonathan Goldberg observes in *Sodometries* that sodomy's regulatory efficacy with regard to criminal behavior follows largely from the fact that it "remains incapable of exact definition."[88] Queerness, similarly, refuses limitation to particular persons, objects, or acts. Associated with the power of a drive that subdues the subject's will or agency and invoking an enjoyment in excess of the pleasures associated with the good, queerness figures meaning's collapse and the encounter with ab-sens. It speaks to the place of the nothing fleshed out by those who are made to embody it. But those entities (persons, objects, acts) cannot, in themselves, *be* queer; they lack an ontological relation to ontological impossibility. Rather, they serve as catachreses for the negativity of ab-sens.

This is not to deny that many use *queer* as a positive identity. Even within such contexts, though, its import remains uncertain. For some it merely substitutes for the continuously expanding roster of sexual or sexually stigmatized minorities. For others it indexes a sexual dissidence at odds with identity as such (whether of gender, sex, or sexuality). Still others use it diacritically within the ranks of sexual minorities to separate opponents of assimilation from those who seek normalization. And if some are content to use *queer* interchangeably with *lesbian* or *gay*, or with the various identitarian positions (currently) codified as LGBTQIA+, others, myself included, construe it as the empty marker of a stigmatized otherness to communitarian norms, thus preserving its force as something that thwarts the straightness of intelligibility.

Other catachreses—woman, trans*, or Blackness, to name just a few—do this work as well, but always at the risk of reproducing (for some) the unbearable encounter to which Wilderson and Malabou attest: the unbearable despecification of a positive identity forged from ongoing material histories of social and cultural violence, a despecification that can seem, as it does for Wilderson and Malabou, to redouble that violence when those positive identities are identified as "mere" figures. I catch a glimpse of a kindred spirit, though, in the work of Jared Sexton, especially in his discussion of Afropessimism as "a meditation on a poetics and politics of abjection wherein racial Blackness operates as an asymptotic approximation of that which disturbs

every claim or formation of identity and difference as such," an assertion in line with my earlier claim that "queerness can never define an identity, it can only ever disturb one."[89]

My argument might seem to bolster the argument against Lacanian-inflected queer theory by such critics as José Esteban Muñoz, Amber Jamilla Musser, and Chandan Reddy—arguments Musser summarizes straightforwardly: "Sexuality as a frame silences race."[90] Reddy, in *Freedom with Violence*, his ambitious reading of race and sexuality at the end of the twentieth century in the United States, explicitly maintains the need to reverse the relation between these two categories: "In our contemporary moment," he writes, "sexuality is an iteration of—and amendment to and of—race."[91] Certainly sexuality, as Reddy construes it, is always already raced; race, after all, belongs to the various historical contingencies we attach to the subject for whom sens-absexe has cut off from thought the primal cut of ab-sens. But sex in psychoanalytic terms is not, as I've argued, reducible to the positivity of sexual difference or to the framework of "sexuality"; it pertains, instead, to the cut itself as the ontological incompletion dissimulated by contingent forms of Symbolic identity . Never one, and thus never just one *more*, among the myriad elements that appear within and constitute social reality, sex, to quote Žižek, "is the way the ontological deadlock, the incompleteness of reality in itself, is inscribed into subjectivity."[92] As such, it merits the characterization proposed by Jean-Claude Milner as "the place of infinite contingency in bodies."[93] Coinciding with primary process thought, and so with a libidinally freighted movement anterior to the logic of meaning, sex as defined by ab-sens elicits the subject from the primal cut and binds that subject, divided from the outset, to the insistence of the drive whose corollary is jouissance as self-subtraction.

Like gender, sexuality, and other differentially articulated social constructs, race both expresses and denies this split that libidinizes the subject from the beginning. As positivized into something determinate, knowable, and sedimented with meaning, race (like gender, sex, or sexuality as conventionally understood) fills the void of ab-sens with the fantasy of a knowable identity. That this fantasy may be collectively shared—and that its consequences can make, quite literally, the difference between life and death—makes it no less fantasmatic in the psychoanalytic sense; all of Symbolic reality depends on a fantasy frame to support it. Neither sexuality (as we think we know it) nor race can claim a privileged relation to the ontologically negated. Sex (in the psychoanalytic sense: as designated by ab-sens) is the indispensable element here, not any culturally and historically contingent

category of identity. This is not to uphold, as Reddy suggests, "the subject's unrelenting attachment . . . to the imagined unity and universality of [the Symbolic] order" (the drive, which springs from the *division* of the subject, expresses resistance to that attachment as it incompletes that unity), and it is certainly not to affirm such attachment *at the expense of* "any plural historicity to the implacable logic that the psychoanalytic subject is seen to be in opposition to."[94] To the contrary, that "plural historicity" confirms the Symbolic's "implacable logic," which is the logic of signification subtending history as the making of sense. No doubt, as Reddy rightly notes, "a variety of contradictions" in the world as it is can portend "the dissolution of a liberal order," producing multiple sites for "mount[ing] a politics of nonidentity."[95] Blackness and woman, for example, can both work powerfully toward that end. But as my readings of Wilderson and Malabou suggest, each tends to return to a substantive *identity* as the locus of ontological exclusion, and each finds it similarly unbearable to renounce an attachment to that *form* of being with which (though differently) each associates the Real of what "is" not (even if those forms are similarly defined by openness to violence and violation). Both Wilderson and Malabou, in other words, elaborate ontological exclusions while positivizing the particular category of beings they view as *essentially* excluded. Reddy, confusing the contingency of the social with the structural law of the Symbolic, denies that ontological exclusions betray the latter's inflexible structure: the "social formation is heterogeneous and always in flux," he correctly asserts, before concluding that this variability "trouble[s] and make[s] unavailable the . . . cultural homogeneity of the symbolic."[96] But the structuring law of the Symbolic demands no "cultural homogeneity." To the contrary, the open set of terms that can figure ontological negation makes clear that what the Symbolic ordains, instead, is the absenting of ab-sens to produce the world as sens-absexe. Social formations, precisely *because* they are "heterogeneous and always in flux," will generate different embodiments to flesh out the place of that negation; but however plastic the *expression* of Symbolic law may be, the structural violence of the law itself, the violence of the word that cuts ("qui tranche") to determine the social order, always calls forth catachrestic identities to fill the place of nonbeing. Those identities themselves are contingent, but their structuring logic is not.

Reddy, however, makes a valuable point about theoretical formalization, especially the sort that privileges structural frameworks over social identities: "The formalism of the psychoanalytic argument against the social can never fully dissociate itself from the cultural archive and texts through which

it makes its argument, including the cultural text of Lacanian psychoanalysis."[97] This reminds us that accounts of structures can never access the structures they analyze. In trying to think what governs the positivity of what is and in trying to resist the temptation of acceding to the world as it merely appears, they depend on models of reading drawn from the very world they read and immerse themselves in particulars to observe a logic that informs and exceeds them. They work, as Wilderson writes in a passage describing his own methodology, by "pressing the social and performative into analytic service of the structural and positional; not vice versa."[98]

In this, of course, such structural formalisms run the risk of ignoring alternative structures that other texts, other modes of reading, other social or performative data, might allow us to apprehend. Only counterreadings and subsequent debates can keep that risk in check. If no formalism "can . . . fully dissociate itself" from the content that it engages, if it can never forgo the world whose "reality" it reads through a structuring law, it aims to sketch from *within* the world the frame subtracted *from* that world for the world as such to take shape. Much like that frame, then, formalism expresses the excessive element in any world that exposes that world as not-all, the element that Barbara Johnson calls "a kind of unthought remainder that would be functioning nevertheless, even though it wasn't recognized" and that she specifies as "a formal overdetermination" that instantiates the "death instinct."[99] To translate this more explicitly into the argument I'm making here: ab-sens is "knowable" only through its negation by sens-absexe, but sens-absexe contains ab-sens as its own internal limit, the point of impossibility encountered in the failure of sexual relation. What eludes the grasp of ontology, precluding the closure of being as one, appears in the ontological field through catachreses of ab-sens.

Two things follow closely from this: understandings of formal structure are structured by the forms they would understand, and critical attention to such structures can alter our perception of those forms in the world. Rather than confirming Musser's claim that "sexuality . . . silences race," this suggests that a certain formalism determines race and sexuality alike. Woman, queerness, Blackness, brownness: the point is neither to silence nor to absolutize such identities but to assume them instead *as displacements*, as figural (mis)namings of ab-sens. As such they mean (in both senses of the word) to suture the hole (the cut of the Real) in the reality of sens-absexe. As contingent embodiments of the noncontingent pressure of ab-sens, such figures are conjured to materialize the void, the unnamed and uncounted element that structures a given world. They simultaneously express and disavow what could only ever

be *thought* as nothing. If saying this seems to "silence" race, sexuality, gender, gender expression, or any of the other catachreses generated by a sociopolitical reality, then it does so in the hope of sounding out the structure such reality silences in order to produce its illusory coherence. Far from being fictions we could hope to see through, get over, or decolonize, catachreses like these, though not necessarily these catachreses in particular, will populate *any* world that has swollen into shape through sens-absexe, which is to say, any world in which the cut of the word is decisive. Undoing the givenness of a specific world by attending to the void within it can never undo the foreclosure of ab-sens, the primal expression of Symbolic law that governs the logic of worlds. But it can expose the figural structure of the social identities those worlds engender by provoking an encounter with the nothing of the cut or division that creates them. This is the work of the death drive but also, as I continue to insist, of queer theory, at least insofar as queer theory takes *queerness* as "incapable of exact definition," as void of any fixed content, and so as a name, though not the only one, for the ab-sens that counts for nothing.

Although Calvin Warren addresses these issues in strikingly similar terms, he sees things rather differently in a dazzling and provocative essay on Symbolic identities and ontological negation. Interpreting Blackness, like Wilderson, as a "structural position of non-ontology" fundamentally distinct from queerness, he describes the "black queer" as doubly erased by what he posits as "onticide."[100] Building not only on Wilderson's analyses but also on Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's work in *The Undercommons*—especially their description of "the containerized" as occupying "the standpoint of no standpoint, everywhere and nowhere, of never and to come, of thing and nothing"—Warren sees a "differential relation to violence" that separates Blackness from queerness, thereby speaking to the "difference between non-ontology and an extreme condition of unfreedom."[101] With this as his predicate, he argues that the queerness of antihumanist queer theory "conceals and preserves the humanity it proclaims to disrupt," producing a figure that may be "at the limit of subjectivity," but a figure that is not, as the Black is, "the object denied symbolic placement" or inclusion in the human.[102] Thus, Warren, like Wilderson, links Blackness as ontological impossibility to the foreclosure from subjectivity of those who embody it catachrestically.[103]

For Ronald Judy, as already noted, the "Negro," as "catachresis" or "misnomer of race," as the comprehensible form that displaces the incomprehensible African, finds "marginal inclusion" in the Symbolic sphere as a *figure* for negativity. I take this as the stronger claim, despite the significant conceptual opening that Warren's work achieves (especially by thinking ontological

negation with reference to structural antagonism and the tension between reason and what exceeds it). Judy avoids the problems that arise when Blackness and queerness in Warren's work become attributes of two distinct entities, as they do in the following passage:

> A person understood as "queer" could purchase a black-object from the auction block like his/her hetero-normative counterpart. In those rare instances where the black-as-object was able to participate in this economy and purchase a black-object as well, the black purchaser could, at any moment, become another commodity—if found without freedom papers or validation from a white guardian—the system of fungible blackness made any black interchangeable and substitutional. This movement between object and subject is not a problem for queerness, but is an unresolvable problem for blackness. This is the important difference between the two.[104]

Warren notes the asymmetry that exempted the (implicitly non-Black) "queer" (which presumably refers here to someone identified with nonheteronormative sexual acts) from commodification as a marketable object in the economy of slavery. As important as this is in approaching the historical experiences of what Warren hypostatizes as "the black" and "the queer" in this passage, it does not follow that the "movement between object and subject is not a problem for queerness"—or, indeed, that queerness as ontological negation is not bound to that very movement. While recognizing the epistemic consequences of centuries in which legal and political institutions have reduced Black persons to the status of objects made to circulate in a global economy, we can still trace the logic that enables that reduction to structures that are psychic and social at once, indeed, to the very structures that may govern the "movement between subject and object."

For Lacan, in fact, such a movement inheres in subjectivization itself. As he famously argues in "The Mirror Stage," the infant, by assuming its specular image, precipitates the "primordial form" of the "I" precisely by identifying *with a form* that situates the ego in an irreducibly "fictional direction."[105] This primordial form of the "I" is subsequently "objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, . . . before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as a subject."[106] But the division of the subject that results from its very constitution *through* division (between the infant and its image, between the proto-subject and the other, between the signifier and the signified) puts the subject at perpetual risk of losing hold of this fictional "I" and returning to the nonidentity of a body reduced to bits and pieces: to disorganized, objectal matter.[107] Lacan, therefore, goes on to note

that when the "specular *I* turns into the social *I*" and the mirror stage comes to an end, leaving in its wake a Symbolic subject mediated by "the other's desire," the very "I" itself becomes "an apparatus to which every instinctual pressure constitutes a danger": the danger of the subject's reduction to an object governed by the drive.[108] While acknowledging the specificity of the Black experience of enslavement and the difference between the "the black-as-object" and the proto-subject's anxiety about falling into objecthood, I trace this psychoanalytic logic to differentiate the ontology of the subject from the particular historical experiences to which that ontology gives rise—experiences that derive from failed attempts to resolve through catachrestic figures a structural antagonism in the subject that admits no resolution and no repair. In this context Wilderson recognizes "the aggressivity toward Blackness not as a form of discrimination, but as . . . a form of psychic health and well-being for the rest of the world."[109] Indeed, as he elsewhere describes it, anti-Blackness functions to "regenerate Humans and prevent them from suffering the catastrophe of psychic incoherence."[110]

The "movement between object and subject," then, is indeed "a problem for queerness," especially when queerness, rather than naming nonheteronormative sexualities, refers to the insistence of those unnamed forces, those catachreses of ab-sens, that make a given world not-all. An encounter with such a figure provokes an influx of enjiety that expresses itself as "aggressivity toward" the catachrestic "queer" whose appearance in the space of being seems to dissipate its consistency. Nonheteronormative sexualities, like the visibility of trans* identities, convey that threat in many contexts, and the violence directed against them (including homophobia, transphobia, lesbophobia, and effeminophobia, to name just a few of its forms), the violence qualified by Warren as "a grammar of suffering, which we call queerness," effects the reduction of a (seeming) subject to a libidinally overdetermined object merely *masquerading* as a subject.[111] Instead of approaching queerness, though, through Warren's "grammar of suffering" (a phrase that Wilderson used earlier to describe the experience of the Black and the slave), where that suffering elicits the humanizing pathos of a distinctive type of being, I would argue that queerness is agrammatical and acephalic both.[112] The encounter with whatever counts as "queer" effects an anacoluthon in the rhetoric of reality. Queerness, like anacoluthon (from the Greek *an*, "not," and *akolouthos*, "following"), cuts or interrupts a sequence (grammatical, narrative, or genealogical) by confronting the logic of meaning with the ab-sens from which *nothing* follows.[113]

"Onticide," for all its conceptual power, positions the "black queer" as uniquely the catachresis of this "nothing." Warren supports this claim

by noting that the "black queer" doubles "the black's" exclusion from being while also facing exclusion from "the queer's" "incorpor[ation] . . . into the fold of humanity."[114] He develops this argument through Eric Stanley's observation that "the overwhelming numbers of trans/queer people who are murdered in the United States are of color."[115] This prompts him to reflect on the "differential relationship to violence" of "people of color" and "non-people of color" among "those who might identify as 'queer.'"[116] Based on the disproportionate representation of the former among "trans/queer people" killed in the United States, Warren argues that the Blackness of "black queers" denies them "symbolic placement, differentiating flesh, and a grammar of suffering"—all of which remain possibilities, if only marginally, for "queers" not "of color."[117] Construing "the black," through reference to Fanon, as outside "symbolic placement," Warren asserts that "black suffering" is unintelligible in *any* "grammar of suffering" (which he now associates with "queer theory"), precisely to the extent that Black suffering "lacks a proper grammar of enunciation."[118] As heir to "the violence of captivity [that] expelled the African from Difference, or the Symbolic," "the black-as-object," for Warren, "is situated outside of space, time, and the world," which is also to say, outside of the human as "the order of differentiating subjects."[119] Blackness and queerness, in other words, have not only different relations to violence but also, as Warren puts it, "a differential relationship to 'nothingness,' where 'nothingness' is the symbolic designator of the incomprehensible remainder or exclusion. The fact that the overwhelming majority of those murdered are 'of color' and the position of blackness in the antagonism is one of non-ontology (negative existence) is no mere coincidence."[120]

Underlying this analysis, though, is the conflation of ontological impossibility with entities represented as *ontologizing* this very impossibility. If, that is, the overrepresentation of people of color among trans/queer murder victims and the "position of blackness . . . [as] one of non-ontology" is, indeed, "no mere coincidence," then either "the black" must *essentially* coincide with Blackness as nonontology or the "the black" must be understood as *one* of its highly charged catachreses. But what could it mean, and how could we know it, if "the black" were essentially bound to the "blackness" that remains, not *like* but *as* the Real, excluded from representation? Can an experience historically correlated with African captivity in the Atlantic slave trade *uniquely* define "the Real of ontology" that, in Warren's own phrasing, "ruptures and preconditions symbolization"?[121] "The black," no less than "the queer" or "the woman," is subjectified through language, but what Warren rightly characterizes as the "unresolvable problem for blackness"—the fact that it

remains "the 'unthought' and the incommunicable," "outside of life and its customary lexis"—leads him, despite his own warning against it, to slide "between identity and structure" by conflating the ontological exclusion that is "blackness" with the social exclusion of Blacks.[122] He thus presents as noncontingent, nonhistorical, and a priori—in other words, as ontological—"the black's" relation to the structural position of ontological impossibility.[123]

Warren himself sounds a warning about the dangers of such a conflation when responding to Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's analysis of David Marriott's *On Black Men*.[124] Jackson, he argues, errs in her effort to "think race and sexuality together":

> It is here that we seem to slide between blackness as a structural position of non-ontology and the sociology of race (as an identity). In this analysis, blackness becomes a "type" much like sexologist [*sic*] created the "homosexual" as a type. Instead of thinking about blackness as the ontological horizon that fractures epistemology, we locate blackness within the Symbolic Order of scientific discourse and sexology. Blackness, then, oscillates between an identity, a marker of the Symbolic order, and an ontological position, the "Real" that ruptures and preconditions symbolization. This sliding between identity and structure is a symptom of what Wilderson would call "the ruse of analogy." Whenever we equate an ontological position with an identity formation, we perform the very violence that sustains the antagonism.[125]

Notwithstanding the care with which he makes these distinctions, Warren himself, I have argued, identifies Blackness (as the ontologically excluded Real) with "the black" (as the sociological identity of particular Symbolic subjects). He reads "the black" not only as a "being fallen off the map of conceivability," as one who "'does not exist' in the world because lacking symbolic placement," but also as a social identity whose visibility enables the statistical analysis of murdered trans/queer persons of color.[126] This conflation seems to spring from his resistance (rooted in solid political ground) to viewing "the black" and "the queer" as equivalent in their social or historical positions—a resistance reinforced by the preponderance of violence against "trans/queer" people of color. But it results in a less sustainable resistance to the "equivalence" of "blackness and queerness."[127] As "ontological position[s]" that gesture toward what the order of being leaves out, Blackness and queerness would name catachrestically the unnameable void in reality and the enjiety aroused whenever a subject comes too close to the Real. Though certainly inflected by unconscious motivations and by my own position as a subject,

my focus on *queerness* as an organizing term wagers that its indeterminacy of reference (in contrast to the fungible "black-objects" to which Blackness for Warren is *essentially* fixed) might slow, if not prevent, the slide from ontological position to fixed social identity, thus permitting the negativity of queerness to supplement—rather than to supersede—the ongoing historical and political efforts to read "the queer" and "the black."[128] The work of queer theory thus coincides with interrogations of woman, Blackness, or trans* as ontological exclusions, a point reinforced by David Marriott's insight "that blackness has no locatable referent or unequivocal name, but is something that escapes all attributes, including the unity of an ontic-ontological fugitivity or again the hypostatized name of 'absolute dereliction.'"[129]

Interestingly, Jackson's essay, which Warren charges with enacting that "slide between blackness as a structural position of non-ontology and the sociology of race (as an identity)," explicitly works *against* that slide. Indeed, it is precisely toward that end that Jackson thinks Blackness and queerness together. Addressing herself to "black queerness" instead of to the particularity of "the black queer," Jackson suggests that if "we think about queerness as something other than an identity, gender, or even set of sexual practices," then "we might think of black queerness as an existential matter rather than as an attribution that accompanies only some black subjectivities."[130] Queerness, so considered, would pertain to anyone positioned to represent Blackness as ontological impossibility. While avoiding the factitious equivalence of "the black" and "the queer" as social beings—which is also to say, as allegories of histories that overlap for some subjects at certain points while diverging at and for others—Jackson reads Blackness and queerness alike as figures of negativity: "Arguably, one could see queerness as the ontology of blackness in culture while theorizing how gender and sexual identities and experiences are produced within the context and logic of antiblackness."[131] As radicals of negativity, neither Blackness nor queerness would correlate with any particular social attributes or refer to a mode of "being" that any subject could properly claim. Neither would "have" a history but both, instead, would *engender* histories through the contingent designation of certain persons or groups as their catachreses, which is to say, as figures of "nothing."

What occasions Warren's anxiety in the face of Jackson's text is his confusion of these catachrestic histories with the ontological negation from which they spring. He writes, "The 'existential matter' that preoccupies Jackson's inquiry here is one that reduces the ontological position of blackness to the experience of unfreedom, or human suffering—a grammar of suffering, which we call 'queerness.' Queerness, here, assumes a problematic

interchangeability with blackness[.] . . . We might ponder the ethical implications of this collapse and the way that the collapse itself serves to distort the antagonism that, as she insightfully notes is 'the foundation of ethics and politics, even of modern sociality itself.'"[132] What's at stake comes into focus here when Warren insists on the "ethical implications" that make the "interchangeability" of queerness and Blackness "problematic" in his view. By asserting the primacy of "ethical" consequences, he frames the discussion in social rather than in structural or ontological terms. That framing becomes more apparent with his claim that Jackson, by enacting and encouraging this "collapse," "distort[s] the antagonism" that she sees as the "foundation of ethics" as such. Though Jackson never mentions "antagonism" in her text, her essay does, as Warren observes, propose that a structuring logic of negation—in other words, a logic of antagonism—underlies and calls into being ethics, politics, and sociality. She calls that logic "the negation of blackness," before proceeding to suggest that queerness be thought as the "ontology of blackness in culture."[133] Understood as the ontology of the division or cut in articulations of reality, queerness expresses the radical force of Blackness as negativity, a negativity that is not the negation of something substantive and specifiable ("the Black" or "the queer" as types of beings) but the insistence of what, in a given order, is inimical to being itself.

Warren may evoke as "antagonism" what Jackson describes as "the negation of blackness," but Jackson, for whom that act of negation produces the ground of ethics, analyzes the negation of Blackness/queerness as the negation of *the negativity inherent in ontological incompletion*. Warren, by contrast, notwithstanding his interest in antagonism as ontological, elaborates an ethical discrimination among sociocultural identities.[134] Antagonism, as a structuring principle, may serve to establish the field of ethics, but for just that reason it remains outside of ethical determination. Warren's concern about the "ethical implications" of "distort[ing]" this antagonism springs less from an engagement with the negativity that structures social reality than from his (justified) anxiety about effacing the differences between two *figures* of that negativity: "We might ask how anything could serve as the ontology of blackness? . . . Frank Wilderson insightfully notes that any rider that we attach to blackness is a conceptual fallacy and results in nothing more than a 'structural adjustment'—the attempt to incorporate blacks into the fold of humanity through the grammar of another's suffering. The queer subject is constructed as degenerate and transgressive, but the fundamental distinction between the 'degenerate queer' and the 'derelict black-as-object'

is that one possesses a grammar to express unfreedom and the other lacks communicability altogether."[135]

Here queerness and Blackness quickly slide into "constructed" sociological entities ("the 'degenerate queer' and the 'derelict black-as-object'"), each with its own proper attributes. Blackness, according to Warren, must be free of "any rider" that would "incorporate blacks" into humanity by way of "another's" suffering (where "the black" is excluded—transculturally and transhistorically—from the access to being enjoyed by "the queer," whose suffering—also, transculturally and transhistorically—is considered recognizably "human"). But "the black" as social identity becomes the "rider" of Blackness here, the ontological realization of Blackness as exclusion from ontology. The positing, which is also the positivizing, of these determinate social identities negates the negativity of Blackness and queerness as Jackson's essay reads them, thus repeating the violence that establishes ethics to mask and master antagonism.[136] Warren's words are worth repeating: "Whenever we equate an ontological position with an identity formation, we perform the very violence that sustains the antagonism."[137] If, in my reading, he fails to heed his own well-founded warning or to acknowledge that the violence he refers to inheres in the notion of antagonism as such, that testifies less to a failure on his part than to the difficulty (structural, psychic, and political) of broaching the "ontic . . . function," as Lacan describes it, of the cut or of trying to conceive ab-sens within the topology of sens-absexe.

At the same time, however, Warren takes the full measure of antagonism when he writes, "One simply cannot rely on 'rational instruments' to resolve an irrational dilemma, especially when these very instruments depend on the destructive kernel of irrationality to sustain them."[138] This insight bears significantly on what this book calls "bad education"; it also resonates with arguments I made earlier in *No Future* and, together with Lauren Berlant, in *Sex, or the Unbearable*. Indeed, my quarrel with Warren's resistance to considering ontological negation as pertaining to Blackness and queerness both (as well as to other catachrestic figures for ontological exclusion) is prompted by the similarity of our engagements with the structuring antagonism of the Symbolic. Though our differences have serious implications, which Warren might qualify as "ethical," they should not obscure what brings us together (with Marriott, Jackson, and Wilderson, too): our common recognition that the insistence of the Real calls forth our social reality. Warren may propose as unique the relation of Blackness to that negativity, while I maintain that within the contingencies of their historical, political, and cultural constructions, innumerable

catachreses will be posited to take the Real's impossible place ("the Black," "the queer," "the woman," etc.), but we come together in attending seriously to that place's impossibility and in trying to address its consequences for the figures of "nothing" made to fill it.

My claim for the embodiment of that nothing and the localization of that impossibility in an open set of catachreses—among which I emphasize queerness for its referential indeterminacy (which Marriott, in my view rightly, also associates with Blackness) and for its designation of something strange, unfamiliar, or out of place—finds support in the concept of atopia as it travels across critical traditions.[139] Derived from the Greek for "without a place," atopia informs discussions of Blackness for scholars from Houston Baker ("the blues singer's signatory code is always *atopic*, placeless") to Fred Moten ("blackness is the place that has no place") to Rebecka Rutledge Fisher ("Harlem is . . . an atopia, the no-place or abyss where black being is presumed to fall inexorably into nothingness").[140] It looms equally large in feminist discourse. Julia Kristeva employs it to conceptualize the mother ("the absolute because primeval seat of the impossible—of the excluded, the outside-of-meaning, the abject. Atopia"); Moira Gatens invokes it in discussing the philosophy of Michèle Le Doeuff ("Atopic feminist thought-on-the-move is an ongoing process without a proper place"); and Adriana Cavarero conceives it as structurally inseparable from the condition of women ("Some women . . . have turned their experience of atopia in the patriarchal 'scientific' and academic order, not into a discomfort that can be remedied through assimilation, but into the place of a fertile rooting").[141]

As inherited from classical Greece, however, atopia correlates with no identity; indeed, by definition, it shuns assignment to any place. Referring to what *lacks* a proper place, to whatever is incongruous, odd, or queer, atopia, in the *Dialogues* and *Symposium* of Plato, is used in describing Socrates. After initially translating atopia as "strangeness" in *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, Gregory Vlastos quickly qualifies that decision in a footnote: "The Greek is stronger; 'strangeness' picks it up at the lower end of its intensity-range. At the higher end 'outrageousness' or even 'absurdity' would be required to match its force."[142] Joel Alden Schlosser extends that range by noting that "we cannot place something characterized by atopia—it eludes categorization, formulation, or a set geography. . . . Atopia thus gains definition in contrast to its topoi, the practices endemic to a given place, location, or context."[143] Expanding on Roland Barthes's discussion of atopia in *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* ("the loved being is recognized by the amorous subject as 'atopos' [a qualification given to Socrates by his interlocutors]

i.e., unclassifiable, of a ceaselessly unforeseen originality"), Sarah Kofman returns to this notion of classificatory impossibility when she summarizes Søren Kierkegaard's take on Socrates as atopic: "Socrates is irreducible to all definitions and specifications; he is and is not."[144] Recalling Goldberg's description of sodomy as "incapable of exact definition" and Lacan's description of the unconscious as "neither being nor non-being," this phrasing, which pushes atopia's refusal of norms to its extreme, captures its unthinkability within the order of what is, its defiance of the logic that imbues a world with the appearance of consistency.

As Kofman's formulation implies, moreover, and as reports of responses to Socrates by his contemporaries confirm, atopia's "strangeness" can entail so radical a departure from social convention that those to whom it pertains can appear as illegible, monstrous, or diseased. The oddity of Socrates threatens to contaminate the order of sense itself, thus bringing us to the intersection of queerness, atopia, and irony: the place where meaning, like a Möbius strip, folds over on itself. Read as the corollary of atopia (and, to that extent, of queerness), Socratic irony, for Pierre Hadot, effects "a reversal of values and an upending of the guiding norms of life," which, as he adds, "cannot help but lead to conflict with the state."[145] In fact, for the Kierkegaard of *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*, the world historical importance of Socrates, the singularity that renders him atopos, springs from what Kierkegaard (giving credit to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who in turn gives credit to Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand Solger) calls the "infinite absolute negativity" of his irony, a negativity that dissolves the ground of his relation to the structures of social meaning: "In this way he becomes alien to the whole world to which he belongs (however much he belongs to it in another sense); the contemporary consciousness has no predicate for him—nameless and indefinable, he belongs to another formation. What bears him up is the negativity that still has engendered no positivity."[146]

By virtue of belonging to this "other formation," Socrates, according to Kierkegaard, puts an end to the world he inherited and ushers in a new one, becoming, for Kierkegaard no less than for Hegel, "the founder of morality."[147] By interrupting the sequence of world history, Socrates functions like an anacoluthon or, as Kierkegaard puts it, "like a dash" or "a magnificent pause in the course of history" that induces us to fill its void with "the meaning of his existence," despite the fact that his irony undoes the assurance such "meaning" would offer.[148] For Kierkegaard, who insists on this anacoluthon even as he sutures it, Socrates embodies the emergence of a "universalizing subjectivity" not "confined in the substantial ethic" of a particular time and

place, a subjectivity that Socrates instantiates by having "taken himself out of, separated himself from, this immediate relationship" to the world.[149] But isn't this to say that he does so as a figural embodiment of ab-sens? Socrates, that is, subtracts himself from collective social reality by virtue of deploying his irony not merely as an instrument of his teaching but also, and more disturbingly, as the practice of a life that renders "the individual alien to the immediacy in which he had previously lived."[150]

The guardians of that immediacy, of course, have good reason to find this troubling—and every Symbolic subject is such a guardian to some extent. However resistant a particular subject's relation to the world, that subject's investments and its self-identity are bound to the world it resists—even, or perhaps especially, in its militant promotion of another (such "other" worlds are conceived, after all, as "better" versions of this one). The tension between such militancy and the negativity of Socratic irony resonates with Wilderson's discussion of the difference between what he calls "American activists" and those, like himself, who want to preserve the "state of pure analysis . . . about the totality and the totalizing nature of Black oppression." The former, as he puts it, are "trying to build a better world. What are we trying to do? We're trying to destroy the world."[151] Socratic irony, in a similar vein, is as indifferent to pragmatic political reform as it is to revolution; it dismisses the authority of the world as we know it and the framework in which the world makes sense by insisting on the pressure of the nothing, of the impossibility excluded from being, of the ab-sens that necessarily structures every articulation of what is.

In challenging "the actuality of the whole substantial world," Socratic irony, as Kierkegaard views it, unleashes an annihilating energy like Walter Benjamin's "divine violence."[152] In Kierkegaard's words: "Here then we have irony as the infinite absolute negativity. It is negativity, because it only negates; it is infinite, because it does not negate this or that phenomenon; it is absolute, because that by virtue of which it negates is a higher something that still is not. The irony establishes nothing, because that which is to be established lies behind it. It is a divine madness that rages like a Tamerlane and does not leave one stone upon another."[153] To the extent that it establishes nothing while taking aim at every establishment, such irony sets meaning spinning in rhythms of appearance and disappearance, thus opening up in the order of sense the (non)place of atopia where "nothing" is established. Kierkegaard's reference to Tamerlane, by relating this irony to "madness," relates it as well to the jouissance inseparable from the drive and so to the insistent subtraction of the subject from itself.

It's ironic, then, that Plato should morph this irony into philosophy, the enemy of jouissance. If Lacan, in Seminar XVII, views philosophy as the master's theft of the knowledge that is the jouissance of the slave, then Plato, by writing Socrates into his philosophical text (or more simply, by *writing* Socrates), appropriates the only knowledge that Socrates ever claimed: the knowledge that he knew nothing.[154] Claire Colebrook, considering the possibility that "the Socratic ironic legacy would not lead to truth, recognition, or moral education" but only to "absence or negativity," proposes that "in many ways, Socrates typifies the impossibility of philosophy."[155] Socrates had to die, we might say, so Plato could *turn him into philosophy*—or at least into the sort of philosophy that renounces jouissance. Alain Badiou, Plato's foremost contemporary advocate and heir, underscores this renunciation: "I think that we have to share, at least provisionally, the antiphilosophical verdict of psychoanalysis according to which philosophy wants to know nothing about jouissance. In any case philosophy, when put to the test, which I propose for it here, of thinking the contemporary, will not find its point of departure in jouissance. It will turn away from jouissance methodically, always with the hope of being able to get back to it."[156] Badiou, however, tellingly describes the jouissance to which philosophy might "get back" as a "rehabilitate[d] jouissance," one that philosophy will have learned to "think . . . otherwise," which is also to say, one he imagines as capable of being dominated by thought.[157] In this sense Platonic philosophy's relation to the "madness" of Socratic irony is a "rehabilitate[d] jouissance" from the outset. As Plato makes clear in the *Republic*, such philosophy forswears atopia in order to gain the world.

Badiou, when he "translates" the *Republic* into French, may modernize, rewrite, and reimagine it, but he continues Plato's positivization of Socratic negativity, making Socrates an earnest spokesman for "the supreme calmness of rational thought" and having him repudiate "the wild, animal-like agency" associated with the "drives."[158] Badiou's Socrates has little of what Jonathan Lear associates with the Socrates of the *Phaedrus*: an "ironic uncanniness" that Socrates celebrates as a form of "god-sent madness . . . finer . . . than man-made sanity," an uncanniness about which Lear, continuing to lean on quotations from the *Phaedrus*, observes: "Those who are struck in this way '*do not know what has happened to them for lack of clear perception*' (250a–b). They are troubled by 'the strangeness [atopia] of their condition' (251e), but they also show 'contempt for all the accepted standards of propriety and good taste'—that is for the norms of social pretense."[159] *Badiou's* Socrates, in contrast, even while continuing to gesture toward his ostensible

lack of knowledge ("Would you think it right . . . for someone to talk about what he doesn't know as if he *did* know?"), puts the philosopher at the center of politics and the social order both, determining and defending the very propriety, the very allocation of proper places, that atopia puts at risk.[160] Not for him the "consistently sustained irony that lets the objective power of the state break up on [its] rock-firm negativity," as Kierkegaard expresses it.[161] While the latter sees Socrates as "the nothing from which the beginning must nevertheless begin," Badiou reads him, like Plato, as the plenitude from which philosophy will have begun.[162]

At the same time, however, Badiou acknowledges that philosophy must take account not only of atopia's subtraction from meaning but also of absens as pure division. He expands on this theme in his long encounter with Lacanian psychoanalysis, especially in the seminar he devoted to Lacan from 1994 to 1995. He responds to the "antiphilosophical" views he attributes to the French psychoanalyst by denying that philosophy yields to what he calls the "temptation of the One." Instead, he avows the inherence of division in philosophical thought, in particular the division between metaphysical unity and the primacy of division itself. If Badiou, on the one hand, admits philosophy's "temptation toward the recollection of meaning," he affirms, on the other, its "thought of the true as a stranger to meaning."[163] Calling the former the religious temptation (where "truth is absorbed in the space of meaning") that philosophy can never escape, he declares, "You could say that religion insists in philosophy, but only if you add that philosophy, constitutively, is a certain system of interrupting that insistence."[164] Insofar as Badiou understands philosophy as both an investigation of this interruption and the nondialectical, nonsynthesizable system of interruption itself, he rejects the charge that philosophy aims to plug the hole in being through a discourse of political idealism such as Plato's in the *Republic*.

Addressing Lacan's distaste for that text, with its vision of a regulated society that Lacan compares to a well-run horse farm, Badiou claims that rather than dismissing Plato as simply totalitarian, Lacan reads the *Republic* as a work of irony in which Plato is pulling our leg. Without explicitly endorsing that position, Badiou points out how persistently the *Republic* challenges philosophy's "religious" temptation to suture the hole in (political) reality (noting, for example, Plato's insistence on the plurality of politics, the hazards of chance, and the precarity of the ideal). If not ironizing philosophy's ambitions, then, the *Republic*, as Badiou conceives it, stresses the structural negativity to which philosophy responds. Approaching that division or gap ("béance") in terms of the political distribution of places (the focus, in

the *Republic*, of political philosophy as such), Badiou affirms its irreducibility even in the face of philosophy's will to establish a new mode of thought.[165]

Having said as much, Badiou nonetheless makes clear his profound investment in the positivity of such new establishments in the face of that "béance." They counter the instantaneous and atemporal cut of Lacanian analysis ("la coupure instantanée"), with the temporality of what he identifies as philosophy's "long détour."[166] With this he privileges philosophy's attachment to thought in its duration over the abruptions and divisions of the analytic act that make psychoanalysis a continuous undoing at odds with any establishment. Lacan may once have described himself as Lenin to Freud's Marx, but for Badiou he fails to answer the central question that Lenin posed: What is to be done? ("Que faire?").[167] This, for Lenin and Badiou alike, is the essentially *political* question whose answer is collective struggle to dismantle the world as it is and *establish a new one*.

But Lacan, as Badiou acknowledges, rejects the survival of collectivities or the fixity of doctrinal transmission, refusing to formulate precise regulations for the analytic session or to produce an organization to define when an analytic act takes place. Observing that "the final thought of Lacan is that there is no intrinsic legitimacy to the duration of any collective whatsoever," Badiou refers to Lacan's "Monsieur A," dated March 18, 1980, in which, after dissolving the École freudienne de Paris, Lacan offers his fellow psychoanalysts the following advice: "Stick together for as long as needed in order to do something and then, afterwards, disband in order to do something else."[168]

This imperative of dissolution encapsulates Lacan's position for Badiou. Dissolution, he maintains, becomes the very maxim of Lacanian psychoanalysis ("la maxime veritable") insofar as it is synonymous with the analytic act ("l'acte, c'est l'acte de dissolution").[169] Such a will to undo embodies, for Badiou, the essence of antiphilosophy insofar as it insists on and reenacts the primacy of the cut. Against the performative recurrence of this Lacanian "I dissolve" ("Je dissous"), Badiou poses a counterinclination that he frames as "I establish" ("Je fonde")—an inclination that he recognizes as present in Lacan as well, but that repeatedly, even symptomatically, gives way to dissolution.[170] "I establish" declares philosophy's resistance to the negativity of the act, its will to overthrow "what is" by founding what might be, and it reflects, for Badiou, the shared commitment of politics and philosophy (but not of psychoanalysis) to the construction of new worlds in the "long détour" that leads the present toward the ideal.

Though acknowledging the gap, the "béance," that precludes the realization of a world or a republic where everything would find its proper place,

Badiou takes the part of Plato against Lacan's atopic Socrates. If, as Claire Colebrook aptly puts it, Socrates "typifies the impossibility of philosophy" (and so, in Badiou's sense, anticipates Lacan as an antiphilosopher), then Badiou persists, nonetheless, in making him Plato's specular double. In his seminar on Lacan, Badiou claims, for example, "Socrates did not have the least intention of winning over the sophists. He just wanted to show the young people that he could shut the sophists up and move on to serious things."[171] To the extent that these "serious things" for Badiou include the thinking of the world in relation to its Real by establishing philosophy as the dominance of thought and the disavowal of jouissance, Badiou's account of what Socrates achieves by "shut[ting] up" the sophists parallels Sarah Kofman's description of Plato's (re)construction of Socrates: "Plato, bowing to a non-dialectical necessity, especially after Socrates' death, congealed Socrates into a master figure, a founding figure of philosophy."[172] At the same time, however, the "serious things" that this Socrates would "move on to" reveal philosophy's constitutive investment in, its *anti-ironic* investment in, proceeding as if the hole in reality (acknowledged in the sophists' resistance to any positive claims of truth) were capable of political repair—a repair whose possibility rests, according to Badiou, on "the glue of meaning" (la colle du sens).[173]

This phrase echoes Lacan's reference to "l'effet de colle," literally "the gluing effect," by which he names the inertia that turns a group into a static institution. Punning on "l'effet d'école" (the effect of a school) to suggest the conformity of education and the formalization of schools of thought, Lacan refers to *l'effet de colle* on March 11, 1980, in a text entitled "D'Écolage" (a takeoff, a beginning, and an unschooling), which announces as irreversible his decision to dissolve the École freudienne de Paris.[174] At the same time, he identifies a series of steps by which his fellow workers in the Freudian field can move on from this "unschooling." These steps programmatically oppose the production of permanent collectivities (where the signifier *collectif* is already marked by the trace of *colle*). Instead, Lacan affirms interruption as central to analytic work. Insisting on the cut of division as the defining analytic act (already enshrined in the scansion that determines when the variable-length session ends), Lacan resists "l'effet de colle" and "l'effet d'école" at once, countering philosophy's flirtation with power and the proper distribution of places with the psychoanalytic focus on what has no place and upsets the distribution of power.

Jean Allouch has something similar in mind when he argues that psychoanalysis has "nothing to do with the side of those in power, those who determine how society should function, what rules it sets out and how it treats its members."

He then goes on to specify what a psychoanalytic ethics might mean: "Marguerite Duras gave the best formulation when she expressed the wish, which she herself registered as the maxim of politics as well, 'Let the world go to perdition!' If one does not set up one's camp with the radicality of that, with what Lacan calls 'décharite,' that of a Big Other barred, non-existent, then there's no way to be on the side of those whose symptoms scream it ceaselessly."[175] With his reference to *décharite*, the charitable noncharity of the analyst's positioning as excrescence, waste, or trash, Allouch promotes a psychoanalysis that aligns itself with those made queer by dominant opinion, those consigned to the position of ontological exclusion, negation, or nonbeing. Such a psychoanalysis would manifest a queerness of its own by opposing the order of meaning that rests on the subtraction of ab-sens and insisting, instead, on the atopia of Socratic negativity over and against its translation (by Plato and the philosophy he initiates) into a positive mode of instruction held together by the glue of meaning, by "la colle du sens," that invariably generates "l'effet d'école."

It follows, as Badiou observes, that philosophy and psychoanalysis must differ on the good of education and also, a fortiori, on education in the good, just as they differ in the value they attach to foundation and dissolution, organization and negativity, thought and jouissance:

> Lacan's views, even if they present themselves in the form of a discourse, are clearly quite far from university discourse, but they are even more profoundly distant from any educational ambition. And this, by the way, is characteristic of antiphilosophy. Because one could establish Lacan's belief—a belief one can easily share—that there's an educational drive within philosophy. After all, the Platonic system, considered as foundational, can be understood as an educational system. In stark contrast to this educational underpinning of philosophy, even taking "education" in as noble a sense as possible, psychoanalysis, even in its discourse, breaks with every educational aim. Lacan says as much, with the greatest rigor, in the text that closed the Congress of 1970. He says: What saves me from education is the act.[176]

To the degree that it dissipates meaning by refusing the Symbolic distribution of places, the act opposes education as the defense and "transmission of a knowledge."[177] Thus Lacan, who conceives the hysteric's discourse as questioning both the master signifier and knowledge as the signifier of mastery, can invite us to "recognize in Socrates the figure of hysteria," the person who poses the question of being as inseparable from discourse as such.[178]

Socrates, that is, like the hysteric, as characterized by Bruce Fink, "pushes the master . . . to the point where he . . . can find the master's knowledge lacking. Either the master does not have an explanation for everything, or his or her reasoning does not hold water."[179]

Rather than assuming the transmission of knowledge as providing a stable ground, irony hystericizes knowledge, generating ever-expanding circles of irony instead. As Sarah Kofman observes, "Kierkegaard believes that he is the only one who has been able to grasp the viewpoint of irony, precisely because irony (like Socrates, who is of a piece with his irony) does not allow itself to be grasped."[180] Escaping one's grasp, precluding comprehension: such an irony approaches madness. So, too, does psychoanalysis, according to Lacan, by engaging in an analytic act "all the madder for being unteachable."[181] This leads him to insist on "the antagonism . . . between education and knowledge" and to declare, while dismissing what he calls the "educational underpinning of philosophy," that "knowledge passes through the act."[182] Knowledge passes, in other words, through ab-sens and through the drive, bypassing a philosophy predicated, as Badiou understands it, on the "colle du sens."

Socrates, of course, was sentenced to death for failing to recognize the gods of Athens and for corrupting the young with his teachings. Lacan, who was investigated throughout his career by psychoanalytic organizations, would be expelled from the International Association of Psychoanalysis, denied the right to conduct training analyses by the Société française de psychanalyse, and forced to stop holding his seminars at the École normale supérieure. Like Socrates, he was accused of promulgating bad educational practices by undermining the institutions of meaning and by substituting foreign gods, as it were, for those officially acknowledged (by following his own daimonion and establishing the variable-length session in defiance of institutional authority). Each was denied a place in his world for engaging the atopia within it and for enacting (by means of irony or the analytic cut) the antagonism responsible for the jouissance against which education defends.

Discussing the daimonion of Socrates, for example, the internal "voice" that interrupted him when he sensed he was on a wrong path (and which, according to his accusers, he enshrined as a god above those of the state), Jean-François Baladé observes that this "'demonic sign' . . . manifests itself only in a negative manner, and it only distracts Socrates from doing such and such a thing, without offering any positive incitement." He then adds, "This sign, which is beyond Socrates, is at the same time what most intimately belongs to him."[183] Baladé's language recalls Lacan's formulation of something "in you . . . more than you," a phrase he applies to the *objet a*, the object-cause of desire that

resists, as Guy Le Gaufey observes, "any imposition of unity."[184] As Žižek describes it in *The Parallax View*, the *objet a* "stands in for the unknown X, the noumenal core of the object beyond appearances, for what is 'in you more than yourself.' . . . [The] *objet petit a* is the very cause of the parallax gap, that unfathomable X which forever eludes the symbolic grasp."[185] Later, in *Less Than Nothing*, he asserts, "There is 'something in you more than yourself,' the elusive *je ne sais quoi* which makes you what you are, which accounts for your 'specific flavor'"; he exemplifies that "something" in one's proper name, which he understands as "a signifier that falls into its signified."[186] Such "a name," Žižek notes, "far from referring to your collection of properties, ultimately refers to that elusive X."[187] In other words, the name is the empty placeholder that seeks to pin down the impossible Real (in this case, the Real of the subject as enjoyment, as attachment to jouissance). It would capture, precisely as "something" capable of articulation in the Symbolic, the nothingness, incapable of appearing as such, that registers, like Blackness and queerness (inter alia), the ontological negation, the exclusion from being, by which reality appears.

Expressing both his radical self-division and "what most intimately belongs to him," the daimonion of Socrates stands in for this "nothing" by designating his access to jouissance through "infinite absolute negativity." It thus functions as complement and counterpart to the Lacanian agalma, the treasure hidden from common view that irradiates a subject with value. Both the agalma and the daimonion constitutes what Žižek glosses as an "extimate kernel" in the subject that would suture the gap in "what is."[188] Paradoxically, however, the daimonion evinces that kernel as the gap or the nothingness itself; rather than referring to something subtracted or cut off from Symbolic reality, it signals the persistence of the rupture or cut, the determining pressure of the Real as ab-sens that inheres in the structure of reality *as* the cutting off of the Real. This is what Žižek gets at when he writes, "In the case of *objet petit a* as the object of the drive, the 'object' is directly loss itself. . . . That is to say: the weird movement called 'drive' is not driven by the 'impossible' quest for the lost object; it is *a push to enact 'loss'—the gap, cut, distance—itself directly*."[189] While philosophy's "educational underpinning" seeks to mend the hole in reality by applying the "glue of meaning," Socratic irony and the analytic act dissolve that glue and reveal that hole by establishing (the place of) nothing.

Lacan makes this makes this clear in "Monsieur A," his text of dissolution. Having urged the adherents of La cause freudienne to "stick together [*collez-vous ensemble*] for as long as needed in order to do something and then, afterwards, disband in order to do something else," he declares his intention

to "establish a propitious turbulence for you."[190] The only alternative to such turbulence is "the certainty of being stuck in sticking together" (la colle assurée). Apparently referring to his puns on *colle* and *école*, he then goes on to remark:

> You see how I put that by small touches. I will let you take your time to understand.
>
> Understand what? I don't pride myself on making sense. Nor on the opposite. Because the real is what opposes itself to that.
>
> I've paid homage to Marx as the inventor of the symptom. This Marx, however, is also the restorer of order, by the sole fact that he breathed back into the proletariat the di-mention [*dit-mention*] of meaning. It was sufficient for that purpose that he speak or name the proletariat as such.
>
> The Church learned a lesson from that, that's what I told you on January 5. Take it from me, religious significance is going to experience a boom you can't imagine. Because religion is the original home of meaning. This is obvious to those at the top of the hierarchy even more than to others.
>
> I try to go counter to that, lest psychoanalysis become a religion, as it tends to do, irresistibly, once we imagine that interpretation only works by way of meaning. I teach that its spring lies elsewhere, namely in the signifier as such.
>
> And that's what those who are panicked by this dissolution are resisting. The hierarchy only sustains itself by virtue of managing meaning.[191]

Lacan would undo the entrenchment (*la colle*) endemic to every school (*école*) by severing interpretation from meaning and disrupting the institutions—religious, educational, and psychoanalytic—designed to control and pass on meaning by refusing the nothing, the negativity of division, that ab-sens designates as sex.

Queerness, irony, and psychoanalysis all conduce to a bad education by insisting on this "nothing" that irrupts in jouissance. Philosophy, still our paradigm for the "good" of education, founds itself on separating jouissance from rational thought, maintaining, in the words of Colette Soler, "that there exist instruments or organs of knowledge that are autonomous with regard to the demands of the libido and that this separation makes possible what one imagines to be a capacity for so-called objective thought, which is to say, thought dissociated from every interest of jouissance."[192] For Lacan, to the contrary, as Soler remarks, "thought is jouissance," and what she wittily labels "joui-pense" pervades the whole of the conceptual field with its destabilizing

libidinal charge.[193] This signals the place of sex in thought as the atopia, the nothing and the nowhere, against which reality defends.

If bad education, while insisting on this nothing, offers nothing by way of repair, then what could we ever hope to learn by attending to its teaching? Can it even "teach" at all? The chapters that follow approach this question as central to queer theory's project and suggest that bad education insists on returning us to this nothing—and, therefore, to nothing "good." "Bad" is not transvalued here, nor does queerness *become* a "good," though the pull of such reabsorption into a dialectically redeemed education, an education construed as *positively* "bad" and so as *positively* "queer," inheres in the problematic that this book engages throughout. To forestall that return of the good, each chapter broaches education as inseparable from ideological suture and poses against its redemptive promise a relentlessly queer negativity: queer because it never resolves into sense, establishes an alternative world, or makes a claim on being.[194] At a moment when the profligate use of the term prompts the question, "Is everything queer?" this book has an answer: "No." Insofar as queerness pertains to ab-sens, it argues that nothing "is" queer, while maintaining that *nothing*, the ontological negation figured by queerness, *is*. Put otherwise: *Bad Education* theorizes queerness without positivizing "queers." Like every critical enterprise, it maximizes certain issues while minimizing others. Structuring logics take precedence over sociological or historical analysis, neither of which is in danger of being scanted by other scholars. Literary and cinematic works take precedence over scientific data insofar as they foreground the roots of queerness in the logics of representation. Inevitable though such limitations must be in any work that foreswears the ambition of providing *The Key to All Mythologies*, they can never escape their implication in ongoing conceptual violence. If this risks, to return to Warren's term, complicity with "onticide," or, to return to Musser's charge, the "silencing" of race and sexuality, then it does so as the necessary consequence of following queerness to the very end. For queerness is inseparable from the violence with which it detotalizes a world and the end, the rupture, the cut is precisely where queerness always leads, even to "the end of the world." Insofar as that end invariably evokes the terrorism of the Real, queerness, like all catachrestic misnamings of the primally absented ab-sens, remains foreign to our thought. This book, therefore, like every attempt to think ontological negation, can only aspire to *approach* the nothing that can never afford us freedom, meaning, identity, or anything good: the nothingness of the bad education this book will try, and fail, to imagine.

Notes:

Preface

1 Evan Hill, Ainara Tiefenthäler, Christiaan Triebert, Drew Jordan, Haley Willis, and Robin Stein, "How George Floyd Was Killed in Police Custody," *New York Times*, May 31, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-investigation.html. See also Mike Baker, Jennifer Valentino-DeVries, Manny Fernandez, and Michael LaForgia, "Three Words. 70 Cases. The Tragic History of 'I Can't Breathe,'" *New York Times*, June 29, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/06/28/us/i-cant-breathe-police-arrest.html.

2 Bostock v. Clayton County, Georgia, 590 U.S. ___ (2020), majority opinion by Justice Neil Gorsuch, available at https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/19pdf/17-1618_hfci.pdf.

3 Bostock v. Clayton County, Georgia, 590 U.S., majority opinion by Justice Neil Gorsuch.

4 Bostock v. Clayton County, Georgia, 590 U.S.

5 Adam Nagourney and Jeremy W. Peters, "A Half-Century On, an Unexpected Milestone for L.G.B.T.Q. Rights," *New York Times*, June 15, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/15/us/politics/supreme-court-lgbtq-rights.html.

6 Nagourney and Peters, "A Half-Century On, an Unexpected Milestone for L.G.B.T.Q. Rights." Without questioning the symbolic significance or the widespread impact of the resistance at the Stonewall Inn, we do a disservice to the courageous people who pursued gay rights for decades before it by foreshortening the historical record and ignoring the work of the Mattachine Society, the Daughters of Bilitis, and other organizations dedicated to procuring justice for those denied it because of their sexual orientation, sexual identity, or sexual practices.

7 Bobby Seale, "Interview with Bobby Seale," conducted by Blackside, Inc., November 4, 1998, Eyes on the Prize II Interviews, Washington University Digital Gateway Texts, http://digital.wustl.edu/e/eii/eiiweb/sea5427.0172.147bobbyseale.html. See also item 8 of the "Letter to Parents Concerning the Black Panthers," reprinted from "What Do the Panthers Stand For" (1970),

https://ia803109.us.archive.org/34/items/mcsa_S6_1970BlackPantherParty/1970BlackPantherParty.jpg: "As a first step we want a truce signed between black, white, and brown working people, in the community and on the job, as we recognize that fighting among ourselves only serves the rich."

8 Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: Random House, 2019), 222.

9 Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 49, 238.

10 Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 223.

11 Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright, 2020), 14.

12 Angela Y. Davis, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 18.

13 Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 331.

14 As the introduction argues, the logic of sexual difference in the Symbolic, informed by what Lacan calls *sens-absexe*, takes shape through the subtraction of sexe (ab-sexe) in order to generate sense.

15 The paradigmatic nature of sexual difference does not make its correlation with the established binarism of male and female necessary, contrary to Justice Alito. It insists only that a marker of difference will shape Symbolic subjects and that any such marker, whatever it may be, will carry a libidinal force.

16 *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "queer (adj.)," accessed March 11, 2022, https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/156236.

17 "USCCB President 'Deeply Concerned' about Court's LGBT Ruling," *Intermountain Catholic*, June 19, 2020, http://www.icatholic.org/article/usccb-president-deeply-concerned-about-courts-lgbt-24213922.

18 See, among others, Manuela Tobias and Anthony Galavi, "Woman Allegedly Attempts to Deface Fresno Black Lives Matter Street Art," *Fresno Bee*, June 19, 2020, https://www.fresnobee.com/news/local/article243672582.html; and Marissa Parra, "Oak Park Black Lives Matter Mural Painted Over to Read, 'All Lives Matter,'" *CBS Chicago*, July 8, 2020, https://chicago.cbslocal.com/2020/07/08/oak-park-black-lives-matter-mural-painted-over-to-read-all-lives-matter/.

19 Calvin Warren, "The Catastrophe: Black Feminist Poethics, (Anti)Form, and Mathematical Nihilism," *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 28, no. 2 (December 2019): 357.

20 My argument, in advancing its analysis of structure, presupposes the very ontology whose totalizations it critiques. It proposes no access to the beyond of sense except by engaging the ruptures, the ironic obtrusions, produced by the order of meaning that, in both senses of the word, *contains* them.

Introduction

1 *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "educate (v.)," accessed March 10, 2022, https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/59580.

2 Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire 2, 1954–1955: Le moi dans la théorie de Freud et dans la technique de la psychanalyse*, December 1, 1954, 67, http://staferla.free.fr/S2/S2.htm. Unless otherwise noted, English translations from non-English sources are my own.

3 Lacan, *Séminaire 2*, 16. "Que *la fonction symbolique* intervient à tous les moments et à tous les degrés de son existence."

4 Lacan, *Séminaire 2*, 16. "Et *la totalité* dans *l'ordre symbolique* s'appelle *un univers* . . . à l'intérieur duquel tout ce qui est humain doit s'ordonner." (And that totality in the Symbolic order is called a universe . . . inside of which everything human must organize itself.)

5 Lacan, *Séminaire 2*, 157. "Si le sujet humain ne dénomme . . . comme la *Genèse* dit que cela a été fait au *Paradis terrestre*: les espèces majeures d'abord, . . . ne s'entend pas sur cette *reconnaissance*, il n'y a aucun monde même perceptif du sujet humain qui soit soutenable plus d'un instant."

6 Lacan, *Séminaire 2*, 16. "En d'autres termes, que tout se tient, que pour concevoir ce qui se passe, ce qui nous est donné dans *le champ de l'observation*, le domaine propre qui est de l'ordre humain, il faut que nous partions de l'idée que cet ordre constituant *une totalité*, et *la totalité* dans *l'ordre symbolique* s'appelle *un univers* et est *donné d'abord* et dans son caractère universel, c'est-à-dire que ce n'est pas peu à peu qu'il se constitue quelque part une amorce de *relation symbolique*, un *premier symbole*: *dès qu'il vient le symbole, il y a un univers de symboles qui englobe toute la question*, si vous voulez, qu'on pourrait se poser." (In other words, in order for everything to hold together, to understand everything that happens, everything that is given to us in the field of observation, the proper domain of the human order, we have to start from the idea of that order constituting a totality, and that totality in the symbolic order is called a universe and is given from the outset in its universal character, which is to say that there isn't constituted somewhere, little by little, some beginning of symbolic relations, a first symbol: as soon as a symbol appears there is a universe of symbols that englobes every question that arises.)

7 Lacan, *Séminaire 2*, 21.

8 Alenka Zupančič, "On Evil: An Interview with Alenka Zupančič," interview by Christopher Cox, *Cabinet*, no. 5 (Winter 2001–2002), http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/5/alenkazupancic.php.

9 Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 122; Julia Kristeva, "La femme, ce n'est jamais ça / Woman Can Never Be Defined," in *The New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), 137; Catherine Malabou, *Changing Difference: The Feminine and the Question of Philosophy*, trans. Carolyn Shread (Malden, MA: Polity, 2014), 98; Sylvia Wynter, "*Proud Flesh* Inter/Views: Sylvia Wynter," interview by Greg Thomas, *Proud-Flesh: New Afrikan Journal of Culture, Politics and Consciousness*, no. 4 (2006), https://www.africaknowledgeproject.org/index.php/proudflesh/article/view/202; Jared Sexton, "Unbearable Blackness," *Cultural Critique*, no. 90 (Spring 2015): 162; and Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 739.

10 At the end of 2017, for example, US district judge A. Wallace Tashima permanently blocked a ban on ethnic studies programs in Arizona's public schools that

had been passed in 2010, while in August 2018, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's government moved to ban gender studies courses in Hungarian universities.

11 In the manifesto *2083: A European Declaration of Independence*, Breivik devotes significant space to lamenting the decline of the Western University, a decline he blames on the Frankfurt School and the academic institutionalization of multiculturalism, feminism, queer theory, and deconstruction. He writes, for example, in the introduction:

> This new generation of critics instead became prime practitioners of what is known in literary circles as 'cultural criticism.' They strained to view literature from the 'woman's point of view' or the 'victims' or the 'radical minority point of view.' Their attempts were not to find meaning—they were influenced too greatly by relativists for that—but to find sexism, racism or 'homophobia' in the works of male, European or heterosexual authors.
>
> Derridean deconstruction became a tool for these cultural critics. Simply stated, deconstruction is a school of thought that posits that words have no meaning. Instead, words have 'traces' of meaning. The meaning of a word is continually disappearing, leaving us with only the memory, or trace, of what that meaning once was.
>
> Once they realised the power of this school of thought, the cultural critics embraced it readily, for here they discovered a method of attack on the traditional interpretations of literary works. They used deconstruction to remove traditional meaning and replaced it with new meaning. That meaning was the Political Correctness that infests our society today. For example, after the traditional meaning of 'How Do I Love Thee?' has been destabilised in the process described above, a feminist critic might come along and—in the absence of a stable traditional interpretation—declare that the poem is 'really' concerned with how women in nineteenth-century England were conditioned to see themselves as secondary to men.

Kakutani, in *The Death of Truth*, echoes these sentiments. Denouncing the turn to "subjectivity" in academic criticism and its association with multiculturalism, feminism, and queer theory, she then turns her focus to deconstruction: "Deconstruction, in fact, is deeply nihilistic, implying that the best efforts of journalists and historians—to ascertain the best available truths through the careful gathering and weighing of evidence—are futile. It suggests that reason is an outdated value, that language is not a tool for communication but an unstable and deceptive interface that is constantly subverting itself." Symptomatically, neither of these defenders of "meaning" and "reason" seems to deploy these concepts very meaningfully or reasonably. Breivik assails cultural criticism and deconstruction for claiming that literature and even words have no meaning before going on to describe the sorts of meanings that cultural critics might discern in literary works. And Kakutani, while complaining that for deconstructive critics "reason is an outdated value," seems, unreasonably, to assume that just because deconstruction exposes the nonfinality of evidentiary interpretations, such interpretations themselves must be "futile." Similarly, she seems to think that language cannot be, at the

same time, a "tool for communication" *and* "an unstable and deceptive interface that is constantly subverting itself." Anders Behring Breivik, "Political Correctness: Deconstruction and Literature," in *2083: A European Declaration of Independence,* 2011, https://sites.google.com/site/breivikmanifesto/2083; and Michiko Kakutani, *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2018), 160–61.

12 Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (New York: Verso, 2013), 744.

13 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 25.

14 Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 26.

15 Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 29.

16 Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 30, 31.

17 One could think about polysemy here as the mere multiplication of closed ones, much in the way that arguments for the multiplication of differences (social, political, cultural) presuppose the integrity of the elements thus differentiated from and added to each other.

18 As one example among many, consider a passage from Kathleen Collins's short story "Whatever Happened to Interracial Love?" The father of the central character, Cheryl, whom the author characterizes, within ironizing quotation marks, as "negro," visits his daughter's New York apartment to have dinner with her; her white roommate, Charlotte (who had been, like Cheryl, a student at Sarah Lawrence); and Charlotte's Black boyfriend, Henry. Cheryl herself has a white boyfriend in prison in Georgia for his activities as a freedom rider. In the aftermath of the dinner, Collins writes, "When Cheryl accompanied him to their car, he was still crying. He asked her to come home; he realized now that he had made a terrible mistake sending her to that exclusive school to be the first and only one. It had made her queer. It had made her want a queer life among queer, unnatural people. It was not what he had in mind at all. He had simply wanted her to have a good education with a solid, respected ('white') name behind it. That was all he wanted. Then he had expected her to come home again and teach and get married and live in the apartment on their third floor. He did not want her to lead this queer integrated life with some pasty freedom rider who liked to flagellate himself for ('negroes'). It was unhealthy. It was wrong. He should go home, too. They should all go home. Henry should go back to his ghetto. Charlotte should return to her well-bred country-life. She, Cheryl, should come home and get a job teaching school. Everything else was too queer, too unspeakably queer, and made him cry." Kathleen Collins, *Whatever Happened to Interracial Love?* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016), Kindle loc. 640 of 1790.

19 Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 12. I am very grateful to Elizabeth Wilson for reminding me about Derrida's phrase and for being so incisive a reader and interlocutor.

20 For a detailed engagement with the concept of the unbearable and its relation to the Real, see Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

21 Guy Le Gaufey, "Le plus atopique des deux . . . ," in *Lacan avec les philosophes* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1991), 168. "Signifie son incapacité à recevoir une quelconque imposition d'unité, ce qui est à soi seul lourd de conséquences quant à son être, ne serait-ce que d'un point de vue leibnizien où un *être* est d'abord *un* être."

22 See Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*.

23 Jacques Lacan, *L'Étourdit*, in *Autres écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), 454–55.

24 Lacan, *L'Étourdit*, 452. "Freud nous met sur la voie de ce que l'ab-sens désigne le sexe: c'est à la gonfle de ce sens-absexe qu'une topologie se déploie où c'est le mot qui tranche."

25 *Designates* (*désigne*) may condense this double gesture by suggesting an act of designification (*de-signe*) as well.

26 Alenka Zupančič, "Sexual Difference and Ontology," *e-flux Journal*, no. 32 (February 2012), http://www.e-flux.com/journal/sexual-difference-and-ontology/. More recently, in *What Is Sex?*, a brilliant book that came out as my own was being finished, Zupančič broaches this question of sex and meaning in similar terms, though from a somewhat different direction. As she puts it concisely near the outset: "It is as if sexual meaning, so generously produced by the unconscious, were here to mask the reality of a more fundamental negativity at work in sexuality, to separate us from it by a screen that derives its efficacy from the fact that it is itself a means of satisfaction—satisfaction through meaning, satisfaction in the production of sexual meaning, and (as the obverse of this) in the production of meaning of the sexual. Paradoxical as this may sound, one of the primary tasks of psychoanalysis is to slowly but thoroughly deactivate the path of this satisfaction, to render it useless. To produce sex as absolutely and intrinsically meaningless, not as the ultimate horizon of all humanly produced meaning. That is to say to restore sex in its dimension of the Real." Alenka Zupančič, *What Is Sex?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 8.

27 Ellie Ragland, "The Discourse of the Master," in *Lacan, Politics, Aesthetics*, ed. Willy Apollon and Richard Feldstein (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 142.

28 As we will see, this putting askew bears a crucial relation to the etymology of *queer*.

29 "C'est à partir de là qu'il nous faut obtenir deux universels, deux *tous* suffisamment consistants pour nous séparer chez des parlants—, qui, d'être des, se croient des êtres—, deux moitiés telles qu'elles ne s'embrouillent pas trop dans la coïtération quant ils y arrivent." Lacan, *L'Étourdit*, 456.

30 In this context one should note that the Lacanian position would not assert that there are multiple sexes instead of two but rather would insist that every reification of sex into some sort of knowledge or identity is a fantasy.

31 Kenneth Reinhard, "Introduction to Alain Badiou and Barbara Cassin," draft shared with author (2015).

32 Alain Badiou, "Formulas of 'L'Étourdit,'" in *There's No Such Thing as a Sexual Relationship: Two Lessons on Lacan*, by Alain Badiou and Barbara Cassin, trans. Susan Spitzer and Kenneth Reinhard (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 50.

33 No list could be inclusive or make the chosen examples less selective and less partial. The point, indeed, is that any set will include the null set that signifies what cannot be signified or added to the count. In making the case for queer theory as a theory of this libidinized relation to ab-sens, I have no interest in discrediting or superseding other possible nominations. Every nomination will be a catachresis that attempts to pass as literal. Queerness, in its openness to anything stigmatized as unusual, deviant, foreign, or strange, and hence to anything that disturbs the coherence on which an aesthetic community relies, seems particularly well suited as a catachrestic nomination for this unnameable alterity to the meaning of any social order.

34 Justin Clemens, *Psychoanalysis Is an Antiphilosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 53.

35 Zupančič, "Sexual Difference and Ontology."

36 Joan Copjec, "The Sexual Compact," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 17, no. 2 (2012): 46.

37 In Žižek's words, jouissance "is never fully achieved, always missed, but, simultaneously, we never can get rid of it." Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 308.

38 See, for instance, Lacan, *Séminaire 2*, 157, where Lacan offers the following account of a moment in Sigmund Freud's interpretation of the dream of Irma's injection: "Ce n'est pas simplement pour lui qu'il trouve le *Nemo*, ou *l'alpha et l'oméga* du sujet acéphale, comme représentant son inconscient, c'est au contraire lui qui parle, par l'intermédiaire de ce rêve, qui s'aperçoit qu'il nous dit, sans l'avoir voulu, sans l'avoir reconnu d'abord, et le reconnaissant uniquement dans son analyse du rêve, c'est-à-dire pendant qu'il nous parle, il nous dit quelque chose qui est à la fois lui et pas lui, qui a parlé dans les dernières parties du rêve, qui nous dit: *Je suis celui qui veut être pardonné d'avoir osé commencer a guérir ces malades, que jusqu'à présent on ne voulait pas comprendre, donc que l'on s'interdisait de guérir. Je suis celui qui veut être pardonné de cela. Je suis celui qui veut n'en être pas coupable, car c'est toujours être coupable que de transgresser une limite jusque-là imposée à l'activité humaine. Je veux n'être pas cela. À la place de moi, il y a tous les autres. Je ne suis là que le représentant de ce vaste mouvement assez vague qui est cette recherche de la vérité dans ce sens où moi je m'efface. Je ne suis plus rien. Mon ambition a été plus grande que moi. La seringue était sale, sans doute. Et c'est justement dans la mesure où je l'ai trop désiré, où j'ai participé à cette action, où j'ai voulu être moi, le créateur. Je ne suis pas le créateur. Le créateur est quelqu'un de plus grand que moi. C'est mon inconscient, c'est cette parole qui parle en moi, au-delà de moi.*" Sylvana Tomaselli translates as follows: "It isn't just for himself that he finds the *Nemo* or the alpha and omega of the acephalic subject, which represents his unconcious. On the contrary, by means of this dream it's him who speaks, and who realises that he is telling us—without having wanted to, without having recognised it at first, and only recognising it in

his analysis of the dream, that is to say, while speaking to us—something which is both him and no longer him—*I am he who wants to be forgiven for having dared to begin to cure these patients, who until now no one wanted to understand and whose cure was forbidden. I am he who wants not to be guilty of it, for to transgress any limit imposed up to now on human activity is always to be guilty. I want to not be (born) that. Instead of me, there are all the others. Here I am only the representative of that vast, vague movement, the quest for truth, in which I efface myself. I am no longer anything. My ambition was greater than I. No doubt the syringe was dirty. And precisely to that extent that I desired it too much, that I partook in this action, that I wanted to be, myself, the creator, I am not the creator. The creator is someone greater than I. It is my unconscious, it is this voice which speaks in me. Beyond me." Jacques Lacan, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book 2, The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954–1955*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 170–71.

39 Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 35.

40 Alenka Zupančič, "Encountering Lacan in the Next Generation: An Interview with Alenka Zupančič," in *Žižek and His Contemporaries: On the Emergence of the Slovenian Lacan*, ed. Jones Irwin and Helena Motoh (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 163.

41 Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 43.

42 Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 204.

43 Malabou, *Changing Difference*, 140.

44 Catherine Malabou, "A Conversation with Catherine Malabou," interview by Noëlle Vahanian, *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 9, no. 1 (2008): 3, https://jcrt.org/archives/09.1/Malabou.pdf.

45 Malabou, "Conversation with Catherine Malabou," 4.

46 Jacques Lacan, *Encore: 1972–1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1975), 93. "Il n'y a pas *La* femme, article défini pour désigner l'universel."

47 Lacan, *L'Étourdit*, 466. "Ainsi à se fonder de cette moitié, 'elles' ne sont pastoutes, avec pour suite et du même fait, qu'aucune non plus n'est toute."

48 Catherine Malabou, *The Heidegger Change: On the Fantastic in Philosophy*, trans. Peter Skafish (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 270.

49 Malabou, *Heidegger Change*, 283. This "strange" or "queer" economy might be thought in terms of the meanings of *atopia* discussed later in this chapter.

50 Malabou, *Heidegger Change*, 270.

51 Malabou, *Heidegger Change*, 274.

52 Malabou, *Changing Difference*, 39.

53 Catherine Malabou and Judith Butler, "You Be My Body for Me: Body, Shape, and Plasticity in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*," in *A Companion to Hegel*, ed. Stephen Houlgate and Michael Baur (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2011), 623, 624.

54 Malabou, *Changing Difference*, 135.

55 Malabou, *Changing Difference*, 140, 139.

56 Malabou, *Changing Difference*, 108.

57 Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover: Of Friedrich Nietzsche*, trans. Gillian G. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 50. "Il n'y a pas d'essence de la femme parce que la femme écarte et s'écarte d'elle même." The phrase might better be translated as "There is no essence of woman because woman parts and strays from herself."

58 Jacques Derrida and Christie V. McDonald, "Interview: Choreographies," *diacritics* 12, no. 2 (1982): 76; Malabou, *Changing Difference*, 108.

59 Malabou, *Changing Difference*, 14.

60 Malabou, *Changing Difference*, 98.

61 Henry Louis Gates Jr., introduction to *The Slave's Narrative*, ed. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), xxiii; Ronald Judy, *(Dis)Forming the American Canon: African-Arabic Slave Narratives and the Vernacular* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 84.

62 Judy, *(Dis)Forming the American Canon*, 84.

63 Judy, *(Dis)Forming the American Canon*, 84.

64 Olaudah Equiano, "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavas Vassa, the African. Written by Himself," in Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin Books, 2003); Judy, *(Dis)Forming the American Canon*, 91, 88.

65 Judy, *(Dis)Forming the American Canon*, 88–89.

66 Judy, *(Dis)Forming the American Canon*, 92.

67 Judy, *(Dis)Forming the American Canon*, 96, 97.

68 Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 40.

69 Judy, *(Dis)Forming the American Canon*, 88.

70 Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 43, 42.

71 Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 43.

72 Frank B. Wilderson III, *"We're Trying to Destroy the World": Anti-Blackness and Police Violence after Ferguson; An Interview with Frank B. Wilderson III*, interview by Jared Ball, Todd Steven Burroughs, and Dr. Hate (n.p.: Ill Will Editions, 2014), 8, https://illwilleditions.noblogs.org/files/2015/09/Wilderson-We-Are-Trying-to-Destroy-the-World-READ.pdf.

73 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 110; Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 57.

74 Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 56.

75 Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 56.

76 Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 54.

77 Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 54, 15.

78 Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 56.

79 For Wilderson, the violability of woman is not essential but contingent, at least as he describes it in the context of whiteness: "To be precise, violence as it pertains to and structures gender relations between White men and White women (and it

does!) is of a contingent nature: White women who 'transgress' their position in the symbolic order run the risk of attack." Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 88. Malabou, among others, would argue that such violability requires no "transgression" of one's Symbolic position but inheres in that position itself.

80 David Marriott, "Black Cultural Studies," *Year's Work in Critical and Cultural Theory* 20, no. 1 (2012): 47; and Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 15–16.

81 Judy, *(Dis)Forming the American Canon*, 94.

82 Judy, *(Dis)Forming the American Canon*, 94.

83 Wilderson, *"We're Trying to Destroy the World,"* 12; emphasis mine.

84 Each, of course, does so differently, in response to particular cultural and historical conditions. My purpose here is to chart the catachrestic logic underlying these identities and their relation to sex as the unthinkable negativity of ab-sens as the primal cut.

85 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

86 Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 2.

87 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 122.

88 Jonathan Goldberg, *Sodometries: Renaissance Texts, Modern Sexualities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 18.

89 Jared Sexton, "Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word," *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, no. 29 (2016): 3, https://doi.org/10.20415/rhiz/029.e02; and Edelman, *No Future*, 17.

90 Amber Jamilla Musser, *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 18.

91 Chandan Reddy, *Freedom with Violence: Race, Sexuality, and the U.S. State* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 17.

92 Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 745.

93 Jean-Claude Milner, "The Doctrine of Science," in *Jacques Lacan: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (New York: Routledge, 2002), 1:288.

94 Reddy, *Freedom with Violence*, 174.

95 Reddy, *Freedom with Violence*, 174.

96 Reddy, *Freedom with Violence*, 174.

97 Reddy, *Freedom with Violence*, 175.

98 Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 311.

99 Barbara Johnson, *The Wake of Deconstruction* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1994), 98.

100 Calvin Warren, "Onticide: Afropessimism, Queer Theory, and Ethics," Ill Will, November 18, 2014, 6, 11, https://illwill.com/onticide-afropessimism-queer-theory-and-ethics. I put quotation marks around the phrase "Black queer" and around "Black" and "queer" when used to indicate specific types of persons in order to recall their catachrestic function as placeholders for ontological exclusion.

101 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Composition, 2013), 93; and Warren, "Onticide," 14. Note that Harney and Moten on page 93 produce a neologism, *exsense*, that comes strikingly close to Lacan's: "Present and unmade in presence, blackness is an instrument in the making. *Quasi una fantasia* in its paralegal swerve, its mad-worked braid, the imagination produces nothing but exsense in the hold."

102 Warren, "Onticide," 14–15.

103 Unlike Judy's attention to "the catachresis at work in the biological misnomer of race," Warren's essay reads only the "black queer" as "a catachresis." "Blacks" and "queers" are otherwise ontologized as if they were not also catachreses.

104 Warren, "Onticide," 20.

105 Neither the absence of the father nor the destruction of the family that frequently followed from chattel slavery would disrupt this process of subjectivization through the image of the other. Hortense Spillers rightly observes that "legal enslavement removed the African-American male not so much from sight as from *mimetic* view as a partner in the prevailing social fiction of the father's name, the father's law." But the children born in slavery were not thereby removed from the logic of subjectivization through that fiction or that law. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *Black, White, and in Color* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 228.

106 Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), 76.

107 In his account of onticide as "overkill," Warren describes the brutal murder of Steen Keith Fenrich as "the literal projection of the unconscious fantasy of fragmentation—the 'body in bits and pieces.'" Warren, "Onticide," 25n13. To recognize this violence as a *projection* of fragmentation is already to acknowledge the anxiety, born with the subject as such, of a movement between subject and object. It would be interesting to juxtapose Warren's conclusion from Fenrich's murder that "the queer" but not "the black" is popularly grievable with David Marriott's discussion of the "media melodrama" surrounding the death of Stephen Lawrence in England (the year after the murder of Matthew Shepard). See David Marriott, *On Black Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 117–24.

108 Lacan, "Mirror Stage," 79.

109 Wilderson, *"We're Trying to Destroy the World,"* 7.

110 Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 17.

111 Warren, "Onticide," 18.

112 As one example from Wilderson's book, consider the following collocation of Fanon and Lacan: "There is an uncanny connection between Fanon's absolute violence and Lacan's real. Thus, by extension, the grammar of suffering of the Black itself is on the level of the real." Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 75.

113 This does not, of course, mean that obtrusions of queerness eradicate world-making, but queerness's obtrusion of "nothing" compels new figures of meaning

whose defensive structure (insofar as they defend a given world) contributes to undoing that world as known and to ushering in another. In this sense we might take issue with Shakespeare's Lear: something (new) *only* comes of nothing. In the context of this discussion of the agrammatical and anacoluthic structure of queerness, I would call attention to Christina Sharpe's brilliant account of the "anagrammatical blackness" and "dysgraphia" that bespeak "the inability of language to cohere around the bodies and suffering of those . . . Black people who live and die in the wake." Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 75, 96.

114 Warren, "Onticide," 20.

115 Cited by Warren, in "Onticide," 14. See Eric Stanley, "Near Life, Queer Death: Overkill and Ontological Capture," *Social Text* 29, no. 2 (107) (Summer 2011): 9.

116 Warren, "Onticide," 14.

117 Warren, "Onticide," 15.

118 Warren, "Onticide," 10.

119 Warren, "Onticide," 9.

120 Warren, "Onticide," 14.

121 Warren, "Onticide," 7, 19.

122 Warren, "Onticide," 20, 21, 19.

123 Alternatively, Warren could be read as insisting on the historicity of ontology and as focusing on a specific moment of ontological determination within the context of Western discourse. But that raises the question of ontological exclusion (which "preconditions" the Symbolic, as Warren acknowledges) anterior to the regime of ontology determined by anti-Blackness and whether or not that anterior logic is bound to the Symbolic ontologically.

124 Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, "Waking Nightmares—on David Marriott," *GLQ* 17, no. 2–3 (June 2011): 357–63.

125 Warren, "Onticide," 19.

126 Warren, "Onticide," 9.

127 Warren, "Onticide," 19.

128 As a wager, of course, this involves some risk. Many, after all, continue to positivize queer as an identity, linking it, variously, to same-sex relations, to nonheteronormative sexualities, to radical forms of sexual experimentation, to nonbinaristic experiences of embodiment, and to countless other forms of minoritized, abjected, or unrecognized "being." That variety, though, is precisely the point. Queerness, originating in the stigmatization of categorical disturbance, can never name a particular group without opening itself to challenge by those who disturb such categorization (Are pedophiles queer? Are children? Are racial fetishists, rapists, or serial killers?). As the legal and social normalization of gay and lesbian citizens accelerates (for the time being, at any rate) in many Western democracies (stratified though that normalization is by vectors of race, class, and gender expression), queerness no longer maps onto sexual orientation as tightly as it did. For some the experience of queerness today may thus be gone tomorrow. But the very mobility of the term makes the wager on

queerness seem all the more cogent insofar as it signals the term's negativity beyond a specific content.

129 David Marriott, "Judging Fanon," *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledges,* no. 29 (2016): 7, https://doi.org/10.20415/rhiz/029.e03.

130 Jackson, "Waking Nightmares," 360.

131 Jackson, "Waking Nightmares," 361.

132 Warren, "Onticide," 18–19.

133 Jackson, "Waking Nightmares," 361.

134 At a certain moment in Warren's text, he seems to open onto the alignment of Blackness and queerness as radical categories without ontological content, writing, "What we call 'heterosexism' or anti-gay violence might be a particular *form* of anti-black violence." Warren, "Onticide," 10. But, in context, he seems to be referring to "heterosexism" or "anti-gay violence" directed toward what he defines as "black-objects," making some such "objects" "more vulnerable to forms of violence not easily recognized as anti-blackness" (10).

135 Warren, "Onticide," 19–20.

136 This is not to dismiss ethics as mere disavowal or to denigrate the importance of ethical projects that conceptualize the possibilities and consequences of living with an awareness of this structuring antagonism. Alenka Zupančič, Lynne Huffer, Fred Moten, and Lauren Berlant, for example, all, in their different ways, attempt just that.

137 Warren, "Onticide," 19.

138 Warren, "Onticide," 13.

139 With regard to the fungibility of queerness, it is important to note that the term does not necessarily carry a politically "progressive" force. In a given social formation, queerness may express itself through racism, sexism, homophobia, monoculturalism, xenophobia, or religious fundamentalism. The relation of those ideological value systems to queerness will always depend on their relation to power in the dominant social and political order, and a gauge of their "queerness" may be found in the degree to which their institutional suppression takes place in the name of the greater good. This requires us to ask if we are willing to accept queerness as a value in itself rather than continuing our adherence to the dominant values we think should be extended to a subclass of "queers." Socratic irony, in my view, compels us to risk such a "valuing" of queerness as such, even as it necessitates a constant questioning of the grounds of our values.

140 Houston Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 5; Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness," 751; and Rebecka Rutledge Fisher, *Habitations of the Veil: Metaphor and the Poetics of Black Being in African American Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 336.

141 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 22; Moira Gatens, "Polysemy, Atopia, and Feminist Thought," in *Michèle Le Doeuff: Operative Philosophy and Imaginary Practice*, ed. Max Deutscher (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books,

2000), 57; and Adriana Cavarero, "Dire la nascita," quoted in Cristina Mazzoni, *Maternal Impressions: Pregnancy and Childbirth in Literature and Theory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 191.

142 Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 111.

143 Joel Alden Schlosser, *What Would Socrates Do? Self-Examination, Civic Engagement, and the Politics of Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 12.

144 Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 34; and Sarah Kofman, *Socrates: Fictions of a Philosopher*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 8.

145 Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercise from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Michael Chase (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 156.

146 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 196.

147 Kierkegaard, *Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*, 228.

148 Kierkegaard, *Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*, 198.

149 Kierkegaard, *Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*, 228.

150 Kierkegaard, *Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*, 228.

151 Wilderson, *"We're Trying to Destroy the World,"* 18, 19, 20.

152 Kierkegaard, *Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*, 264. For Benjamin's discussion of "divine violence," see Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978).

153 Kierkegaard, *Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*, 261.

154 See Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 18–24.

155 Claire Colebrook, *Irony* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 29, 30.

156 Alain Badiou, *Images du temps present, 2001–2004* (Paris: Fayard, 2014), 68. "De ce point de vue, je pense que nous sommes obligés d'accepter pour part, et au moins transitoirement, le verdict antiphilosophique de la psychanalyse selon lequel la philosophie ne veut rien avoir à connaitre de la jouissance. En tout cas, le philosophie, dans l'épreuve, que je lui propose ici, de penser le contemporain, ne partira pas de la jouissance. Elle s'en detournera méthodiquement, avec toutefois l'espérance de pouvoir y revenir."

157 Badiou, *Images du temps present*, 61.

158 Alain Badiou, *Plato's Republic: A Dialogue in 16 Chapters*, trans. Susan Spitzer (New York: Columbia University, 2012), 284.

159 Jonathan Lear, *A Case for Irony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 20.

160 Badiou, *Plato's Republic*, 203.

161 Kierkegaard, *Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*, 196.

162 Kierkegaard, *Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*, 198. Badiou writes, "La philosophie fait comme si pouvait exister un amour de la vérité comme plenitude" (Philosophy proceeds as if there could be a love of truth as fullness or plenitude). Alain Badiou, *Lacan: L'antiphilosophie 3; 1994–1995* (Paris: Fayard, 2013), 213.

163 Badiou, *Lacan*, 129, 142: "la tentation de l'Un"; "une tentation de recollection du sens"; and "une pensée du vrai comme étranger au sens."

164 Badiou, *Lacan*, 143. "Où la vérité est résorbée dans l'espace du sens"; and "vous pouvez bien dire que la religion insiste dans la philosophie, mais à condition d'ajouter que la philosophie est constitutivement un certain régime d'interruption de cette insistence."

165 "Je conclurai donc sur le rapport de la philosophie à la politique un peu de la même manière que sur celui qu'elle soutient à la mathématique: même au comble de sa volonté fondatrice—et Dieu sait que c'est le cas dans le *République* de Platon—, la philosophie identifie, dans la politique, quelque chose qui ne se laisse pas suture, mais qui reste soumis à une sort de béance contingente que la pensée fondatrice même ne peut pas réduire" (I will end with the relation of philosophy to politics a bit in the same fashion as its relation to mathematics: even at the height of its founding will—and God knows that it's the case with Plato's *Republic*—philosophy identifies something in politics that can't be sutured, something that remains subject to a kind of contingent gap that even philosophy's foundational thought can't reduce.) Badiou, *Lacan*, 150.

166 Badiou, *Lacan*, 230, 231.

167 Badiou, *Lacan*, 219.

168 Badiou, *Lacan*, 213, 214. "La pensée ultime de Lacan est qu'il n'y a pas de légitimité intrinsèque à la durée d'un collectif quell qu'il soit"; and "'Collez-vous ensemble, le temps qu'il faut pour faire quelque chose, et puis, dissolvez-vous après, pour faire autre chose.'"

169 Badiou, *Lacan*, 152, 131.

170 Badiou, *Lacan*, 232, 231.

171 Badiou, *Lacan*, 224. "Socrate n'a aucunement l'intention de rallier les sophistes. Il veut seulement montrer aux jeunes qu'on peut leur clouer le bec et passer aux choses sérieuses."

172 Kofman, *Socrates*, 4.

173 Badiou, *Lacan*, 220.

174 Jacques Lacan, "D'Écolage," March 11, 1980, http://staferla.free.fr/S27/S27.htm. Lacan here describes an apparatus for moving forward after the dissolution of his school in order to prevent the repetition of "*l'effet de colle*." Whether or not this constitutes a new foundation in Badiou's terms, it speaks to the effort to assure the constancy of interruption in the psychoanalytic field.

175 "Interview de Jean Allouch," September 6, 2001, 7, 8, http://www.jeanallouch.com/pdf/193. "Le psychanalyste, à mon sens, n'a rien à faire du côté du pouvoir, du côté de ceux qui décident de comment doit fonctionner la société, de quelles règles elle se donne, de comment elle traite ses membres"; and "Marguerite Duras

en a donné la meilleure formule lorsqu'elle exprimait ce voeu, qu'elle inscrivait, elle, comme la maxime même du politique : 'Que le monde aille à sa perte !' Si vous ne campez pas sur cette radicalité-là, celle du 'décharite' de Lacan, celle d'un grand Autre barré, inexistant, il n'y a aucune chance de pouvoir être du côté de ceux dont les symptômes ne cessent de hurler ça."

176 Badiou, *Lacan*, 211–12. "Le propos lacanien, même s'il se présente sous le signe de discours, est précisément distant, bien entendu, du discours de l'université, mais plus profondement distant de toute visée educative. Et c'est d'ailleurs une donée antiphilosophique. Car on pourrait établir que la conviction de Lacan—conviction qu'on peut aisément partager—, c'est qu'il y a dans la philosophie une pulsion educative. Après tout, le dispositif platonicien, considéré comme fondateur, peut être perçu comme un dispositif éducatif. À cette visée educative de la philosophie, même en prenant 'education' en un sens aussi noble que possible, s'oppose ceci que la psychanalyse, fût-ce dans son discours, est rupture au regard de toute visée educative. Lacan le dit, avec la plus grande fermeté, dans un texte qui est la cloture du Congrès de 1970. Il dit: Ce qui me sauve de l'enseignement, c'est l'acte."

177 Jacques Lacan, "Allocution sur l'enseignment," in *Autres écrits*, 297.

178 Lacan, "Allocution sur l'enseignment," 302.

179 Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 134.

180 Kofman, *Socrates*, 245.

181 Lacan, "Allocution sur l'enseignment," 302. "Cette production la plus folle pour n'être pas enseignable comme nous ne l'éprouvons que trop, ne nous libère pas pour autant de l'hypothèque du savoir."

182 Lacan, "Allocution sur l'enseignment," 302, 305. "L'antagonisme que je souligne ici entre l'enseignmenet et le savoir" and "le savoir passe en acte."

183 Jean-François Balaudé, "Socrates's Demon," in *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed. Barbara Cassin, trans. Steven Rendall, Christian Hubbert, Jeffrey Mehlman, Nathanael Stein, and Michael Syrotinski, translation ed. Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 194.

184 Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 268.

185 Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 18.

186 While conventions for proper names vary, in cultures that use the patronymic, one's name is always "borrowed," and the same holds true for one's "given name," as the speaker in Elizabeth Bishop's "In the Waiting Room" understands when she cries, "You are an *Elizabeth*, / you are one of *them*. / *Why* should you be one, too?" Elizabeth Bishop, "In the Waiting Room," in *Geography III* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), 3–8.

187 Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 589.

188 Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 33.

189 Žižek, *Parallax View*, 62.

190 Jacques Lacan, "Dissolution," March 18, 1980, http://espace.freud.pagesperso-orange.fr/topos/psycha/psysem/dissolu9.htm.

191 Lacan, "Dissolution." "Voyez comme je pose ça par petites touches. Je vous laisse votre temps pour comprendre. Comprendre quoi ? Je ne me targue pas de faire sens. Pas du contraire non plus. Car le réel est ce qui s'oppose à ça. J'ai rendu hommage à Marx comme à l'inventeur du symptôme. Ce Marx est pourtant le restaurateur de l'ordre, du seul fait qu'il a réinsufflé dans le prolétariat la dit-mension du sens. Il a suffi pour ça que le prolétariat, il le dise tel.

"L'Église en a pris de la graine, c'est ce que je vous ai dit le 5 janvier. Sachez que le sens religieux va faire un boom dont vous n'avez aucune espèce d'idée. Parce que la religion, c'est le gîte originel du sens. C'est une évidence qui s'impose. A ceux qui sont responsables dans la hiérarchie plus qu'aux autres.

"J'essaye d'aller là contre, pour que la psychanalyse ne soit pas une religion,. comme elle y tend, irrésistiblement, dès lors qu'on s'imagine que *l'interprétation* n'opère que du sens. J'enseigne que *son ressort est ailleurs, nommément dans le signifiant comme tel*.

"A quoi résistent ceux que la dissolution panique.

"La hiérarchie ne se soutient que de gérer le sens."

192 Colette Soler, "Lacan en Antiphilosophe," *Filozofski vestnik* 24, no. 2 (2006): 127.

193 Soler, "Lacan en Antiphilosophe," 128.

194 Although it is not possible to discuss the question adequately in passing and the present book does not permit me to address it at length, the relation between this notion of queerness and the logic of capitalism cannot be left wholly unremarked. Let me merely sketch the framework in which one might try to approach it. Certainly, insofar as it manifests the repetitions of the death drive and undermines logics of meaning, capitalism could be said to "queer" the structures of social order. But it does so by presenting the expansion of capital as *meaningful* in itself, indeed as the quasi-theological corollary of subjective self-realization. To that extent it operates, like the social order, as a vector of jouissance that refuses the queerness of the death drive it projects onto its others (the "idle" poor, the "lazy" worker, the "pampered" communist, the welfare "queen," etc.). In this context it is surely worth asking if, as some psychoanalytic critics suggest, capitalism really encourages us to "enjoy" in the Lacanian sense. It is true that the double logic of capitalism promises, by way of the commodity, the jouissance we otherwise lack, but it does so while promoting wage labor as the means of gaining access to commodities. Even when it seems to be encouraging us to "enjoy," it is actually commanding us to "submit"—not to enjoyment or to the drive but to the law the keeps the subject enchained to the logic of desire. As laborers we may enjoy our submission to desire, and as capitalists we may enjoy the surplus value the submission of wage laborers accords us, but the system itself constrains that "enjoyment" to operate (with rare exceptions) within the limits of the law of desire.