



Mu, 49 Marks of Abolition

BUY

Black Outdoors: Innovations in the Poetics of Study  
*A series edited by J. Kameron Carter and Sarah Jane Cervenak*

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Sora Y. Han <sup>49</sup>Marks of Abolition

mu

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For my father, Kwang Woo Han,

who lives on in the freedom dream of Korea's reunification

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## *note on etymologies*

Etymological definitions throughout this work were developed by consulting a number of dictionaries and lexical references. For hangul, *hanja*, and Chinese words, these references included: *Naver Hanja Online Dictionary*, <https://hanja.dict.naver.com/#/main>; *The Dong-A Ilbo*, 한자 뿌리 읽기 (Understanding hanja roots) serial, <https://www.donga.com/news/Series/70070000000210>; *e-hanja*, *Digital Hanja Dictionary*, <http://www.e-hanja.kr/>; and the English-language *Wiktionary*, <https://en.wiktionary.org>. For Latin-script words, I referred to the *Oxford English Dictionary (Online)*, <https://www.oed.com/>; the *Online Etymology Dictionary*, <https://www.etymonline.com/>; and *Logeion*, an open-access database of Latin and Ancient Greek dictionaries, <https://logeion.uchicago.edu/λογος>. Less frequently consulted references are specifically cited and included in the bibliography.

I must thank Monica Cho, who provided invaluable support translating and interpreting the hangul and *hanja* throughout this book. All errors and bumbles remain mine alone.

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## *preface*

Inside a closed book, or in some crevice of a library bookshelf, the girl hides, as emaciated as paper. The girl's smell lingers in my metal printing types. A smudge from the girl's soldering iron stays on my book's cover. —YI SANG, "Paradise Lost" (1939)

Where does language go limp, break apart, or fall into pieces, stammers, glimpses, or just merely the black marks that make up letters? —DAWN LUNDY MARTIN, "A Bleeding, an Autobiographical Tale" (2007)

My iPhone reminds me that I wrote a note. The feeling I attempted to record there is beyond me. I do know, though, that the note is there because at that moment, back in March 2020, I feared regretting at some future moment not giving in to a need to write.

A peculiar effervescent loss has glittered every experience of daily life since then.

One week before that note reappeared, I learned that stage 4 cancer had taken over my father's liver and stomach. It was also the week that California shut down in response to the coronavirus, COVID-19, spreading across the globe. Or, maybe, on second thought, the events should be reversed. That was the week COVID-19 started to devour the world's human population, like the stage 4 cancer that had taken over my father's liver and stomach.

Somehow, I still think now that if I can decide the correct order of these two events, I might be able to write something truer about this effervescence

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that has hued every moment of my day, whether asleep or awake. As time became a practice of bone-deep dread, drawing and bearing breath, I disappeared into a sense of life too vivid to capture in any language I assumed to share with anyone else.

Whatever the order, this note reminds me, every letter of every word I typed into this unaddressed note was a slowly fading heartbeat, the mark of a cell-by-cell colonization of vital internal tissues, a pithy series of strokes filling in an expanse of time that seemed to open up in those months between each touch and thought.

Writing marks some interval between this nearly imperceptible decay in living and some cataclysmic future happening. In those early days of 2020, I could barely muster the energy to put this theory to the test. But somehow, after so many predawn flights of notating later, this book is complete as a practice of the Buddhist tradition to mourn the dead for 49 days. Writing confronted and comforted me, ultimately, with the fundamental entanglement of decay and regeneration, the ritual practice of an always more to be given, which exceeds the melancholic economy of loss.

He and my mother called a meeting to tell us they would die one day. The first time they brought this up was during a secret trip abroad to North Korea nearly four decades ago. They pulled me out of kindergarten before the school year was over, and as we transferred from one plane to another, I sleepily wondered how long it would take to get to “Canada.” It was during this trip that they plainly informed us that they would die, and they did not want their dying to become a burden on our lives. My three-year-old sister broke down then, sobbing, pleading, fat tears rolling down her cheeks. “Please don’t die.”

I did not cry. I would not plead. Dying is an unchangeable fact. No grief, no supplication, no abject fear, could distract from a child’s knowledge. Its devastation is neither narcissistic nor sentimental. It is life. “Why are we born if we just die?” my three-year-old son would ask me three decades later.

For a child, it strikes me, imagining the day when a parent will die is the closest experience to one’s own death. In dependency, the thought of no longer existing is coterminous with and fundamentally shared with the end of another’s life. The parasite lives and dies as the host does. And yet this truth coexists with the fact that actual loss and imaginary death have radically incommensurate temporalities and differential significance for both the parent and child. And so, on occasion, we carve out lessons from the essential en-

tanglement of dying, losing, and living, even as this entanglement undoes the identities assumed as we try to learn these lessons.

I have come to see the lesson I learned in North Korea of risking death in living out radical political desire as a scene of separation. Separation, which is to say, a desire to know what is beyond language and the Other, took place as I was taught how to love and work while assuming the risk of losing one's life. The eventual real loss of the parent who imparted such a teaching only intensifies its brilliant truth, only further distills and disseminates, hands, this undying anti-colonial tradition across the social field. And if one spends a life trying to learn this lesson, as I have through writing, then separation is not individuation but some sort of continuous impossible disambiguation of "I" and "you," young me and grown you, that which is not yet me and that which is you yet gone. Separation through the cut of radical political desire yields endless indivisible transmission. This is where love and work gather each other's mutual erasednesses in a realm of knowing so vast that the thought of and desire for one's life, the life of a one, is impossible to sustain in any real or imaginary way.

Who have I been writing to? Who have I been writing for? I can finally conclude that there was no "to" or "for" other than an unconscious knowledge of something necessary and worthy to figure out by returning, over and over, to the reality of death impressed on my five-year-old mind during this most extraordinary family meeting. This became all the more clear with the purity of the sadness of losing a father who gave lessons in stark and mysterious truths. Writing theory through transliterating and translating to Korean hangul and *hanja* has been both my mourning ritual and the modality my desire took to try to say something about an upheaval in the way the body knows in the midst of a most brilliant sensorial scramble of light and touch, loss and love, death and grief. As Don Mee Choi poignantly captures, "For a child-translator, translation is an act of autogeography."<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, that note, inputted into a machine, orders me to return: "I am constantly shuttled between wanting to make my father a mythological character and seeing him for his gentle and breathing life. He both towers in a train of memories that intrude, one after another, in my field of vision, and folds down into a warmth enclosable in my arms." In his final days, he would momentarily wake from some place behind his closed eyes and look at his hands, turning them this way and that, as if to study them. Here, in this tangle of grief and love, I don't know how to differentiate between the man whose death causes the desire to write and the desire itself.

If Buddhist mourning gave me a schedule, the principle of free verse allowed me to keep writing. Transliterations and translations so loosely associative I can only call them *dystranslations* produced a nonmetricity recorded in the following pages. They capture less the rhythm of natural speech than a rhythm of the unconscious, or improvisation, in how theoretical political ideas are thought by some other faculty of knowing, both internal and to the side of reason and experience. At every turn where my thought failed, broke off, or lay neglected in a file on my computer, the way forward for me was ultimately given by an open field poetics and how its itinerary of debates and differentiation has been taken up and surpassed by Nathaniel Mackey.<sup>2</sup> Fred Moten, devoted student of Harriet Jacobs, to my mind, is the first poet-philosopher to fully integrate the force of free verse into his theoretical writing.<sup>3</sup> He inaugurates what we might call *free theory*. Writing theory should not be exempt from the movement of free verse. Theory in the black radical tradition should move with an a priori “sociopoetic grounding” given in “(mis)translation, (mis)transliteration, and (mis)transcription.”<sup>4</sup> This reality became inescapable for me the instant this revelation appeared in my study of Mackey’s “Mu” poems, especially those in *Splay Anthem*.<sup>5</sup> And to submit myself to the accompanying obligation that writing theory be real *in this way*, that is, *grounded sociopoetically because written with and in lunacy, love, and analyticism*,<sup>6</sup> I reformulated Moten’s question “What if blackness is the name that has been given to the social field and social life of an illicit alternative capacity to desire?” to *What if blackness is the name that has been given to the open field and open life of an illicit alternative capacity to desire?*<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps as a response to this question, in the middle of drafting this book, I started writing another text more identifiable with poetry proper, offering me new appreciation for the early language poets like Lyn Hejinian and Robert Duncan, and then poet-translators of Korean folk myth and modernist poetry, like Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Don Mee Choi, and Myung Mi Kim.<sup>8</sup> Such language writing breaches the line between poetry and criticism, and I am so grateful to have found this space of study. This book, however, is not a study of them or the historical literary movements with which they and other poets contained in the following pages are associated. Rather, while deeply shaped by their art, thought, and protest traditions, this book risks actually participating in language writing, in the sociality of language poetics, in *free theory*.

As I wrote this book, I could only start to study Ezra Pound studying Ernest Fenollosa and their work with Chinese writing and poetry.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, I was compelled, however prematurely, to take up the questions of “objectism” raised

by Charles Olson and the lasting influence of the imagists by allowing analytic thought processes to pause and yield, of an accord that would exceed my own intentions and imagination, language and imagery in extremely concentrated form, or what Jacques Derrida refers to in *Of Grammatology* as the “irreducibly graphic.”<sup>10</sup> These are the letters that mark each of the pieces of *Mu*. And though, for Pound, modern poetics might strive with Chinese ideograms to inoculate the lyric from “the wanton play of sounds and letters” as “emblems of stability,” according to Mutlu Konuk Blasing, the concreteness of my letters could not possibly exist without lyrical vulnerabilities, or what Charles Bernstein has described as “language’s *animalady*,” which poetic practices carry with them as profound and varying emptinesses of sense and meaning.<sup>11</sup>

Emptiness, the held presence of absence, harbors the power, beauty, and danger of thought, theory, and language to come. Transliteration and translation, insofar as the activity carries along absences of possible corresponding meaning within a language and between languages, offered me a more manageable protocol of writing to guide my thinking in *Mu*. The 49 letters capture in clipped and dense form the constancy of waves of memories, images, sounds, and things of everyday life that bend, puncture, and evacuate speech of the sovereignty of conscious thought. As objects resulting from a procedure of *free theory*, the 49 letters of *Mu* bear my having submitted to a writing that might be replete with life. Life with my father was, is, always present possible revolutionary thought quietly coursing through territories of desire and cultural memory unextinguishable by slavery and colonialism.

The honorific Korean phrase for dying, for passing away, is 돌아가시다, *dora gasida*. 돌아, *dora*, means “spin.” And 돌아가다, *doragada*, means “go back or return to.” Dying, spinning, returning.  $4 = 2 + 2 + (-\phi)$ . Contained in the infinitesimally small of the subtracting thing, 돌아가시다 indexes an at least double-spun force. The galaxy turns and returns, turns as it returns. And we spin as we circle toward some nonpoint of origin. This is the something, other than this world, that I believe my father prepared me for with our math lessons so many decades ago. Here, this something gets us ever closer to this obscure place of everything in these condensed reassociations I call *marks of abolition*.

돌, *dol*, is a homophone for the Korean word for “stone, pebble.”

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In Cormac Gallagher's translation of Jacques Lacan's seminar on anxiety, Lacan leaves a tachygraphical notation, a "little mark," so we can find our way back to the lesson if we drift off during his lecture. It is "the small o" in contrast to "the big Other."<sup>12</sup> Its function is one thing, while its mark, the signal of anxiety, takes the form of "a white stone." We need this little white pebble to find our way as we attempt to outline the processes by which the ego, baffled by a certain "ambiguity between identification and love," invites us to consider "the relationship between *being* and *having*."<sup>13</sup> This o, an "instrument of love," is how "namely—we find it again—... one loves... with what one does not have."<sup>14</sup> The practice of love is a practice of *not having*, or having only "what one n-o longer has (*n'a plus*)," which is to say, sharing in "the disorder of small o's which there is no question yet of having or not."<sup>15</sup> Love is abandonment to and in a disordered condition of *n'a plus*. Love is the abolition of the very phenomenological problem of associating *being* with (*not*) *having*. In choosing "the subjectification of o as pure real," perhaps it becomes possible to produce a new mythographic practice of loss.<sup>16</sup>

I look again at this small white pebble, this o. While it guides my reading of Gallagher's translation of Lacan, it is oddly out of place. Its markedness invokes the primordial lines and curves of hangul that can be seen, I realize, in fragments and pieces in any system of writing, if one looks from a certain view of *dys*translation.

o, this small white pebble, the 돌 of *dora*, *doraga*...

Each of the 49 letters in this book is an attempt to recall and retain the sound of burnishing this stone in a time of war. Not a war of benign and malignant life, of prey and predator, colonized and colonizer. No, this is a war of cellular attrition on one front and of cosmic attrition on the other. And fighting in it requires giving in to everything the way, I think, I give in to the psycho-hapticality of a beloved's question. In one instance, it is nowhere and then, in another, everywhere inside me, which is to say, in not-me, just o.

With this particular attention, my writing seemed always to set off and arrive on some path of alphabets and glyphs as I cut and pasted characters and letters that the buttons on my keyboard are not programmed to correspond to. Annie Rogers, in *Incandescent Alphabets*, writes that "a true hole—outside meaning, outside the chain of signifiers, and outside discourse—leaves in its

wake a river of Real *jouissance* that runs through our bodies, collecting the melodies of the river, all those sounds we heard before we had language.”<sup>17</sup> She says we might, like the psychotic, make use of this river, this swarm.

Writing suspended my thoughts in this swarm, like water drops in air hover, fall, and fly. I reassociated them in an ideo- and pictographic terrain of Korean hangul and *hanja* in service to what J. Kameron Carter calls a “black rapture” that I hear in the vernacularity of thought in general, performed across poetries, theories, histories, and laws.<sup>18</sup> Black rapture, the complete lapse of will, “a lapsarian condition,” to “enfleshed spirit,” materializes in *Mu* as an animist mode of study in the necessity of emptinesses, palimpsestic blanknesses, and cutting arrhythmias in spoken and written forms of radical political desire.<sup>19</sup> The satisfactions of this mode of study have been many, as it sent me each day to raze, not necessarily the lyric, but the grammatical structure of the English sentence. For if the jurisgrammatical scale of the sentence is an essential unit of violence on which colonial law, language, and history depend, then the abolition of the sentence is precisely what was and has been at stake in poetic writing and mark making.

Returning over and over to both graphic and phonemic priority in this mode of study deconstructed and inspirited the givenness of the written word (of law, but also theory) into a form of writing I ultimately felt was, or should be, approached as a form of calligraphy. This is precisely what Aldon Nielsen has theorized as the intertextual and polyglottal form of “black chant,” which “bodies itself forth in the garb of mark, inscription, calligraphy.”<sup>20</sup> The calligraphic contained in translating and transliterating between Korean hangul and *hanja* and other languages became an occasion for communion with both the immateriality of poetic thought and, in turn, the reenchantment of presumptively lifeless letters and words.<sup>21</sup> This reenchantment performs thought in the difference between social life and social death to overwhelm this something we call an “I,” who might write, or think, or speak about this difference as one *about* concepts, while also *listening* to the Real difference of words as glyphs or marks. This is to say, while listening as “‘*mu*’ second part”:

The

enormous bell of a

trumpet’s inturned

eye, an endangered

isle, some

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insistent Mu,  
become the  
root of whatever  
song.<sup>22</sup>

The speaking subject is a glossolalic, chanting, *mudang* (“shaman” in Korean) subject whose body both bares and bears the promise of a language that honors the difference between social life and social death. If R. A. Judy’s devotional thought of and in *Sentient Flesh* murmurs “us is flesh,” *Mu*’s mode of study strives to produce a calligraphy of this murmur, where every stroke is a poem on the way to another, “us is glyph, mark, letter . . .”<sup>23</sup>

As notated echoes with no beginning, I wish these 49 letters to be an incomplete anti-neocolonial alphabet. I wish for them to remain in what Craig Dworkin has called the “alphabetic threshold” one encounters with the sheer materiality of language.<sup>24</sup> The letters of *Mu* mark an obstinacy in somersaulting phonemes that, over and over, on and on, give the lie to every conception of sovereignty, democracy, and freedom Europe and the United States have polluted our waters, air, soil, and imaginaries with. It is an alphabet of the oceanic of history, law, and language that wells up in some odd aural medium my body was called on to scribe. They are irreducible flecks of flesh in a general condition of violence that I wanted to spare from the added offense of fixing meaning in a conditional and contextual nature.

Thus my enthrallment with apophasis, which Michael Sells describes as the unsayable in speech. Such speech is often characterized by the metaphor of emanation and refuses to ontologize transcendent phenomena by persisting in the immanent nature of speech.<sup>25</sup> These letters are meant to retain what remains empty, enigmatic, and unsayably real about life in the wake of colonialism and slavery, neocolonialism, and anti-blackness. They mark an apophatic movement of thought immanent to prison abolition as the ongoing struggle for the abolition of slavery. They are my way of responding to this strange bidding, “Knit her speaking to the Real in a social link.”<sup>26</sup>

While English is the stranger language of European continental philosophy, the law-giving and enforcing power of law written in English the world over is produced through both its grammatical structures and its capacity to colonize and assimilate non-English words and cultures into a single-minded drive to sovereignty. Yet the English of US law contains an etymological hybridity and promiscuity between Latin and Germanic strands of Proto-Indo-European language families. The poetry and poetics of social life and social

death I think with and through, largely given in Black and Korean American Englishes, queers this etymological promiscuity internal to law by further dis-ordering and proliferating the marks and sounds of Chinese, French, German, Latin, and Greek.

While the early writings of Lacan focused on “full speech,” his later writings shifted more specifically toward how speech holds the Real in what he referred to as the “well-spoken.” That which is “well-spoken” is speech that holds the quiet excess of the *unsayable* and how that form of truth lives immanently in the body. Hangul as I use it throughout this book offers the *well-written* in the truth of the letter that lives in how the mouth moves and the body listens. Mobilizing the Korean hangul alphabet was crucial because its consonants directly depict the speaking body held together by the mystical realm of vowels. It is an anti-aristocratic alphabet designed for vernacularity, ease of learning and use, and adaptable to the changes of speech and ideas of oral culture. The proliferated *well-written* of *Mu*’s hangul is not to recover or reconstruct legal meaning but to force the law to surrender to us, the only rightful keepers of the precious, vital resource of the unsayable, of justice.

A voice that tenderly says other than what is said in what we hear is borne of its own murmuring. It demands we give in better, give better, give like the hands from Lucille Clifton’s poem “cutting greens.” They write, which is to say, hold and cut, and prepare and nourish our connection to another order of things.

curling them around  
i hold their bodies in obscene embrace  
thinking of everything but kinship.  
collards and kale  
strain against each strange other  
away from my kissmaking hand and  
the iron bedpot.  
the pot is black,  
the cutting board is black,  
my hand,  
and just for a minute  
the greens roll black under the knife,  
and the kitchen twists dark on its spine  
and I taste in my natural appetite  
the bond of live things everywhere.<sup>27</sup>

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These letters will not relent to meaning. They are nonsynthesizable. This is because the pragmatic, material nature of the apophatic language of abolition is covert, irrepressible, and overflowing. The social practice of breaking words into breath and sound, mark and phoneme, thought and poem, is always also a sacral, mystical practice beyond the way sacrifice and the knowable have come to dominate expressions of political desire. And so we move associatively as ciphers of our beloved, whose everlasting abundance is a living thinking of *mu*.

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savoir  
*black*

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In his preface to *Splay Anthem*, Nathaniel Mackey writes, “Any longingly imagined, mourned or remembered place, time, state, or condition can be called ‘Mu.’”<sup>1</sup>

Mu, 𠂇, 無, nothingness.

Writing this book on *Mu* has been a practice of reading again and again, and revising over and over. Something of my living body has wanted to make an offering. And yet this possible offering otherwise burrows down, just out of grasp, as if me because in me. And so a certain insatiable feeling to write something truthful about radical politics and desire appeared. The form of this feeling was *mu*, empty and so unsatisfiable, and nothing but the incompleteness of all the words I found and deleted along the way to figuring out how I might offer that which remains unknown.

I travel the surface of the possibility of this strange condition, this possible offer. Perhaps this strangeness of writing is itself an offering.

*Parlêtre*, where mark, lack, and some bodily text densify into a thing. I work this thing, its imperfections and imprecisions, over and over.

This was finally myself swallowing  
those small, common parts of me.<sup>2</sup>

There is no end to writing over, starting over, doing over. Even with this book. Repetition carves lines out of a meaningless block. Sometimes beautiful, sometimes abject, some form of absence always appears. It blows gray ash off from the surface of everything in the afterlife of our burning world. To write with *parlêtre* is to happen upon an amber fossil on this surface.

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that it is re-  
served for *going* too, for a deeply  
artifactual spidery form, and how it can, gleaming,  
yet looking still like mere open air mere light,  
catch in its syntax the necessary sacrifice.<sup>3</sup>

The hand that scribes, the hand that cuts, the hand that brushes, is pushed along by another, ghostly hand. That hand is the hand that places a yellow jewel in my palm, ever moving along, ever ready to twist and open up to catch what falls. Being enjoys the prosthetic gestures of *that* ghostly hand, drafting on my exhaling body.

Neither *prose* nor *thesis*, prosthetic writing absents a letter—*e*—and two modes of writing and thinking are revealed to be one. The prosthesis of poetic writing writes the absent *e*.

The absent *e* marks a species of time Luis Izcovich refers to in *The Marks of a Psychoanalysis* as the “meticulous present.”<sup>4</sup> He is referring specifically to Jorge Luis Borges’s poetry, but so many others come to mind. You will find them manifesting a meticulous present throughout this book, where I feel an urgency to make theory’s past and future respond to the present, but, as well, where writing theory as a physical act admits and undertakes the seemingly impossible task to write a word that will ring truth in times un(fore)seeable, circumstances absent any anchoring law, and ears listening for refuge and revolution.

In the rapid eye movement of the poet’s night vision, this dictum  
can be decoded, like the secret acrostic of a lover’s name.<sup>5</sup>

The absent *e* of *prosthesis* is more than silent. It has an inapparency, an uncanniness. Where and how does this *e* emerge in the law’s writing? This inapparency between the prose and thesis of law’s language? One must approach the law fundamentally as a form of writing constituted through the repetition of questions people bring to it. These questions remain unanswerable in any final way because of the sheer heterogeneity of complaints desire produces in the living.

And yet law’s answers to social matters have to be made to hold. “The origin of every contract,” writes Walter Benjamin, “points toward violence.”<sup>6</sup> Legal holdings are not just holdings. They are marks made to cohere into words. And without force, without state and civil agents to enforce this coherence,



holdings are empty. Law depends on letters, which, absent their enforcement into grammar and translation, compose a strange emptiness of an “unalloyed means of agreement.”<sup>7</sup> The inapparency of *e* marks, for me, the reality of both the unalloyed agreement available in law as language referred to by Benjamin, and “a profound agreement” Jared Sexton points to as “an agreement that takes shape in (between) *méconnaissance* and (dis)belief” when one submits, in the most extreme sense of the word, to “being inhabited by that writing.”<sup>8</sup>

It is this emptiness in law that drives the writing of *Mu*. It is here that all the misrecognized and unrecognizable suffering the law propagates, with its always evolving enforceability, elicits a strange horizon of thought on nothingness. Erica Hunt, in her poem “Upon another acquittal / A choreography of grief,” dedicated to “Mamie Till, Sybrina Fulton, Samira Rice and Geneva Reed Veal,” in *Veronica: A Suite in X Parts*, locates this horizon in the movement of collapse:

& crumple in an instant  
knowing no justice will ever be found  
could be found

where nothing is said out loud  
& when it is said or wailed

the something said is  
something that no one hears:<sup>9</sup>

To say nothing out loud is to give these nothings a substance, a “something” that no single being can hear, at the same time that this substance persists in gestures, marks, and letters. My 49 marks of abolition follow Hunt’s colon and echo the 49 days of Kim Hyesoon’s *Autobiography of Death*.<sup>10</sup> They crouch and ride underneath the imposition of meanings of and as justice, or the subjection of writing to the political. They are not total voids. They are what Izcovich refers to as “median void[s],” insofar as gestures, marks, and sounds, left in the aftermath of enforcement, sparkle like grains of sugar. These nothings are compounds of something visible and an invisible force that allures, like sweetness, what is necessary and lethal to life.<sup>11</sup>

In *Six Drawing Lessons*, William Kentridge writes about a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke he has taped on the wall of his studio.

Like a dance of strength around a centre  
Where a mighty will was put to sleep.<sup>12</sup>

The poem's lines depict a panther, which reminds Kentridge of something essential at the core of his creative practice: "The urge to make something," he writes, "a gathering of energy around . . . Around what? The blank page, the empty paper. An energy gathered, but not knowing what it should do. The impulse to make something, to draw or to paint something; but waiting for a clear instruction."<sup>13</sup> I am interested in this tension between "a gathering of energy around" and "waiting for a clear instruction."

Around the empty paper, who gathers? Who or what instructs?

We gather, with all our sounds, desires, and histories. Those who gather gather not simply around, but *with*, the blank page. Gathering here is an occasion granting the symbolic lack constitutive of desire. It is the gathering not of solidarity in some shared symbolic object of desire but of the solidity of a knowledge obtainable with the not-all of each and every differentiated symbolic object. And the blankness of the page will persist even after every color is applied, each picture drawn, and all the words typed.

This blankness can menace, just as we suffer the barred-ness of desire as archaic or phallic jouissance. Or it can impart something, a gift, just as we might enjoy the barred-ness of desire as a third form of jouissance beyond the phallus. Across his later teachings, Jacques Lacan identifies three types of this third form: feminine, mystical, and a nominative ex nihilo referred to as "Jouis-sense."<sup>14</sup> The clarity of the instruction we wait for is given in the timelessness of the blank page's invitation to be with and in the not-all of feminine, mystical, nominative pleasures, of making, doing, acting outside the protocols of symbolic ownership of self and objects. We gather and wait for an instruction whose clarity depends neither on what the instruction is nor on who instructs, but on being able to know the difference between the I who knows

and enjoys and something that knows and enjoys the mystery of the blankness that grounds all thought and desire.

The blankness of *savoir*, its peculiar clarity, calls from the Real, rings black.

The torus is a ring, but not just any one. The torus's three-dimensional hole is planar. Unlike the hole of a two-dimensional surface, which can be filled by pulling the border of the hole into a single point, the torus's hole can never be filled. As a structure, the inside of its hole will never become one point on a smooth surface. Instead, its many points will only ever exist touching each other. In the crowd and press of points, there is still the emptiness of the hole.

I is the on of on going and gone.  
Up and away<sup>15</sup>

Amiri Baraka's movement away from the "I" to an "on" appears as o<sup>n</sup>, the rule of touching given by the torus's empty space.

The hand at the end of my arm that moves a pencil across that blank page, or the fingers at the end of my hand that press a sequence of letters across a blank digital plane, are prone to not-copying. This writing arm prosthetically choreographs lines that register the briefest of pauses, a hesitation both nearly imperceptible and unavoidably insistent. It writes lines that start at the left, break at the right, and start over directly beneath the line prior. But . . . it also writes lines on some invisible topological surface, bumping and bouncing arrhythmically along.

The panther circles because it abides by an ante-instructive law. It will never be instructed, not completely, except by this place, where "a mighty will was put to sleep," where the world and a protest baby meet in fields ablaze: Oakland, xučyun (Huichin) territory, Watts, Ferguson, the South African highvelds, the banks of the Han River.

Circling around nothing is not itself nothing, but consent to the inapparent.

DUKE

2. o<sup>n</sup> [blankness]

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In the winter of the highveld, there are veld fires, and the yellow grass is reduced to black stubble. It becomes a charcoal drawing in itself. You could drag a piece of paper across the ground, and a charcoal drawing could be made.<sup>16</sup>

I miscopy: Kentridge's word is *drag*. I handwrote *draw*. As I recount this slip in writing by hand, my fingers still want to type *w* instead of *g*. My body, and something else, insists that what one does with paper is "draw on it" instead of "drag it across."

Paper for drawing is a membrane that awaits a mark to be made on it, my body insists. It is not to be turned face down, scraped across the soot of a scorched field, marked out of sight, dirtied. Something remains impossible to copy. In this repetitious physical urge "not to copy," there is something obscene about the act of dragging invoked by the visceral description of the essence of drawing materials: black stubble, charcoal, paper, ground.

What about the conditions of possibility for creative life comes into view when that which is dragged is draped over the history of art, literature, and philosophy? When one identifies (or is given the chance to identify) not with the subject who draws on an "it" but with this other scene in which it is impossible to not not-copy? How to invite this "it" that is dragged across the blackness of the earth in the aftermath of fire?

The word *membrane* comes from the Latin *membrum*, meaning "part of the body," "covering a part of the body," or "flesh."<sup>17</sup> At some point in the etymological evolution of the word, this notion is displaced and expanded to include the idea of "parchment" and more biologically and medically technical definitions, including "a thin sheet of tissue or layer of cells, usually serving to cover or line an organ or part, or to separate or connect parts."<sup>18</sup> That which projects becomes a surface, that which points becomes pointless or pointillistic, and that which protrudes becomes an enclosure.

This etymology tracks a shift from geography to topology. Lacan uses the figure of the lamella to conceptualize a distinctly libidinal *objet a*. *Lamella* generally means a thin flat scale, membrane, or layer; for example, biological membranes like the gills of a mushroom; geological layered mineral formations that produce line patterns; various layers that make up bone. More recently, the vitreous lamella, or Bruch membrane, refers to a nearly transparent membrane found in the uvea of an eye.

In this montage of membranes, their formal symbolic equivalencies are haunted by the specter of the living dragged across the earth, of inanimate evidence embedded under our nails, the rub of flesh on rock, of tissue on ground. The gold grass once shimmering across the highveld is a ghostly, dingy yellow in contrast to the many shades of charcoal produced in a certain infernal libidinal topology of colonialism and slavery.

From a clearing smoke, skin drafting low to the soil, my mouth a portal, my hand an erring scribe, write o".

*ki* [a little package of air]

3

The law—its business of handing down sentences, delivering judgments, and regulating promises and exchange—expends great effort to annihilate a certain positive force of social life structuring the individuated conflicts that make up a court's docket. When the law abstractly declares, "You are guilty of aggravated assault," it means that some *we* does not believe, for example, that Marissa Alexander fired her gun at her abusive husband to defend herself.<sup>19</sup> Reducing a trial to a sentence, and by that sentence reducing a person to a state of being, "you are" annihilates the person, thing, and context included in "aggravated assault." Law's sentencing evacuates the volatility of violent environments through an intransitive declaration of a defendant's being.

What does the poetic form of the Chinese sentence do to the way we understand law as both a symbolic discourse of norms and Lacan's formulation that "desire is law"?<sup>20</sup>

Ernest Fenollosa, in *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, notes the likeness of form between Chinese and English sentences but also offers the caution that the translation such formal similarity allows "must follow closely what is said, not merely what is abstractly meant."<sup>21</sup>

What does the law say with a guilty sentence, when it reestablishes a taboo, when it asserts itself as the regulation of desire? It reclaims a certain fundamental senselessness of violence into meaning. Violence is reduced to human

3. *ki* [a little package of air]

intent; its reality is an event with beginning, middle, and end; the loss it leaves in its wake can be accounted for by the force of the writtenness of law. This is Robert Cover's point: the performativity of law as *nomos* encloses and manages violence at the scale of its actual sentences.<sup>22</sup>

Comparing English and Chinese, Fenollosa notes the prevalence of the intransitive verb in English, whose performative effect reveals the separability of verbs from direct objects. These verbs without direct objects reveal that it "requires great effort to annihilate" the sense of a verb's positive force into "weak and incomplete sentences which suspend the picture and lead us to think of some verbs as denoting states rather than acts."<sup>23</sup> This is in contrast to the otherwise vivid experience in written Chinese, where verbs "are all transitive or intransitive at pleasure."<sup>24</sup>

The annihilation of an essential activeness or life of language itself is a core part of the repressive function of law's written sentences. This grammatical annihilation structures desire in and of legal judgment and, in turn, naturalizes the separability of verb and object in every declaration of law. Grammatical order, the sentence as both a unit of writing and a moment in legal judgment, procedurally offers finality by addressing a person who no longer does or acts in the world but "is" one way or another. Law's passive construction of violence replicates equally passive enjoyment of fantasies in law that personify violence as the essence of blackness.

But what refuses annihilation, despite the sentence's efforts?

"It requires great effort to annihilate. . . ."

*It requires great effort to annihilate. . .*

Ire and fort . . . da.

Anger and strength, gone and there.

In his essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Sigmund Freud observes in the child's game of *fort/da* that "the first act, that of departure, was staged as a game in itself and far more frequently than the episode in its entirety, with its pleasurable ending."<sup>25</sup> *It's so effortless, annihilating this thing, "da" ['there']*.<sup>26</sup>

DUKE

Repeating Fenollosa's sentence on the English sentence's difference from written Chinese, I drop the consonantal sound of the *q* (K), this voiceless velar plosive. This stop sound falls away, and I pick up the sound of the *th* (θ). It is a voiceless dental fricative, a tongue sound.<sup>27</sup>

"The thing of it is . . .," as Fred Moten begins so many of his explanations, phonographic slippage, the sound of a literal slip of movement, from the base of the tongue to the front between the teeth.<sup>28</sup> The thing of it is to write the law by the skin (in the middle) of our teeth.

Perhaps this is what Fenollosa meant when he declared, "*We* can assert a negation, though nature can not."<sup>29</sup> If nature is essentially active, always doing, law's investiture in sentences would seem a uniquely deadening activity. Indeed, "if we could follow back the history of all negative particles," or, I would add, all things, we should find that they are sprung from a certain inseparability of verbs and objects, and not from the intransitive drift baked into English and law's writtenness.<sup>30</sup>

Written Chinese reminds us of a certain meticulousness necessary for positive verbal conception. Traversing the unsentenced life of the ideogram and the uniquely deadening English copular verb *to be*, the consonants in the Korean alphabet offer letters that are at once phonemic references and pictures of the sounding mouth through which air and voice move. The fricative *q* (K) is denoted by the hangul letter ㅋ.<sup>31</sup> The letter itself depicts the shape of the mouth, lips, and tongue when it makes the represented sound.<sup>32</sup> The name of the letter ㅋ, *giyeok*, the first letter, in fact, of the Korean alphabet, is homonymic with 기억, meaning "memory."

Korean consonants both denote and depict sound as the breath and voice cleaved by tongue and lips. Speech acts written are acts of cleaving, a leaving to and in the side. To speak is to take leave of "I," hearing the clear note of some other thing that accompanies the saying, uttering the clear shape of a hangul letter.

Hangul is the orthographic *parlêtre* of and for an aliterate common folk intellectuality. The body is in the stroke, and the stroke in the body, as differential absences.

DUKE

3. *ki* [a little package of air]

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In grammatical annihilation, speech offers the pleasures of “no,” *na*, strung out, one line after another, sentences whose multiplicity betrays ordered sense. “In Chinese the sign meaning ‘to be lost in the forest’ relates to a state of non-existence. English ‘not’ = Sanskrit *na*, which may come from the root *na*, to be lost, to perish.”<sup>33</sup>

And so it is that the sequencing of words, or the ordering of speech, has no end. In forgetting how they began, words contain the capacity to surpass any ending. We speak always lost in the middle of things, forgetting what letter we capitalized at the beginning and between which letters we punctuated a stop. In perpetual revision, each word is a stone that takes me deeper into the Forest of *Na*.

Here, “frequently our lines of cleavage fail, one part of speech acts for another. They *act for* one another because they were originally one and the same.”<sup>34</sup> The proposition of an original sameness is interesting to me only insofar as the uncanny filters my attempts at a certain philological reconstruction. This is to say that uncanniness, for me, cuts philology with the transliterative possibility of Korean hangul to fill the expanse between English and Chinese with a vestibular mouth connecting speech and *parlêtre*. *This* mother tongue, of the marked mouth and mouthlike marks, claims in those failed cleavages. Its geometry of breath tempts me down some road to a place where the mark, the letter, the stroke, the calligraphic line fuses with what writing leaves behind and transmits nonetheless.

ㄷ cleaves.<sup>35</sup>

*Ki*: cleaving the law’s sentence with the clarity of Don Cherry’s trumpet, or the soft brush of his breath in my ear, or the hum of a song’s hook. It is our *petit objet a*, this little package of air, *ki*, or ㄱ in hangul. Can you hear the surpluses that survive the sentence’s repetition?

The thing of it lives in this transliteration, which some might say is slightly off from the more proper *gi*. But I suppose I prefer the harder *k* over the more glottal *g* given that the sound of ㄱ is somewhere in between. In the expanse of difference in the utterance between *ki* and *gi*, and in the nonsensical English phoneme *ki* and the Korean word ㄱ, there is not simply the meaning of the word but a knowledge of it: “energy, life force, breath, heart, ether, temper, a



feeling of.”<sup>36</sup> The *hanja* root of 气 is the familiar philosophical idea of *qi, ch’i*, 氣, also meaning “energy, life force, breath, air.”

Some living part of my body that would hear, utter, and mark this *ki* enacts what Izcovich describes as an “effective real . . . a real not as a frontier between what can and cannot be symbolized, but a real which can be used as a support in existence.”<sup>37</sup> The real borne here, for me, is a procedure of writing where the twist of homophonic translation also wrings the neck of the law’s sentences, forces it to open up to an amonolingual transitive register. There is no existent “I” of this text aside from the marks of this procedure.

The Chinese written character 氣 is a compound of the pictogram 气, meaning “air, breath, energy,” and representing clouds flowing through the sky; and the pictogram 米, meaning “rice.” Together, the character describes one’s effort of steaming rice as a gift for guests. Seditious, riotous, ungovernable guests, whose desire as law’s reverse, re-verse law’s sentences, with tinges of sound as small, soft and hard as grains of rice, scattered, scatted across the earth by the winds of life.<sup>38</sup> So are we ordered, with Layli Long Soldier:

Now  
make room in the mouth  
for grassesgrassesgrasses<sup>39</sup>

Just This, as the great Chan Buddhist teacher Dongshan Liangjie would say.<sup>40</sup>

## *bi* [savoir black]

4

My father died in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. There were four unreal months between when we first learned he had cancer in March and his crossing over at the end of June. The words “mathematical incomprehension” Lacan speaks of in his published series of lectures *Talking to Brick Walls* continue to ring inside me.<sup>41</sup> They give me a way to grieve.

Seven times seven: the Buddhist tradition requires 49 days of mourning by those who survive the deceased. My father’s favorite number was 49. He was born in 1949. Aloft in loss, 49 lines of flight incarnate an indestructible desire.

Listen, listen to the voice of the mountain of the North  
The candlelight inside you is extinguished<sup>42</sup>

He was a mathematician and put this passionate intellect to any problem. Writings of the Black Panther Party, like Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*, sat next to his books on topological manifolds. And somewhere in our home, he had hidden manuscripts of Korean history written by scholars living in North Korea.

Growing up doing math homework with him transmitted profound lessons about living and dying. I would not have said this as a child, but I must have known it nonetheless. His teaching traced how one moves through incomprehension with a protocol to arrive at an answer that includes a partial knowledge of *why*. To teach was to embrace incomprehension as an occasion to construct this protocol. Revelation always awaited at the end of this labor. The answer made sense at a deeper level of knowing, which was also a deeper level of living.

The political traditions of black radicalism and 주체 (*juche*), the Korean word for “self-reliance” or “independence,” were our protocol for arriving at why it was correct to question all teachers, scorn all police, defend the right to self-determination, take pleasure in the possible triumphs of all of the United States’ political enemies, stand up for peasants everywhere, revere the miracles of land and water we receive from farmers and fishers, and always think on the side of black liberation.

I still wake up to the sound of some book, whose pages he would slide before turning to the next, like breathing’s exhale.

Meet me in the open field of mathematical incomprehension.

There is a form of truth in mathematics that proceeds from but also exceeds deductive truth statements performed through logics of bivalency. Mathematical reasoning builds from a series of determinations between “true” and “false,” and each judgment of what is “true” is built out into an expanse of abstraction. It is both real procedure and fantastical ambition that characterizes the scientific revolution. Thus, Lacan’s fuller comment:

"Subjects who are beset by mathematical incomprehension expect more from truth."<sup>43</sup> This expectation, he goes on, "puts them to flight" in "a certain distance between truth and what we may call a cipher."<sup>44</sup>

*Parlêtre*, cipher, and the Arabic grapheme ٠ (*bi*), read by R. A. Judy from Ben Ali's African-Arabic American slave narrative.<sup>45</sup> "The cipher is nothing else but a written form, the written form of its value," writes Lacan, to which Judy follows up with the spoor as "auto-obscuring articulation," from an ancient Arabic proverb, "The camel dung-spoor signifies the camel" (*al-ba'ira tadalu 'alā al-ba'ir*).<sup>46</sup>

*Parlêtre*, cipher, ٠ (*bi*), dung-spoor: they materialize the "patterns of movement" in flight toward the more of truth in and of what Judy calls the "black textual tradition."<sup>47</sup> They are the marks of a *savoir* black, an unknown knowing that is true generally for every practice of writing and reading the illegible.

Deductive reasoning about what blackness is or is not, then, can only get us so far in this formulation of *savoir* black. For at some point, the essential nonnarratable history of the black slave and their descendant textual communities must think about the continued existence of this nonnarratability. Explaining Ben Ali's diary as "gibberish," Judy emphasizes, "the manuscript exists and in existing indicates a discernible system of signs, an *agencement* of referentiality, which somehow resists being comprehended in a universal semiology."<sup>48</sup> More recently, Judy's *Sentient Flesh* extends this earlier study to develop the idea of *para-semiosis*. Judy explains, "*Para-semiosis* denotes the dynamic of differentiation operating in multiple multiplicities of semiosis that converge *without synthesis*."<sup>49</sup> That such *para-semiosis* unfolds and flows "without synthesis" is, as I understand it, the condition of possibility for "blackness," which, Judy explains, "is a poetical, as in *poiēsis*, expression of *para-semiosis*."<sup>50</sup>

What Judy performs as "cryptoanalysis" and now, *poiēsis*, to read the ciphers of the black textual tradition articulates perfectly where blackness and Lacanian psychoanalysis meet.<sup>51</sup> On this approach, statements about ontologies of and as anti-blackness, political and otherwise, are "gibberish" unavoidably admitting that the mouth's or the hand's movement, their "auto-obscuring articulation," is the only fact of existence.

According to Lacan, ontological discourse is a form of *connaissance*, knowledge desired for its transcendental nature.<sup>52</sup> Cryptoanalysis as a form of black psychoanalysis maneuvers the subject whose "desire is a desire to know" to "render present a hole which can no longer be situated in the

transcendental nature of knowledge.”<sup>53</sup> The symbolic existence of that which is nonnarratable, the letter, must and will ultimately displace *connaissance* with *savoir*. Not because *savoir* is a higher form of knowing. But because, as Judy says, there is “graphic material in need of a structural field.”<sup>54</sup>

Through cryptoanalysis, the desiring subject will have been placed in a structural field in which the more of truth can be experienced as some mark that lives on or in the body, and whose origin and cause is unknowable. Every crypt is a hole, and every hole is a crypt. This is a radical extension of the Freudian discovery Lacan tries to impress across his seminars and writing, that is, “the structural reason why the literality of any text, whether proposed as sacred or profane, increases in importance the more it involves a genuine confrontation with truth. . . . That structural reason is found precisely in what the truth that it bears, that of the unconscious, owes to the letter.”<sup>55</sup>

So, how to articulate the *parlêtre* of Afro-pessimism as a challenge to the reduction of it to deducible truth about what blackness is or is not?<sup>56</sup>

The surprise of movement other than the bivalent back and forth of conscious political thought awaits between the imaginary and the symbolic. And to respond to these swarming letters by theorizing this structural field from the very ciphers or materials that exist outside semiology is not to valorize their “oppositional resistance” but, continuing to follow Judy, to trace “a resistance of being that can only be transposed.”<sup>57</sup>

Something of existence whose mode is transposition refers to a surplus jouissance. Specifically, it is a pleasure of redrawing a line around the blankness of a text to be taken in and as the cipher, the letter, *parlêtre*: ب, *bi*, be. Judy says that Ben Ali was “writing writing,” as Judy, too, does with Ben Ali as beloved cipher.<sup>58</sup> And we all, too, might, if we can conscience that black radical politics is the camel, and the black textual tradition the transpositional, transferential movement of its spours.

The letters and sounds of theory’s writing often start to get restless. They do not neatly stay in their field of meaning. They become serial marks, and my eyes and ears unsync themselves from each other as they wander from the monotony of lined-up letters. They catch those letters and sounds that fall away only to return. These are homophonic (mis)translations, or dystranslations, through which I, we, might escape the line. It’s as if theory were a little tune from no song in particular, hummed under one’s breath.

She speaks ajar, the aggregate asunder: render  
The cacomeme babble towards the fourth star<sup>59</sup>

DUKE

While *dystranslation* is my term, it follows in the wake of what Lyn Hejinian has written about *translation*: “What must be preserved,” she writes, “are the disappearances that are enacted as specific meanings vanish into the time and space of sentences, the sentences into paragraphs, and the paragraphs into a book—the momentary experiences of our perceptions occurring always just at [the] moment when they too disappear.”<sup>60</sup>

Dystranslation is a form of composition that works from the nonmeaning of a letter’s sound, but also one that moves, plays, and, indeed, breathes its way from an absence of meaning into the construction of another idea. The initiation of this other idea is linked to the letter on the page as nothing more than a musical notation. And then the letter is released into an open field of sound awaiting alphabets, a crypto-writing. As the movement of the sounding mouth leads us on a path of reading between English letters and Chinese characters, the letters of the Korean hangul alphabet are, for me, the marks of a babble we might call the ghost of and in an anti-colonial machine.

Referring to Lacan’s discussion of Chinese calligraphy, Izcovich remarks that the void “is what is seriously at stake, *l’en-je*, in the letter.”<sup>61</sup> I suppose the English equivalent is the poem, whose patterns of letters and spaces allow a void to inhabit the page. The English in me wants to scatter out into an “auto-obscuring” English.

A being of poetics whose materiality is given in the letter as both movement and vanishment: Chinese calligraphy and the Black Arts Movement. In this disassembly of marks, cuts, curves, infinities, my being enjoys in writing, not about *parlêtre*, but with.

Lacan would conclude in his later work that *parlêtre* is “being specified by the unconscious.”<sup>62</sup> It is a mark that lives in the body as a lost *jouissance* and shapes the search for surplus *jouissance*. It is a special signifier that marks a second birth of the living body, where the Real ex-sists in the symbolic body. *Parlêtre* is not simply a neologism for *être parlant* (“speaking being”) but plays with a certain equivocation of conceptual significance between *parle-être* and *par-lettre* so as to emphasize how that which cannot be absorbed by the symbolic is libidinally expressed as the unconscious. In Izcovich’s words, “The *parlêtre* is the speaking being in his singularity of *jouissance*, which involves the way in which the unconscious produces its effects at the level of the body.”<sup>63</sup>

Let this body, this history, these letters fly into the air.

An unknown knowing sees letters, numbers, and symbols in mysterious relation—madness, maybe. Or reads the marks of a sage of sages. Or hears the prelude to some discourse that will make a path to some other articulation. Write only the “scraps,” Lacan would insist.

Just That is all I have, anyway. *Savoir* black.

## 만 [only]

5

*Savoir* black: holding the transposability of all history and all culture as true, incomprehend mathematically. Mather, not father . . . mather, mother, matter, ether. Math, moth, man. A flute scatters notes across the oceans, buffers the air and light with mist, drowning talk with notes, and more notes. Notes, letters, numbers, his drawing hand whispers as it moves across the page, whistles evermore . . .

波瀾萬丈. 파란만장, *paranmanjang*. Meaning “a life full of change, upheaval, turbulence.”

만, *man*, meaning “10,000” and “only.” Cancer would be another wave in the ten thousand waves of life, he said.

Only (a) life . . . made so little wants revenge on the biggest thing conceivable: time and its utterly arbitrary violence.

I want to cut it down the middle, reduce it to pure logic, fit it into a series of letters, numbers, and signs. I want to be the author of a logic so unconditional, unrelenting, and totalizing an act against time, it can bring the violent chaos and endless heartbreak of the world to heel. What Lacan refers to as a “generator operation” I know as the *generative* operation of my body.<sup>64</sup> I will bear with my body the capacity to gather any- and everything

and spin it all in another direction, away from this ongoing catastrophe of whiteness. Born of revenge and fury, from a state of general coercion we call *freedom*, anything I gestate, living and otherwise, will be a trace of the spoor because this logic theorizes it so. Each strand of desire, which is to say, loss, which is to say, spoor, will always end with a prick that punctures the skin of memory with something to metabolize the sweet senselessness of revenge into a living alphabet.

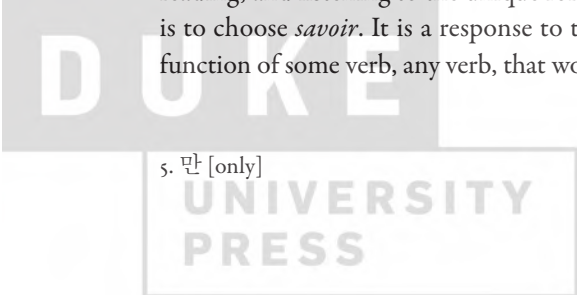
Lacan’s lectures at the Chapel in Sainte-Anne’s Hospital end with “[ . . . ].” Ellipses are a provocative placeholder, perhaps signaling that the lectures collected in the book *Talking to Brick Walls* occurred as part of another series of lectures he delivered to the Law Faculty at the Pantheon around the same time. Those lectures are collected and translated by Jacques-Alain Miller in the volume entitled . . . or Worse, as Lacan’s Seminar XIX. Or perhaps they signal an unrecorded free discussion, the coming of a reader’s free writing that might follow the end of a published lecture.

I read these ellipses as part of a cipher: “. . . or worse.” The cipher is formulated like an operation, like the bivalent operation of “True or false?” Drawn as a little diagram (table 1.1), the ellipses occupy the same place in the structure as truth, suggesting that the mark of the ellipses is how we might regard the “more” of truth. Indeed, Lacan writes in his first lecture as part of . . . or Worse, “This empty place is the only way to catch hold of something by means of language [and] allows us precisely to penetrate the nature of language.”<sup>65</sup>

Table 1.1	TRUE	OR	FALSE
	. . .	OR	WORSE

What is this adverb, *worse*, related to? I believe it is related to what becomes true as a result of not choosing *savoir*. When the matter of knowledge is at stake, the bivalent choice is not between “true” and “false,” but between “. . .” and “worse,” or *savoir* and “worse.” To respond at the level of writing, reading, and listening to the unique form of how the unconscious demands is to choose *savoir*. It is a response to the unconscious in the grammatical function of some verb, any verb, that would ground the adverb *worse*.

5. ㅁㄴ [only]



만 or worse.

My earliest memory of learning math was not solving a math problem but being walked, by my father, through the theory or logic that reveals a knowledge supporting a certain procedure of deduction. He drew, annotated, sketched as he explained how a theory was discovered in the context of real-life situations, people, and technologies. When drawn, Gauss's first summation formula was simply the folding and cutting of a number sequence on itself. In my father's hand, any mathematical comprehension to be had was in the *savoir* of drawing. Drawing was in the teaching, and teaching was in the drawing. This may well have been the first time I fell in love, even if it would take me decades to understand and know exactly with what and whom I had fallen in love.

So, too, then, a theory of the unconscious in a world where law and anti-blackness are one and the same, if there's one to be had, will be in a certain drawing of it. Here, drawing is a poetics of "scraps of discourse."<sup>66</sup> Like a memory, any theoretical insight will reside in a condensation for those who don't know what they want from you.

To give this cipher, for and of study. . . .

It bears an addressee who, also, moves through and beyond an argument of the "true or false." Less digression, less demonstration, just a few points for a drawing. Points that carry forward the expectation of a practice and knowledge of the unconscious, an experimental doing that gathers an "us" that we can only provisionally refer to, or orient around a cipher. This gathering, your teaching, my offering, some transmission happens.

What kind of interview, or inter-view, has already happened, takes place, as we ask and answer questions from separate sides of a brick wall? *Wall* in French is *mur*. Lacan refers to *l'(a)mur* to invoke the object, *a*, as a wall that structures "love, the good a mother wishes her son," and his decision to "come back here to spill some stuff at Sainte-Anne."<sup>67</sup> He puns, "I've been speaking with the *murs* here, indeed with *(a)murs*, and with a-*murs*-ement."<sup>68</sup> So



what desire brings us up close to this brick wall, expecting something on the other side? What will the verb you overlay on the ellipses of Lacan's cipher do with my verbs: write, cipher, alphabetize? How do we each come to the doing of thinking *as if* someone is there, to share an interest with and in incomprehending?

The intimacy of interest in losing time to, or in having all the time for, the arrival of a *savoir* that addresses something deeper to live for than life itself is coterminous with incomprehension. Neither with hope nor with faith, neither agnostic nor fatalistic, I am talking about incomprehensible expectation. This would be, for me, the "more from truth" that emerges from the "distance between truth" and "..."

Between mathemes and math, law and M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*, Nathaniel Mackey's "*Mu*" poems and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's muism, cipher on cipher, jouissance on jouissance, in the distance between the position of the analyst and the analysand's hysterical demand, seditious procedures await to be discovered only once and then never again, except as trace on trace, as so many notes on the discourse of the analyst, these many "scraps."

## • [cosmosis]

6

To recount from memory "what happened" in the months since June 2020, when this book's vision came to be—the pandemic, Black Lives Matter protests, losing my father to cancer—is to necessarily invite layer on layer, veil on veil, of that which divides a writing self from the self at the scene. Writing began with a stubborn persistence, something miraculous about the mere will to show up, or a desire that something would show itself despite and in the midst of recounting.

Serge André reports that he "strangered" himself as he set out to write about his recovery from cancer.<sup>69</sup> This is to wish for a nononeness, to solicit and stay with this nononeness, to know the having always been gathered. The distinction between an awakening of oneself and "something awakened" emerges. The insistence of this distinction in its turning, from side to side and under and over itself, is a palimpsestic process that follows a certain pitch. I mean *pitch* as sound, but also the willingness to be pitched, thrown, by some pitchfork of the real, out or to the side of oneself, or the oneness of being.

Palimpsestic, the words in this book are wet with gesso. They each suspend the mark of psychoanalysis in a splay of pigment. That which is suspended used to be a word. But smeared by and in the gesso, a letter remains, spread for examination. The word takes some lovely hazy shade of gray, a blurry now, a barely perceptible word. This milky fluid shows us the bareness of the materiality of the word, not in its stripping, not in its covering, but by force, a streak of motion.

The analyst's writing, *this* writing, like palimpsestic painting, or the carving of paint on canvas, summons a certain kind of pressure, the press of the real on the symbolic world we unconsciously defend, the unwitting automated "worse" we choose on one side of Lacan's formula "... or worse."

The beyond that which the ellipses mark, and precisely here, is where André poses the question of whether writing might have cured him of his cancer. Beyond as that which exists without representation beyond any frame, delimitation, or rule tends to give us the sense that "the cure comes on its own," that it is a "negative knowledge," an acontextual context of being that "endeavors to keep empty."<sup>70</sup>

I find it frightening and thrilling that art is exemplary of such effort. Insofar as something truly new and true is made through the nonrepresentational part of (any) gesture—noting, smearing, sketching, erasing, etching, sounding, copying—art is exemplary for me, not of courage, but of some way of being in time and space where fear and courage, meaning and madness, and self and other are rendered obsolete as ways of taking responsibility for one's desire. The pen, the brush, the hand, the sponge, the lump of charcoal, the body, the shadow, the keyboard—they are all physical portals to a practice already underway, each offering the possibility of choosing that which can only be symbolized with ellipses.

The open field is scorched for the drawing.

The dots of an ellipsis as grammatical punctuation of a beyond within meaning have a pictorial aspect in hangul vowels. Vowels were created using three figures: the dot, representing heaven (yin); the horizontal line, representing earth (yang); and the vertical line, representing the human. I read the ellipses in J. Kameron Carter's reading of theologian Charles Long, in

*The Anarchy of Black Religion*, with this hangul twist. In the ellipses, Carter registers the presence of cosmological worlds at the heart of black religion and all this implies about the heterogeneity of form we can imagine in and as ellipses.

*Manifestos 4* is a musical art piece by Charles Gaines, who transposed the letters of the written Supreme Court opinion in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* into a system of musical notation and composition.<sup>71</sup> In the black box of slavery with Gaines, he shows us what a true re-versing of law is. There is a new cosmic universe waiting in the conceptual mediation of the letter connecting word and sound, law and music. Gaines's is a process of co-osmosis between written law and musical score, a cosmosis of *savoir* black, between listening and reading. Gaines's conceptually driven practice of musical composition produces orchestral sound from the mathematical incomprehension of how the letters that comprise the *Dred Scott* opinion dispense violence across the social field. It is a dissonant, haunting, contemporary, and musing music. Gaines shows us that the conceptuality of law's writing bears music. The written opinion is just a misread musical score of letters notating an unhearable sonicity.<sup>72</sup> Their phrasings contain polyvoided meanings. And when played in concert through conceptual transposition, translation, and transliteration of the question of who or what Dred Scott was, is, and could be in the late nineteenth-century United States, Gaines's art shows us that, yes, no, *mu*, "music," as Nathaniel Mackey writes, "is wounded kinship's last resort."<sup>73</sup>

The law's illimitable interdiction of *black life is also a black cosmosis* in inter-diction.

Se [bird]

7

M. NourbeSe Philip created the long poem *Zong!* from the words of *Gregson v. Gilbert* (1783).<sup>74</sup> In this infamous English case, the owners of a slave ship sued an insurance company to recoup their "losses" of 130 enslaved Africans they intentionally cast overboard en route from Accra, Ghana, to Jamaica.<sup>75</sup>

7. *se* [bird]

*Zong!* culminates in Philip's scattered and fragmented phonemes and words, many of which are unreadable because they appear like letters typed on top of other letters, into a dense gathering and overlapping movement. They represent the bones of millions of slaves lost to the liquid grave of the Middle Passage, the unhearable sonicity of their submerged lives, and continue to haunt the words of law as letters.

Reading *Zong!* aloud, my voice stops at these knotted letters, and continues on, moving with the waves of what legible phonemes and words appear in relationship to these condensations of sound and mark. The blackness of these typographical figures arrests and presences the labor of breath in reading and making sense.

There is, at the end, no way to untangle writing and reading, history and violence, law and life, letter and mark. Entanglement is beginningless, and endless. There is only reknitting in these secretive, intimate dashes of letters laid over letters. They vibrate with a blurry edge created from their inseparability. They are marks of an uncoded, unencodable silence whose frequency changes into so many waves of murmurance. Indeed, it is as if *Zong!* is part of the quest narrated in *Looking for Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence* to "make the desert of words bloom—with Silence!"<sup>76</sup>

The force of Philip's poetics, which is to say, the force of law written with Philip's hand, is physical. It requires sounding bodies, dead and living. The unencodedness of the silence of these reknotted letters impinges on the body as reader, the body of law as word, and the unconscious as ceaseless writing. The breath is freed from reading as performance. Voice is unwillingly stilled, suspended, unensured. What and who will proceed from there is not assured, even if a next breath can be and is taken, or a next phoneme or word can be and is discerned. *Zong!* is the force of law's language incarnated in hovering, teeming, blurry marine matter whose lines move in a moving medium. *Zong!* azures law.

Filled with glyphs of the ungivenness of breath, to read it, aloud or in silence, is to break the law, which is to say, break prose.

*Zong!* is our *pro se* case.

*Se, sae.* *Sae* is a transliteration of the hangul word 새, meaning “bird,” “new,” “fresh.” Hear the *muni* bird in . . .<sup>77</sup>

. . . that outer space structured by inner sound, which is where the poetics of political form lives, where that poetics takes up and is taken up by its life, which is a form of life, cloaked, clothed, veiled, given in a sumptuary law of motion.<sup>78</sup>

Yes. I see her. The Chinese pictogram for 새 as “bird” is 鳥.

*Zong!* teaches abolitionists that there will be no justice for the slave and their descendants without doing something with the graphic marks of the law. Perhaps Philip, too, would say they are “in need of a structural field.” Abolishing the world of meaning that both gave rise to the case and continues to drive our return to it as historical narrative has only ever been a means. No end. This form of abolition is accomplished by an erasure that is a writing over word and meaning with its sound. *Zong!* as means is an explosive reading and writing from the “underness” of law where the enforcement of a deathly contract at issue is between word and narrative.<sup>79</sup>

Lawlessness: a unary law of the underness of every utterance and tone.

I take a photo of the prints appearing in a book collecting and discussing Cha’s life and art (figure 1.1).

I and this structural field that is yet to be are prefigured in the bottom right frame of Cha’s 1977 set of prints, “Markings.” The doing of *parlêtre*, “blacks,” is summoned by the blankness of this specific frame. It offers as condition of possibility all the things it could be filled with. The inapparency of the ghosted words underneath the clearer ones—black and blue, markings, blacks and blue, mark, blues—is made more present by my desire to include Cha’s “Markings” here by taking a picture of the book’s page. This blankness is all that the absent mark “blacks” marks, inapparent ghosted words there even so.

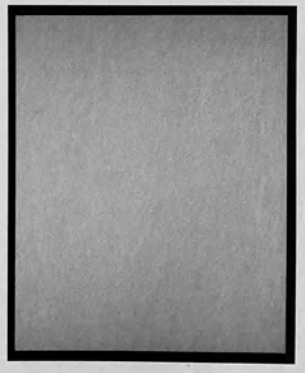
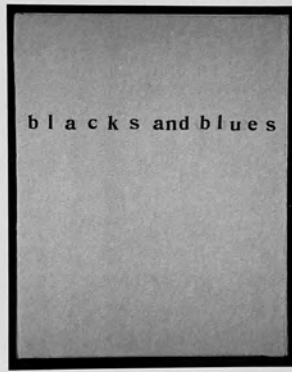
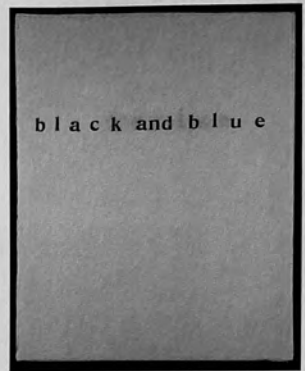
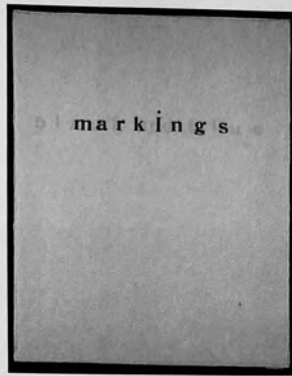
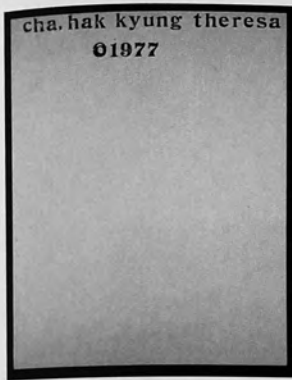
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7. *se* [bird]

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Every morning, somewhere between six and seven, always with waking dreaminess, my son looks over my shoulder and scans my writing. This morning, while I was getting him breakfast, Namu reminded me that I was born in 1977, and “7 times 7 is 49.”

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1.1 Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, "Markings" (1977). In Lewallen, *The Dream of the Audience*, 129. Photo by author.

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# notes

## Preface

- 1 Don Mee Choi, "Translator's Note," in H. Kim, *Autobiography of Death*, 109.
- 2 See Mackey, "Robert Creeley's *The Gold Diggers*"; Mackey, *Discrepant Engagement*, 260–86; and Mackey, *Call Me Tantra*.
- 3 Moten, *Little Edges*; and Moten's trilogy, *consent not to be a single being*, including *Black and Blur*, *Stolen Life*, and *The Universal Machine*.
- 4 Moten, *Universal Machine*, 233; and Moten, *Stolen Life*, 116.
- 5 Mackey's "*Mu*" poems can be found across multiple volumes of his poetry, including *Eroding Witness*, *School of Udhra*, *Splay Anthem*, *Nod House*, and the three-volume set, *Double Trio*.
- 6 This triadic formulation echoes Moten's brilliant condensation of Fanon's language into a reminder that "the lunatic, the (revolutionary) lover, and the poet [who] are of imagination all compact" (*Universal Machine*, 233). Insofar as writing theory after Afro-pessimism depends on the possibility of desiring "something-other-than-transcendental subjectivity that is called nothing," I hear Moten's figure of the blackness of desire as a creative Fanonian reformulation of the Lacanian Symbolic, Imaginary and Real (234).
- 7 Moten, *Universal Machine*, 234.
- 8 Han, *to regard a wave* (selva oscura press, forthcoming).
- 9 Fenollosa and Pound, *Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*; see also Pound, *Cantos of Ezra Pound*; and Pound, *Cathay*. See also Yip, "Translating Chinese Poetry." With this anthology, Yip hopes to put readers of Chinese poetry in the wake of Pound "out of gear," by arguing that "both the Taoist and the Confucian poetics demand the submission of the self to the cosmic measure rather than the Kantian attempt to resist and measure oneself against the apparent almighty-

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- ness of nature, resulting in a greater degree of noninterference in artistic presentation" (27).
- 10 Olson, "Projective Verse"; Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 92.
  - 11 Blasing, *Lyric Poetry*, 169; and Bernstein, *Close Listening*, 22.
  - 12 Lacan, *Seminar X: Anxiety*, translated by Cormac Gallagher, 79.
  - 13 Lacan, *Seminar X: Anxiety*, translated by Gallagher, 79 (my emphasis).
  - 14 Lacan, *Seminar X: Anxiety*, translated by Gallagher, 79.
  - 15 Lacan, *Seminar X: Anxiety*, translated by Gallagher, 79, 80.
  - 16 Lacan, *Seminar X: Anxiety*, translated by Gallagher, 80. For a compelling psychoanalytic exploration of self-writing and the feminine structure of knowledge and love, see Lieber, *The Writing Cure*.
  - 17 Rogers, *Incandescent Alphabets*, 177.
  - 18 Carter, "Black Malpractice," 81.
  - 19 Carter, "Black Malpractice," 81.
  - 20 Nielsen, *Black Chant*, 34.
  - 21 On the innovation of Korean calligraphy, see generally Lachman, *Way with Words*.
  - 22 Mackey, *Eroding Witness*, 67.
  - 23 Judy, *Sentient Flesh*, 7.
  - 24 Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*, 81.
  - 25 Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, 8–9. Sells has also written about apophasis and the language of the unsayable in psychoanalysis; see Webb and Sells, "Lacan and Bion."
  - 26 Rogers, *Incandescent Alphabets*, 202.
  - 27 Clifton, *Collected Poems*, 173. For an audio recording of Clifton reading this poem, see <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/play/76500>.

### *Savoir* Black

- 1 Mackey, *Splay Anthem*, x.
- 2 Griffiths, "Hunger."
- 3 Graham, "In/Silence," 140.
- 4 Izcovich, *Marks of a Psychoanalysis*, 23.
- 5 Mullen, "Sleeping with the Dictionary," 67.
- 6 Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 243.
- 7 Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 244.
- 8 Sexton, "Social Life of Social Death."
- 9 Hunt, *Veronica*, 30.
- 10 Lyn Hejinian's *My Life and My Life in the Nineties* and Robert Bringhurst's *Everywhere Being Is Dancing: Twenty Pieces of Thinking* also inform the organizational principle of this book.
- 11 Izcovich, *Marks of a Psychoanalysis*, 93.
- 12 From a translation of Rilke's "The Panther," quoted in Kentridge, *Six Drawing Lessons*, 154.