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# Black and Blur

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# PREFACE

The essays in *Black and Blur* attempt a particular kind of failure, trying hard not to succeed in some final and complete determination either of themselves or of their aim, blackness, which is, but so serially and variously, that it is given nowhere as emphatically as in rituals of renomination, when the given is all but immediately taken away. Such predication is, as Nathaniel Mackey says, "unremitting"—a constant economy and mechanics of fugitive making where the subject is hopelessly troubled by, in being emphatically detached from, the action whose agent it is supposed to be.[1] Indeed, our resistant, relentlessly impossible object is subjectless predication, subjectless escape, escape from subjection, in and through the paralegal flaw that animates and exhausts the language of ontology. Constant escape is an ode to impurity, an obliteration of the last word. We remain to insist upon this errant, interstitial insistence, an activity that is, from the perspective that believes in perspective, at best, occult and, at worst, obscene. These essays aim for that insistence at its best and at its worst as it is given in objects that won't be objects after all.

In its primary concern with art, *Black and Blur* takes up where *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* leaves off.[2] *In the Break* was my first book and is, therefore, the cause and the object of a great deal of agony. For instance, I suffered, and continue to suffer, over the first sentence, which I can't repeat because it was meant to be second. I can only tell you what the first sentence was supposed to be: "Performance is the resistance of the object." Sadly, agony over the absence of the right sentence is not lessened when I consider that there is something wrong with it, and when I recognize that most of the writing collected in *Black and Blur*—and its companion volumes, *Stolen Life* and *The Universal Machine*—attempts to figure out what's wrong with it and, moreover, to understand the relationship between the devotional practice that is given in recitation of the sentence "blackness is *x*" and the analytic practice that moves to place under

an ineradicable erasure the terms *performance* and *object*. There is a rich, rigorous, powerful, and utterly necessary analytic of anti-blackness that enables that devotional practice. But to be committed to the anti- and ante-categorical predication of blackness—even as such engagement moves by way of what Mackey also calls "an eruptive critique of predication's rickety spin rewound as endowment," even in order to seek the anticipatory changes that evade what Saidiya Hartman calls "the incompatible predications of the freed"—is to subordinate, by a measure so small that it constitutes measure's eclipse, the critical analysis of anti-blackness to the celebratory analysis of blackness.[3] To celebrate is to solemnify, in practice. This is done not to avoid or ameliorate the hard truths of anti-blackness but in the service of its violent eradication. There is an open set of sentences of the kind blackness is $x$ and we should chant them all, not only for and in the residual critique of mastery such chanting bears but also in devoted instantiation, sustenance and defense of the irregular. What is endowment that it can be rewound? What is it to rewind the given? What is it to wound it? What is it to be given to this wounding and rewinding? Mobilized in predication, blackness mobilizes predication not only against but also before itself.

The great importance of Hartman's work is given, in part, in its framing and amplification of the question concerning the weight of anti-blackness in and upon the general project of black study. It allows and requires us to consider the relation of anti-blackness as an object of study—if there is relation and if it is the object—to the aim of her, and our, work. Any such consideration must be concerned with how blackness bears what Hartman calls the "diffusion" of the terror of anti-blackness. For me, this question of bearing is also crucial and *In the Break* is a preliminary attempt to form it. Subordination is not detachment. Disappearance is not absence. If blackness will have never been thought when detached from anti-blackness, neither will anti-blackness have been thought outside the facticity of blackness as anti-blackness's spur and anticipation; moreover, neither blackness nor anti-blackness are to be seen beneath the appearances that tell of them. The interinanimation of thinking and writing collected here might be characterized as a kind of dualism, but I hope it would be better understood by way of some tarrying with Hartman's notion of diffusion, which is inseparable from a certain notion of apposition conceived of not as therapy but alternative operation.

In my attempt to amplify and understand the scream of Frederick Douglass's Aunt Hester, which he recalls and reconfigures throughout his body of

autobiographical work in successive iterations of the brutal sexual violence to which it violently and aninaugurally responds, I began to consider that the scream's content is not simply unrepresentable but instantiates, rather, an alternative to representation. Such consideration does no such thing as empty the scream of content. It makes no such gesture. Rather, it seeks after what the scream contains (and pours out), and after the way that content is passed on—too terribly and too beautifully—in black art. In seeking after that content and its irrepressible outpouring, distance from the vicious seriality of Aunt Hester's rape, and the general "theft of the body," in Hortense Spillers's terms, it can be said to (dis)embody, is impossible.[4] Any such distance could only ever be an absolute nearness, an absolute proximity, which a certain invocation of suture might approach, but with great imprecision. Black art neither sutures nor is sutured to trauma. There's no remembering, no healing. There is, rather, a perpetual cutting, a constancy of expansive and enfolding rupture and wound, a rewind that tends to exhaust the metaphysics upon which the idea of redress is grounded. That trauma—or, more precisely the materiality of her violation and of the violence that makes that beating possible and legible and, in the view of the violator, necessary—is carried in and transmitted by Aunt Hester's scream as a fundamental aspect of its own most ineluctable and irresistible sharpness and serration. This bearing and transmission are irreducible in the scream even if the scream is irreducible to them. Aunt Hester's scream cannot be emptied of the content it pours out in excess and disruption of meaning, of the modality of subjectivity or subjective embodiment that makes and interprets meaning, and of the sense of world or spatiotemporal coherence or global positioning or proprioceptive coordination that constitutes what Amiri Baraka might call the "place/meant" of possessed and/or possessive individuation. Aunt Hester's scream is flesh's dispossessive share and sharing, and the question, really, for those who attend to it, is whether it is enough. My tendency is to believe that in the material spirit of its absolute poverty, Aunt Hester's scream is optimal, as absolute wealth. Where some might see in my analysis a decoupling of her scream from the context of violence, I think of myself as having tried, and in the intervening years having continued to try, to forward a broader, richer, and more detailed understanding of that context. Not only are Aunt Hester's scream and its content themselves uncontained by the boundaries that emerge in the relay between self, world, and representation but the violent context of that scream and its content, and the very content of violence itself, are so uncontained, as well. *In the Break* was a preliminary report on

my attempt to study the nature of this uncontainment of and in content. Somehow, in extension of that study, *Black and Blur* manages to be more preliminary still.

I remain convinced that Aunt Hester's scream is diffused in but not diluted by black music in particular and black art in general. But if this is so it is because her rape, as well as Douglass's various representations of it, is an aesthetic act. Evidently, the violent art of anti-blackness isn't hard to master. My concern, however, is with the violence to which that violent art responds—a necessarily prior consent, an unremitting predication, the practice of an environment that is reducible neither to an act nor to its agent. This brushes up against the question of what the terms *diffusion* and *celebration* bear and is, therefore, a question for Hartman, who writes:

> Therefore, rather than try to convey the routinized violence of slavery and its aftermath through invocations of the shocking and the terrible, I have chosen to look elsewhere and consider those scenes in which terror can hardly be discerned—slaves dancing in the quarters, the outrageous darky antics of the minstrel stage, the constitution of humanity in slave law, and the fashioning of the self-possessed individual. By defamiliarizing the familiar, I hope to illuminate the terror of the mundane and quotidian rather than exploit the shocking spectacle. What concerns me here is the *diffusion of terror* [Moten's emphasis] and the violence perpetrated under the rubric of pleasure, paternalism and property. Consequently, the scenes of subjection examined here focus on the enactment of subjugation and the constitution of the subject and include the blows delivered to Topsy and Zip coon on the popular stage, slaves coerced to dance in the marketplace, the simulation of will in slave law, the fashioning of identity, and the process of individuation and normalization.[5]

*In the Break* also began with an attempt to engage Hartman; as you can see, I can't get started any other way. What I can say more clearly here than I did there is that I have no difference with Hartman that is not already given in and by Hartman. It is her work, for instance, which requires our skepticism regarding any opposition between the mundane and quotidian, on the one hand, and the shocking and spectacular, on the other, not only at the level of their effects but at the level of their attendant affects as well. Similarly, violence perpetrated under the rubric of pleasure demands our study not just because its commission is in relation to paternalism and property

but also because anticipatorily alternative modalities of such violence induce paternalism and property as regulatory modes of response. If the slave owner's enjoyment of enslaved song and dance is rightly to be understood as a mode of violent appropriation it can only adequately be so understood alongside the fact of the expropriative, radically improper violence that is held in and pours out from song and dance in blackness. Because the terror that infuses black music "can hardly be discerned," say, in Louis Armstrong's extraordinary rendition of "What a Wonderful World," I thought, in *In the Break*, I would talk about it via Max Roach's and Abbey Lincoln's "Triptych." The point was precisely to follow Hartman in her concern for the diffusion of terror. Indeed, I have been trying critically to understand and also creatively to augment that diffusion. This is to say, more generally, that my work, in bent echo of Hartman and Spillers, of Denise Ferreira da Silva and Laura Harris, is invested in the analysis, preservation, and diffusion of the violent "affectability" of "the aesthetic sociality of blackness," to which the violence of the slave owner/settler responds and to whose regulatory and reactionary violence it responds, in anticipation.[6] For some, diffusion might mean something like the process by which molecules intermingle; or maybe it means something like the net movement of molecules from an area of high to one of low concentration, thereby signaling dilution. My willingness to claim the term, to express my own concern with it, holds out (for) something other than either of these. It does so by way of, and in thinking along with, Hartman. With regard to the matter in question, first of all, the violence of which we speak is non-particulate, which is to say that it is not a matter of its intermingling with some imagined counterpart or moving from a state of high concentration to low. The concentration is both constant and incalculable precisely in its being non-particulate. At stake is an ambience that is both more and less than atmospheric. In this regard, diffusion might be said imprecisely to name something that the intersection of gravitation and non-locality only slightly less imprecisely names. It is a pouring forth, a holding or spreading out, or a running over that never runs out and is never over; a disbursal more than a dispersal; a funding that is not so much founding as continual finding of that which is never lost in being lost. It is the terrible preparation of a table for a feast of burial and ascension. Neither the violence nor the suffering it induces, nor the alternative to that violence that anticipates even while it cannot but bear that violence, are submissive to the normative ethical calculus from whose exterior some propose to speak, as dissident or supplicant, advocate or prosecutor, in the classic, (self-)righteous, unavoidably contradictory

and neurotic stance of the impossible subjectivity that is our accursed share. Against the grain of that stance, which always laments standing from outside of and in opposition to its framework, black art, or the predication of blackness, is not avoidance but immersion, not aggrandizement but an absolute humility.

Hartman writes, with great precision, "The event of captivity and enslavement engenders the necessity of redress, the inevitability of its failure, and the constancy of repetition yielded by this failure."[7] But here's the thing. The event of captivity and enslavement is not an event. *Event* isn't even close to being the right word for this unremitting non-remittance, as Hartman's own writing shows and proves. This formulation is testament to the ways she exhausts the language and conceptual apparatuses with which she was given to work. Precisely because she establishes with such clarity that slavery conditions an aftermath that bears it, an afterlife that extends it, Hartman uses up the word *event*. There's nothing left of it, nothing left in it for us. Moreover, the ubiquity of such exhaustion in her work is why faithful reading of Hartman's must be deviant. Her work, it seems to me, is for building, rather than scolding, that deviance. In this regard, the notion of time that underwrites the very idea of the event is also offline. *Event*, here, is fantasmatic in a way that Hartman teaches us to understand when she teaches us to ask: "What if the presumed endowments of man—*conscience, sentiment,* and *reason*—rather than assuring liberty or negating slavery acted to yoke slavery and freedom?"[8] Here, again, in her very invocation of them, Hartman establishes for us that none of the terms she deploys are adequate. When slavery is understood to have always been yoked to freedom all throughout the history of man; when (the so-called free) man's yoking to the figure of the slave is also, of necessity, understood to be yoked to his struggle against the free man for his freedom (and the ambiguity of "his" is, here, intentional), then what we're talking about is better, if still inadequately, understood as durational field rather than event. Some may want to invoke the notion of the traumatic event and its repetition in order to preserve the appeal to the very idea of redress even after it is shown to be impossible. This is the aporia that some might think I seek to fill and forget by invoking black art. Jazz does not disappear the problem; it *is* the problem, and will not disappear. It is, moreover, the problem's diffusion, which is to say that what it thereby brings into relief is the very idea of the problem. Is a problem that can't be solved still a problem? Is an aporia a problem or, in fact, an avoidance of the problem, a philosophically induced conundrum predicated upon certain metaphysical and mechanical assump-

tions that cannot be justified? Let's imagine that the latter is true. Then, this absent problem, which disappears in what appears to be inhabitation of the problem of redress, *is the problem of the alternative* whose emergence is not in redress's impossibility but rather in its exhaustion. Aunt Hester's scream is that exhaust, in which a certain intramural absolution is, in fact, given in and as the expression of an irredeemable and incalculable suffering from which there is no decoupling since it has no boundary and can be individuated and possessed neither in time nor in space, whose commonplace formulations it therefore obliterates. This is why, as Wadada Leo Smith has said, it hurts to play this music. The music is a riotous solemnity, a terrible beauty. It hurts so much that we have to celebrate. That we have to celebrate is what hurts so much. Exhaustive celebration of and in and through our suffering, which is neither distant nor sutured, is black study. That continually rewound and remade claim upon our monstrosity—our miracle, our showing, which is neither near nor far, as Spillers shows—is black feminism, the ani*mater*ial ecology of black and thoughtful stolen life as it steals away. That unending remediation, in passage, as consent, in which the estrangement of natality is maternal operation-in-exhabitation of diffusion and entanglement, marking the displacement of being and singularity, is blackness. In these essays, I am trying to think that, and say that, in as many ways as possible.

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"Consent not to be a single being" is Christopher Winks's translation of Édouard Glissant's phrase *consent à n'être plus un seul*. The occasion of Glissant's utterance is an interview with scholar and filmmaker Manthia Diawara in which Glissant is asked to reflect upon the irony of traversing the Atlantic on the Queen Mary II while having written and thought so devotedly and brilliantly on the middle passage and its meaning. The term *consent* doesn't merely defy but rather unravels a set of normative discourses on agency that are either denied to or unsuccessfully salvaged for those who remain in middle passage which is, as Cedric Robinson and Ruth Wilson Gilmore have said, eternal. For Glissant, consent, which is not so much an act but a nonperformative condition or ecological disposition, is another way of approaching what he calls the "poetics of relation." With the utmost reverence and respect, I have been trying to think passage, by way of Winks's version of Glissant's words, against the grain of relation and the individuation that relation seems unable not to bear. I would like to think these essays are messages entanglement sends out to itself and I want to acknowledge, here, some of the beautiful and significant differences that nourish and enable this sending.

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# NOTES

## Preface

1 Nathaniel Mackey, "Destination Out," *Callaloo* 23, no. 2 (2000): 814.
2 Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
3 Nathaniel Mackey, *Atet A.D.* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2001), 118; Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 117.
4 Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *Black and White and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 206.
5 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 4.
6 See Denise Ferreira da Silva, "No-Bodies: Law, Raciality and Violence," *Griffith Law Review* 18 (2009): 214; and Laura Harris, "Whatever Happened to the Motley Crew? C. L. R. James, Helio Oiticica and the Aesthetic Sociality of Blackness," *Social Text* 112, 30, no. 3 (fall 2012): 49–75.
7 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 77.
8 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 5.

## Chapter 1. Not In Between

1 Johannes Fabian (with narratives and paintings by Tshibumba Kanda Matulu), *Remembering the Present: Painting and Popular History in Zaire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
2 C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2nd ed., revised (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), x.
3 See D. H. Melhem, "Revolution: The Constancy of Change," in *Conversations with Amiri Baraka*, ed. Charlie Reilly, 214 (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994).
4 James, *Black Jacobins*, 288.
5 James, *Black Jacobins*, 290–91.
6 James, *Black Jacobins*, 291–92.
7 James, *Black Jacobins*, 314–15.
8 Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2000). This text and its author are