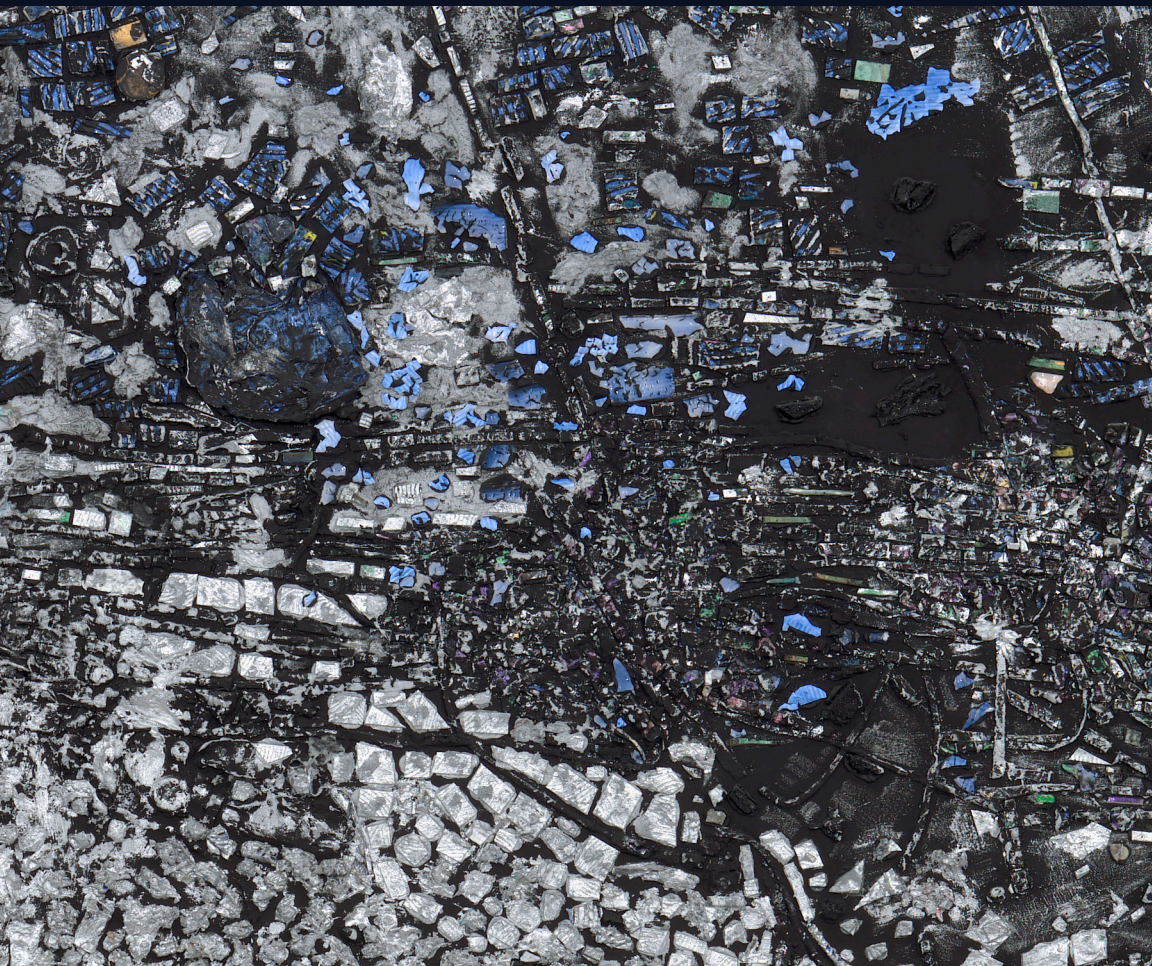
DANCE CADAVEROUS

Antiblackness of the Social World and Social Theory

MOON-KIE JUNG & JOÃO H. COSTA VARGAS



D A N C E C A D A V E R O U S



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DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS DURHAM & LONDON 2027

© 2027 Duke University Press
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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Project Editor: Liz Smith
Designed by A. Mattson Gallagher
Typeset in Minion Pro, Comma Sans, Garamond Premier Pro,
and Map Roman by Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Jung, Moon-Kie author | Vargas, João Helion Costa author
Title: Dance cadaverous : antiblackness of the social world
and social theory / Moon-Kie Jung and João H. Costa Vargas.
Other titles: Antiblackness of the social world and social theory
Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2027. | Includes
bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2026015292 (print)
LCCN 2026015293 (ebook)
ISBN 9781478039709 paperback
ISBN 9781478034674 hardcover
ISBN 9781478063230 ebook
Subjects: LCSH: Racism | Racism against Black people |
Race relations | Anti-racism | Black people—Race identity |
Slavery—Social aspects | Critical race theory
Classification: LCC HT1523 .J75 2027 (print) |
LCC HT1523 (ebook) | DDC 305.8—dc23/eng/20260728
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2026015292
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2026015293

Cover art: Jack Whitten (1939–2018), *Atopolis: For Édouard Glissant* (detail), 2014. Acrylic on canvas, 8 panels, overall 124½ × 248½ in. (316.2 × 631.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York (271.2017.a-h). Acquired through the generosity of Sid R. Bass, Lonti Ebers, Agnes Gund, Henry and Marie-Josée Kravis, Jerry Speyer and Katherine Farley, and Daniel and Brett Sundheim. © 2026 Jack Whitten Estate / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY.

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P R O L O G U E

Modern life begins with slavery. . . . Slavery broke the world in half, it broke it in every way.

Toni Morrison

Modern life begins with modern death. The foundational break inaugurated by the social death of racial slavery, the global enslavement of Africans, remains in place.[1] "Slavery is with us still. We are haunted by slavery. We are animated by slavery," Anthony Paul Farley (2004, 221) reminds us. The rudimental rupture—the enslavement, the haunting, the animation—is *antiblackness*, the focus of this book. We are haunted and animated, and the reminder is necessary, for racial slavery's ongoing fundamentality to modernity is continually sublated, either unthought or euphemized.

Social death is not social life. Though seemingly self-evident, this truism is perpetually violated in social theories and sciences, to the extent that they seriously consider racial slavery at all.[2] They conceive of the Black enslaved, implicitly and explicitly, as if they had been socially alive, if impaired. As if they had been members of society, if unequally and marginally. As if they had been migrants, if in chains. As if they had been workers, if coerced and unpaid. Put differently, theories and sciences of the Social—modern social world, modern social space, modern social life—take their ontological realm

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to be an unproblematically universal category that can duly accommodate the Black enslaved.[3]

In recent decades, scholars, particularly in the humanities and most especially in Black studies, have interrogated the category of the Human, the modern human, from various theoretical angles and have undercut its taken-for-granted universality. The Social, the modern social, has thus far escaped such scrutiny. Wittingly and unwittingly, social theorists and scientists have posited "the social," understood ahistorically, as the catchall ontological category that can and does encompass all humans and their interconnected actions and interactions. This axiom of universal inclusivity is unthinkingly invoked and affirmed whenever *social* adjectivally modifies a noun, such as *theory*, *science*, *contract*, *structure*, *reproduction*, *inequalities*, and so on. The noun is the fish in the water of the Social, the unseen condition of possibility. For instance, when workers and capitalists engage in a *social* struggle, they are all assumed to be *social* actors belonging tacitly, if conflictually and unequally, to the Social. The Social grounds their relationality and antagonism, indeed their existence.

Social death is the all-important exception. Here, the noun modifies the adjective, marking the Social's outer boundary. Death delimits the Social and delineates its finitude. To suffer the social death of racial slavery is to be expelled from the Social, not to be marginalized therein. It is to be rendered social *nonbeings*. In this way, it is qualitatively unlike other forms of domination and exploitation in which the social existence of the dominated and the exploited—that is, their social beingness—is nevertheless a given. In other words, it is incommensurable. Further, tautologically bound to the Social as their ontological terra firma, social theories and sciences cannot but miss or misrecognize racial slavery and the Black enslaved that exceed, but at once define, the Social's limits.

That racial slavery broke the world in this way and that the ontological break has been with us since are the big claims of this small book. Antiblackness foundationally structures modernity, with thoroughgoing and far-reaching implications, and we need to radically rethink our theories, as well as our politics, to plumb its unfathomed depths. We do so through a set of paradigmatic analyses for three historical moments: antebellum, Jim Crow, and contemporary.[4] We offer them as propositions and points of departure for new ways forward.

The most common criticism of conceptualizing slavery as social death is that it ostensibly disallows the agency of the enslaved. The countless historical instances of the enslaved's agency therefore supposedly prove the falsity of

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social death. A curious effect of this summary dismissal of social death is that the putative universality of the Social is never put in question.[5] Of course, it should go without saying that the enslaved exercised agency. However, rather than denying social death for this incontrovertible fact and unreflexively assimilating the enslaved's agency as a form of social agency among others, the difficult task before us is to think the agency of the enslaved anew: What is agency under—that is, in spite of and against—the social death of slavery? What are the impossible possibilities?

We explore these questions in the first chapter, taking on not only mainstream humanist social theory but also posthumanist social theory. Though still peripheral to most fields of social inquiry, the latter advances a crucial critique of the former: It subverts humanist social theory's anthropocentrism, its exclusive focus on the Human and the Social, and expands the notion of agency to account for nonhuman agency and its entanglement with human agency—a move that the climate crisis has made all the more obvious, necessary, urgent, and unavoidable. Yet we find that posthumanist social theory is no more able to contend with racial slavery and the agency of the enslaved. Confronting posthumanist social theory on its strongest stronghold, science and technology studies, we make radical Black feminist sense of the antisocial predicament of enslavement and the paradoxical agency of the enslaved. In addition to and inextricably intertwined with the Social and the nonhuman, *the antisocial* constitutes modernity. Sociology, William Sewell Jr., Andrew Pickering, J. Marion Sims, and Saidiya Hartman, respectively, are the paradigms of modern social science, humanist social theorist, posthumanist social theorist, nineteenth-century medical scientist, and Black feminist theorist that we analyze.

In part II, "Afterdeath," we grapple with antiblackness that racial slavery bequeathed to eras beyond racial slavery proper. Of the potential of an unbroken world that flashed and then quickly vanished in the wake of the Civil War and Reconstruction, W. E. B. Du Bois (1935, 30) writes, in the midst of Jim Crow: "The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery. . . . A new slavery arose." We could say the same for the Haitian Revolution and other post-abolition moments around the world. What is the nature of antiblackness of this new slavery? Is it still social death, and if so, in what sense? Alluding to, but not only to, the Holocaust, Toni Morrison claims that racial slavery "made everything in World War II possible" (as quoted in Gilroy 1993b, 178). Putting to the test the then recently instituted Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, the Civil Rights Congress, led by William L.

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Patterson, submitted a petition to the United Nations in 1951, charging the United States with committing genocide against Black people. Raphaël Lemkin, the tireless advocate of the 1948 UN convention who was fiercely driven by the Holocaust, balked at this accusation, as other liberals then and since have done. In chapter 2, we revisit *We Charge Genocide* (CRC [1951] 2020), a paradigmatic document of the radical Black freedom struggle, in relation to Claudia Card's (2003, 2010) theorization of genocide as social death, and argue that antiblackness is genocide beyond genocide.

What about now? By almost all social measures, Black people in the United States, and across the globe, continue to fare the worst, laying bare the limits of the civil rights movement and decolonization. Yet the predominant theoretical narrative in the social sciences is one of progress and freedom. "Racial rule can be understood as a slow and uneven historical process that has moved from despotism to democracy," and consequent to the "great transformation" of the civil rights movement, "hegemonic forms of racial rule—those based on consent—eventually came to supplant those based on coercion," according to Michael Omi and Howard Winant (2015, 132, 161), the most influential social theorists of racism of the past several decades. In chapter 3, although we cite it, their *Racial Formation in the United States*, as fitting as it would be, does not assume center stage as our chosen paradigm of the exemplary social theoretical text on racism for the contemporary moment. Instead, as a harder test, we turn to the less known *Who Is White?* by George Yancey (2003). We also reflect on "The Combahee River Collective Statement," the groundbreaking manifesto from 1977 that is as politically relevant and alive now as ever. In both cases, the authors endeavor to deal uncompromisingly with what we identify as antiblackness but through the category of racism, which we ourselves have done in the past. In the end, racism proves to be inadequate and inapt. Antiblackness calls for theories and politics beyond even radical antiracism. We end the book by putting the ideas of the preceding chapters in dialogue with Robert D. Bullard's (2000) canonical book on environmental racism and justice, *Dumping in Dixie*, and extrapolating an *abolitionist antipolitics* of Afrological improvisation.

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PART I

DEATH

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1 ANTIBLACKNESS BEYOND (POST)HUMANISM

Making the case for his social theory as not only a theory of scientific practice but a "theory of everything" (1995, 2008c), Andrew Pickering, in his essay "New Ontologies" (2008b), darts from a comparative analysis of the paintings of Piet Mondrian and Willem de Kooning to the philosophy of Martin Heidegger (1977) to the ongoing struggle between the US Army Corps of Engineers and the unruly Mississippi River, among other things. All are subject to what he calls the *mangle*, or the improbably synonymous *dance of agency*—the "open-ended, reciprocally structured interplay of human and nonhuman agency" (2008c, vii). This is "how being in the world always has been and always will be," which de Kooning's art embodies and Heidegger sees more or less clearly (Pickering 2008b, 4). Though ineluctably dancing—for not dancing is not an option for anyone or anything—Mondrian and the Corps of Engineers, with their misguidedly modern, dualist, human-centered ontologies, do so offbeat and as if they were solo performers, all the while trampling over their nonhuman partners, frequently with catastrophic consequences.[1]

With the case of the Mississippi River especially, Pickering means to assert the universal scope of his "true ontology": "I am not talking just about painting but rather *how the world is* in general—and the Mississippi is perhaps a big enough example to sustain the argument" (2008b, 4, 7; emphasis in original). Drawing on the latest hydrologic science, the corps continually seeks to control the river's flow with ever higher levees, among other means, but the river does what it does, periodically breaching and flooding.[2] Open-endedly, emergently, unpredictably, this back-and-forth produces absurdities,

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such as giant cargo ships floating by above the heads of New Orleanians; tragedies, such as Hurricane Katrina's devastation; and much else. Based on his *ontology of becoming*, Pickering advances a politics, and implicitly an ethics, of living experimentally and "self-consciously in the flow of becoming" (2008b, 13; see also 2025). Instead of trying to dominate nature as if from without, like the corps, we could recognize the nonhuman for what they truly are, agentic partners, and learn to dance better, attentive and attuned to the relationship's ever-evolving choreography.

Particularly given his fondness for 1960s-style countercultural ways of thinking and living, of being and becoming, Pickering's (2008b, 8–9) blunt recommendation for New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina is viscerally shocking, but it is wholly in keeping with his ontological vision:[3]

> The Corps of Engineers should stop fighting the river and let New Orleans go. The inhabitants of New Orleans might not like to hear this, but, in fact, the idea is not as crazy as it sounds. . . . The Mississippi is going to flow into the Atchafalaya [River] sooner or later. It can either do it amid death and destruction in the so-called hundred-year flood . . . , or we could let it happen at a time of our own choosing. . . . We could do it gracefully; we could go with the flow; we could start afresh with a new geography. This would be a different and, I think, better way to live in nature than to do so through the use of grim and desperate projects of domination and control.

To be fair, Pickering drafted his essay before Katrina, based largely on a book published sixteen years before it (McPhee 1989), but he evidently had time to reflect and revise before publication. Yet, even with hindsight, he stood by his proposal and could not resist adding, "I still feel like saying I told you so" (Pickering 2008b, 9, 14n2).

To be clear, our point is not that New Orleans should return to status quo ante except with more effectual civil engineering. Rather, we are interested in what questions are unasked and unaskable. Who are the "we" who could, nay should, abandon New Orleans gracefully, going with the flow and starting afresh with a new geography? A better way to live for whom? Presumably, "we" are "the human" that populates Pickering's theory, which no doubt logically includes but actually pays no heed to the putatively unreceptive inhabitants of the City That Care Forgot. That Black denizens, especially the impoverished and the elderly, suffered and died disproportionately in this impoverished Black-majority city figures not at all in his account (Hawkins

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2009; Price 2008; Sharkey 2007). What would graceful abandonment by and better life for the human portend for the Black people of Louisiana? What are the grim and desperate projects of domination and control in their lives, and what were such projects in the lives of their enslaved forebears who built the original levees (Mandelman 2020; McPhee 1989)?

"What do we mean by the 'social' in 'social science'?" asks William Sewell Jr. (2005, 318). Social scientists rarely provide an explicit answer, as "the question of the social is an ontological question, a question about the nature of the world," and they "tend to be rather shy about making explicitly ontological statements." Ultimately, for Sewell, "the social is the complex and inescapable ontological ground of our common life as humans." It is the foundation of collective human existence and the "foundational term" for the scientific study of it (Sewell 2005, 319, 329, 369). The social, the social world, is what grounds humans and what social scientists theorize and empirically investigate, if mostly piecemeal.

In *Black Reconstruction in America*, W. E. B. Du Bois (1935, 727) underscores the singular significance of the transatlantic enslavement of Africans to the history of the modern world: "The most magnificent drama in the last thousand years of human history is the transportation of ten million human beings out of the dark beauty of their mother continent into the newfound Eldorado of the West. They descended into Hell." In the epigraph to our book's prologue, and throughout her incomparable body of work, Toni Morrison expresses a similar judgment. We agree, and the ever-expanding historical literature on racial slavery certainly makes a compelling empirical case. Yet social theory, which takes the modern world as its object of study, is at a complete loss. For instance, from the so-called founding fathers, such as Émile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Max Weber, to more recent inheritors, such as Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens, racial slavery registers in their work barely or not at all. Likewise, there is no substantive mention of it in *Social Theory Today* (Giddens and Turner 1987) or, with minor exceptions in one chapter, *Social Theory Now* (Benzecry et al. 2017)—a pair of self-reflexive exercises in stocktaking (see also Kivisto 2020a, 2020b).

This utter but unnoticed failure of social theory is not inexplicable, however. Against the widely and tacitly accepted notion of the social as the universally shared ontological ground for human being and becoming, we contend that an exclusively social ontology which undergirds almost all social theories, including Sewell's, is inadequate, incapable of accounting for the most magnificent drama of racial slavery. A profoundly *antisocial*

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predicament, enslavement breaches the bounds of the social. The social is not common ground for all. Our urgent task, then, is to provincialize the social (Jung 2019)—and the human, for the social is, in Pickering's idiom, the "human world" (1999, 170), "human realm" (2001a, 172), or "humanist space" (2005b, 417), and the human is, for Sewell and nearly all social scientists and humanists, a social being through and through.[4]

A part of a growing countercurrent in the social sciences and the humanities, an eddy of dissent against the mainstream of "humanist social theory" is the turn toward "posthumanist social theory" in the interdisciplinary field of science and technology studies (STS) (Pickering 2001a, 173).[5] Provincializing the social and the human lies at the heart of posthumanist social theory in STS. Yet it, like its humanist counterpart, is silent on racial slavery. For example, not a single article in the journal *Social Studies of Science*, in its half-century of existence, deals with racial slavery.

In this chapter, focusing on a pair of sociologists, we analyze paradigmatically the gains and limitations of posthumanist social theory, as exemplified by Pickering's, juxtaposing it against humanist social theory, as exemplified by Sewell's. By paradigmatic analysis, we mean that we treat sociology, Pickering's posthumanist social theory, and Sewell's humanist social theory as "exemplars" (Kuhn [1962] 1970, 187; see also Agamben 2009; Hacking 2012, 2016). Sociology is the broadest of the human and social sciences and, aside from its overlap with STS, all but untouched by the increasingly influential posthumanist turn, which could and should put into question the discipline's taken-for-granted anthropocentrism.[6] It is high time for sociology, and the social sciences more generally, to take posthumanist social theory seriously but, given its replication of humanist social theory's silence on racial slavery, also critically.[7] Widely known and cited yet unencumbered by the distorting glare of academic celebrity, the theories of Pickering and Sewell are at once all-encompassing in scope and uncommonly coherent. Unlike, say, Bruno Latour's and Pierre Bourdieu's theories, they also share certain conceptual affinities that promise a productive encounter.[8] After comparing and contrasting the two theories, we critique both not just for their mere disregard for racial slavery but also for their incapacity to comprehend it. Empirically investigating the infamous, much-examined medical science of James Marion Sims, we then draw on Saidiya Hartman and other Black feminist theorists to make sense of the antisocial structure of enslavement and the agency of the enslaved.[9] In revisiting Sims and his experimental surgeries on enslaved Black women, the present chapter, with its critical focus on posthumanist social theory and agency, aims to complement excellent studies by C. Riley

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Snorton (2017) and John Gillespie Jr. (2022).[10] We conclude with a call for an underdiscipline of *antisociology*, or more broadly *antisocial science*, that provincializes the human and the social relative not only to the nonhuman but also to the Black enslaved and what we identify as the *antisocial*.[11]

Pickering's Posthumanist Social Theory

Zoomed in from "everything" to its very core and beginning, Pickering's theory is, first and foremost, a theory of scientific practice, which, along with a number of others since the early 1990s, put forth a set of radical reorientations.[12] Rather than conceiving of it as a body of knowledge, a discourse of theoretical propositions and empirical findings, Pickering recasts science as *practice*, the doing of it in real time. Knowledge matters not in itself but as a part of scientific culture that is extended through practice. Who is the doer, the agent? For humanist social theory, the answer obviously would be the scientist and any other relevant humans involved. For Pickering, the taken-for-granted interrogative pronoun of the question would be symptomatic of a basic problem. Scientists are, of course, agents in scientific practice, but so are the nonhuman, or material, entities involved.[13] In the laboratory, scientists do not know ahead of time precisely how the nonhuman components will perform in response to their intentional, goal-directed practices. Most often, the nonhuman elements defy and deviate from the scientists' modeling. In other words, experiments fail to produce outcomes desirable to the human as the nonhuman *resist*. In turn, the scientists *accommodate* this emergent nonhuman resistance, recalibrating their models, and even their goals, and trying something different. In this way, the human and the nonhuman engage in the aforementioned *dance of agency*, a dialectical interplay of human and material agencies. Pickering refers to this dance as *reciprocal tuning*. For him, what are usually thought of as successful culminations or terminal points of knowledge production, typically to be represented discursively in scientific publications, are *interactive stabilizations*, which in turn can be destabilized and extended in future scientific practice.

The most novel and jarring aspect of Pickering's posthumanist social theory, which marks it as posthumanist, is the concept of nonhuman or *material agency*, the recognition of which has the effect of decentering the human. By agency, he means, more or less simply, "doing things," and its locus is not wholly, asymmetrically on the side of the human. Material agency refers to "agency that comes at us from outside the human realm and that cannot be reduced to anything in that realm." Material agency and human agency are

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not completely symmetrical, however, as only the latter entails *intentionality* (Pickering 1995, 6, 17). A second distinguishing feature of Pickering's theory is his emphasis on *temporal emergence*. Scientists have goals and plans and model them, but these do not straightforwardly determine the outcomes of scientific practice. What actually happens in the laboratory cannot be explained in advance but rather evolves as the nonhuman resist and scientists accommodate in an open-ended fashion. As a corollary, how we conceptualize and analyze science should be in the *performative idiom*, to capture the coupled doings of the human and the nonhuman as they unfold in time, rather than in the typically atemporal *representational idiom*.

One of Pickering's (1993, 1995) early case studies is of the invention of the bubble chamber by the physicist Donald Glaser. Based on Peter Galison's (1985) detailed historical account, Pickering retells the story of how Glaser went about developing a new instrument to detect elementary particles. As a graduate student, Glaser had worked with cloud chambers, which involved tanks of pressurized vapor. When hit with particle beams, they produced tracks of droplets that, as the pressure was released, could be photographed. With a denser medium than vapor, to induce more particle collisions, he reasoned that he could increase the probability of detecting "strange-particle events." After many rounds of trial and error, he arrived at a working bubble chamber, one filled with superheated liquid, rather than vapor, and producing the eponymous bubbles, rather than droplets, which could be filmed. As reframed by Pickering (2017b, 136), the trial-and-error process constituted the dance of agency between the human Glaser and the nonhuman chamber:

> Over a period of a couple of years in the early 1950s, Glaser, as an active human agent, would put together some configuration of apparatus. Then he became passive while the agency of the material object took over, standing back with a movie camera in his hand to see what his latest set-up would do. Switching back, Glaser would react to whatever the machine's performance turned out to be—which was usually not what he wanted (on a scale from inaction to explosion)—and the dance of agency would continue. Its upshot was a new instrument that did new things in a new way, revealing the trajectories of elementary particles as strings of bubbles and winning Glaser a Nobel Prize.

Glaser did set out to create a new instrument, but he did not foresee what would end up being the prototypical bubble chamber or much of what would take place along the way. The process was dialectical and emergent. Put

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differently, the instrument invented itself, through its acts of resistance, as much as Glaser invented it, through his accommodations, and the bubble chamber perhaps deserved a share of the Nobel for its self-invention.

Zooming back out, substitute Glaser with the Corps of Engineers and the bubble chamber with the Mississippi River, and we can quickly intuit how Pickering can and does scale up his theory of scientific practice to a theory of everything: "We act in the world, and the world acts on us, to and fro, in a dynamic process I call the 'dance of agency,' in which all the partners are unpredictably and emergently transformed. This is how scientists genuinely find out about the world. There is nothing mysterious about this. It is just how things go in science and, indeed, everywhere else" (2017b, 136). At the same time, such a spare theory with such an outsize aspiration risks vacuity. Trevor Pinch (1999, 145) asks, "Is it not just a rather more sophisticated way of talking about trial and error?"[14] Yes, to an extent, which Pickering concedes, but he insists that his theory is a significant step forward nonetheless: "It is, I believe, something of an achievement to have discovered a non-trivial real-time structure to practice, a structure which seems to have gone unremarked in an enormous amount of scholarly thought on related issues" (1999, 169). We agree, to an extent, which we explore in relation to Sewell's social theory.

Sewell's Humanist Social Theory

Pickering rarely cites, much less engages with, what he calls humanist social theory, especially contemporary versions of it. Mostly, it serves as foil, swiftly dispatched for its human-centeredness, inattention to temporality, focus on causality and variables, and so forth. Exceptionally, he refers to Sewell a few times and always approvingly (Pickering 1995, 1997, 2001b). The works he cites are the article "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation" (Sewell 1992) and the essay "Whatever Happened to the 'Social' in Social History?" (Sewell 2001), the latter of which Sewell (2005) would fold into the closing chapter of *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation*.[15] The titles already intimate affinities, spotlighting various categories that both Pickering and Sewell employ and scrutinize: structure, duality, agency, transformation, the social, social theory, and history.

For Sewell (2005), the social—the human realm, the human world—is, as noted earlier, the foundational term for and the proper domain of the social and human sciences, and this realm is pervaded by and composed of social structures or, simply, structures. *Structures* are "constituted by mutually

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sustaining cultural schemas and sets of resources that empower and constrain social action and tend to be reproduced by that action." *Schemas* refer to "not only the array of binary oppositions that make up a given society's fundamental tools of thought, but also the various conventions, recipes, scenarios, principles of action, and habits of speech and gesture built up with these fundamental tools" (Sewell 1992, 7–8). In short, schemas constitute the "semiotic" (i.e., meaningful, cultural) dimension of social life. Supplying the "materialist" dimension, *resources* are of two types: human and nonhuman. Human resources are "physical strength, dexterity, knowledge, and emotional commitments that can be used to enhance or maintain power," whereas nonhuman resources designate "objects, animate or inanimate, naturally occurring or manufactured, that can be used to enhance or maintain power" (Sewell 1992, 9).

Structure is the reiterative, practical articulation of schemas and resources through human agency. Though to highly differing degrees, structures tend to reproduce themselves, because, as Sewell contends, resources are the effects of schemas, and schemas are the effects of resources: They are "mutually sustaining" (1992, 9, 27). A car manufacturer would be but a motley collection of buildings, machines, parts, managers, workers, and so on unless a particular set of schemas—including wage labor, various techniques of assembly and management, and so forth—were applied to turn them into resources. Conversely, the gathered resources—machines and parts laid out in an assembly line, for example—evoke and instill the schemas of a car manufacturer.

Again to highly differing degrees, structures not only reproduce themselves but also change. Rather than resorting to exogenous factors, Sewell posits that the very processes involved in structural reproduction also generate structural transformation. It is through agency that structures exist and persist, and it is through agency that structures change. A structure is transformed when agents apply its schemas to different resources or when they mobilize its resources through different schemas. Given the *multiplicity of structures*, "which exist at different levels, operate in different modalities, and are themselves based on widely varying types and quantities of resources," and agents situated at assorted *intersections of structures*, "resource consequences" (and, we would add, schema consequences) of structures are "never entirely predictable" (Sewell 1992, 16–19).

Social life is saturated with structures, from a fleeting casual conversation to centuries-spanning global capitalism. Sewell proposes two dimensions along which we can sort them: *depth* and *power*. Depth refers to the degree to

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which schemas are unconscious or conscious. They can range from the syntax of human language, much of which is ostensibly "hard-wired" in human brains, to bodily dispositions and tacit knowledge to deliberate choices. Deeper schemas tend to be more "durable," less vulnerable to transformations. They may also be more extensive, since they can manifest themselves in myriad "surface" structures. Power varies according to the quantity and kinds of resources implicated (Sewell 1992, 22–26).

In the final chapter to *Logics of History*, Sewell (2005, 321) switches conceptual vocabularies from *structure*, and its constituents *schema* and *resource*, to *language game* and *built environment*, in part to shed some of the ungainly "semantic load" of the former in the social sciences, but he sees the two sets of metaphors as "perfectly compatible." We stick mostly with the lexicon of structure for it better highlights the correspondences, contrasts, and complementarities between Sewell and Pickering.

Pickering and Sewell, Compared and Contrasted

What does posthumanist Pickering see in Sewell's humanist social theory worth acknowledging and commending? Two of his three references to Sewell concern *change*. Discussing how we need to see interests and identities not as given but as emergent and changing, he writes, "Sewell (1992) discusses the problems created by the concept of 'structure' in social theory for the analysis of social change, and offers a constructive critique of the work of Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu, which moves some way in the direction suggested here" (Pickering 1995, 65n34; see also Pickering 1997, 332n3). Both Pickering and Sewell having been part of the so-called practice turn of the 1980s and 1990s, Pickering (2001b, 203n2) also rightly detects a resonance in their respective approaches that deemphasize the representational in favor of the performative: "Sewell [2001] suggests that we need to undo, or go beyond, the linguistic turn in social science; what follows [in this essay] points to one principled way of doing so." Overall, what he shares with Sewell, a historian by training, is a historical sensibility, mindful of temporality, contingency, path dependence, and open-endedness: "My picture of practice, knowledge, and everything else, is therefore a non-deterministic one. It is, I would say, historicist" (Pickering 1999, 168). In other words, of the two most significant interventions he sees his own theory making—posthumanism and temporal emergence—Pickering finds in Sewell an ally in relation to the latter.

Even with regard to change and temporal emergence, however, Sewell is only a partial ally. At least initially, Pickering stakes out an extremist position

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toward which he sees Sewell "mov[ing] some way in [his] direction" (1995, 65n34). With the qualified exception of Sewell, Pickering deems the rest of humanist social theory as hopelessly misdirected: "The organizing problematic of traditional social theory is a static one, namely, how does the social reproduce itself as the same over time?" (1997, 328). His point is that the social, in tandem with the material, is always in flux, always emerging, always changing, always liable to surprise.[16]

In more recent writings, Pickering pulls back from his absolutist position to acknowledge and ponder the many *islands of stability* in our midst, "configurations, socio-material set-ups—where some sort of reliable regularity in our relations with nature is to be found" (2017b, 140). Mixing and matching metaphors, he writes, "Islands of stability . . . are only relatively stable and require work to maintain them. Likewise, dances of agency do not so much cease when loci of stability are found as they contract and to some extent become routinized" (Pickering 2017a, 393). More viable, if less striking, Pickering's softened stance on stability and change is now of a piece with humanist social theories he once scoffed at: "There is no ground either for the exclusive opposition of stability and change," notes Marshall Sahlins (1985, 153), a key source of theoretical inspiration for Sewell.[17] For Sewell, too, stability and change are always relative. The reproductive quality of structures varies greatly, and some structures, such as individual firms, for example, may come and go, while the larger structure which they partly compose, such as capitalism, carries on. No structure is ever static, if defined as pure absence of action, and every structure is contingent, emergent, and open-ended, for even reproduction is an achievement of (human) agency that could have been and could be otherwise.[18] The contingency, emergence, and open-endedness of history are, of course, even more obvious in commonly accepted instances of transformation, such as revolutions.

Beyond their shared historical sensibility, Pickering's and Sewell's theories diverge variously, even as they sometimes use the same terminology. *Duality*, for instance.[19] Sewell is for duality, and Pickering against, but the real difference lies in the particular duality each fixes on. For Sewell (1992, 13), the duality in question is the "dual character" of structures, which are "composed simultaneously of schemas . . . and of resources." As seen earlier, recognizing this duality enables him to reconcile three false but deeply ingrained dichotomies in social theory: structure versus culture, structure versus agency, and structure versus change. The duality of Pickering's concern is one central to modernity: "*dualism of people and things*, of the human and the nonhuman" (2006, 1; emphasis in original). It is the ontological vision that

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asserts an asymmetric separation between the human and the nonhuman, one in which the human exists apart from the nonhuman and acts to control and dominate the ostensibly passive nonhuman. This perspective is at odds with what Pickering posits as the "true," nondualist ontology of intertwined becoming. Yet, because the modern project of detachment and domination has been so successful in shaping the world in its image—"Modernity can be characterized by a kind of *practical dualism*[,] the opening up of a visible gap between people and things . . . that has grown over the last few centuries in a world of scientific and technological and engineering achievements that speak to us constantly of a separation of the human and the nonhuman"[20]—the "false" is easily taken for granted as the "true," in social theory as elsewhere (Pickering 2008a, 305–6; emphasis in original).[21]

Structure is another common term that divides Sewell and Pickering. They both aim to identify and grasp *structure*, but they mean different things by it: Pickering is interested in *temporal* structure—the dance of agency, the dialectical entanglement of nonhuman resistance and human accommodation, transpiring in time—whereas Sewell theorizes *social* structures, which exist and take place in time but can and should be subjected to synchronic, as well as diachronic, analysis. Especially with its recent turn to stability, Pickering's framework, if not his own research program, could be more open to amending its spartan repertoire of methodological choices to add synchronic analysis and retroductive reasoning.

With regard to Pickering's temporal structure, we should beware that his prototypical and much-repeated example of Glaser's bubble chamber is misleading as a paradigm of everything. The "non-trivial real-time structure to practice" that he "discovered" (Pickering 1999, 169)—the alternating rhythm of active human/passive nonhuman and passive human/active nonhuman—may approximate the interaction between Glaser and his inanimate apparatus in the closed system of his laboratory, but it hardly exhausts the rhythmic possibilities of dances of agency, especially in open systems involving any number of animate and inanimate entities.[22] As in actual dance, partners taking turns being active and passive is hardly typical.[23]

As for social structures, Pickering, in the end, does not deny that they exist (2005b, 419) or even "that traditional sociological explanations . . . can be persuasive in particular instances" (1999, 169), but he has an intense aversion to anything but "the visible" (1997, 2001a, 2008a).[24] Most of what falls under Sewell's category of schema, as well as the related notion of depth, are anathema to Pickering. Visible surface is all. Predictably, the two theorists latch on to two different facets of Thomas Kuhn's notion of paradigm. For

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Sewell (2005, 332), "paradigmatic explanation," which he deems to be indispensable if insufficient for social analysis, "accounts for patterns of human action by specifying the paradigms or codes that enable human actors to produce them. . . . A particular instance of performance is explained, in other words, as an instantiation of the (usually implicit) preexisting code." Deeming it a mystification, Pickering (1997, 328) disparages this understanding of paradigm "as a collective but inaccessible numinous entity." Instead, he favors a second sense of the concept: "paradigm as shared example" (Kuhn [1962] 1970, 187). This meaning accords with what Pickering (1997, 329) means by model and, for him, has the benefit of requiring "no invocations of the invisible." However, there is no need to choose between depth and visible surface or between paradigm as code and paradigm as shared example. Pickering himself writes of ontologies, in the plural as opposed to the "true" singular sense, in similar ways as Sewell writes of paradigms. The dualist ontology Pickering identifies as definitive of modernity is less a shared example than a deep schema or a shared hegemonic code that organizes innumerable performances across countless domains. His dualist islands of stability are not disconnected isolates so much as visible peaks of a volcanic archipelago.

The starkest differences between Sewell and Pickering concern the (de)centering of the human/social. Like most social theories, Sewell's is anthropocentric. It is not barren of nonhuman entities, but they are understood entirely from the vantage point of the human, as *nonhuman resources* for the human: "objects, animate or inanimate, naturally occurring or manufactured, that can be used to enhance or maintain power"—that is, social power. The nonhuman exist materially, but they matter for social theory and for the social world it analyzes only once they are "activat[ed] . . . as resources": "The determination of their value and social power is dependent on the cultural schemas that inform their social use" (Sewell 1992, 9, 12). Agency—the activation, the determination, the social use—is vested entirely in the human as "social actors." Sewell insists on the coequality of schemas and resources, including nonhuman resources, but, again, only upon the nonhuman's entry into the social as resources. Even Sewell's (2008, 584) updated metaphor of *built environment*, which he hoped would capture the "structuring force of materiality in social life more adequately" than the "perhaps too static and passive" concept of *resource*, makes clear that the environment of interest is a built one and that human social actors are the ones who built it.

Here, Pickering's, and others', posthumanist critique is a vital corrective. Sewell's, and by extension all humanist social theory's, anthropocentric lens lends a distorted, impoverished view of the nonhuman. No doubt, the

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Mississippi is a resource for the social and the human, but it is certainly more and other than that. While it may not have a mind of its own, it nonetheless does what it does, as usually predicted and partially directed by the human but ever incompletely. The point is even more patent when we consider animate nonhuman entities, many of which do have minds of their own.[25]

Mirroring Sewell's humanism, Pickering's posthumanism entails, unnecessarily, an impoverished view of the human and the social. "We humans are performative agents, but so are cats and dogs, rocks and stars," he states. For him, recognizing nonhuman agency "impl[ies] a sort of ontological leveling and symmetry that puts humanity in its place and cuts us [humans] down to size" and a rejection of the "assertion that people and things are different sorts of entities and need to be analyzed differently" (Pickering 2017a, 382, 384). To our minds, getting rid of anthropocentrism and accounting for nonhuman agency do not entail disclaiming that people and rocks are different and may indeed need to be analyzed differently. Pickering himself acknowledges some difference: He ascribes intentionality only to human agency, and he draws a distinction between *practice*, "human activity in the world," and *performance*, "the 'doing' of any entity or system, human or nonhuman," regarding the former as a special subset of the latter (2010, 474n2).[26] More recently, he also subtly expands upon what he means by *agency*. Usually, it refers simply to the doing, the action. In the essay "In Our Place," he defines it additionally "as the *capacity* of entities, both human and nonhuman, to affect others and to be affected by them" (Pickering 2017a, 382; emphasis added).[27] A crucial analytical task, then, would be to specify the affective capacities of the entities under study, which, we would venture, are qualitatively different, as well as overlapping, between humans, grass, dirt, bacteria, and so forth.[28] For Sewell (1992, 27) and most other humanist social theorists, one way that human capacity differs is that human "agents are empowered by [human social] structures"—unequally and often antagonistically empowered. Of course, other animate entities, such as ants and trees, may have their own relatively autonomous collective structures to which any given study may need to attend (Simard 2021; Wilson 2020). The point is that we need not simplify the human and the social in order to decenter them.

In sum, there are a number of key differences between Pickering and Sewell, but as Pickering senses, they are largely like-minded and complementary. Both are heedful of agency and the performative and are acutely sensitive to temporality, contingency, path dependence, and open-endedness of the world. For different but not contradictory reasons, Sewell and later Pickering also agree that stability and change are relative. They clearly differ on

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(post)humanism, however. Though dimly aware of his theory's inadequacy in dealing with the "structuring force" of the nonhuman, Sewell (2008, 584) is unable to overcome his anthropocentrism. Pickering's posthumanism suggests a way out for Sewell, but a robust synthesis requires not a flattened ontology and an exclusionary insistence on visible surface but a closer attention to differential agentic capacities, which, for the human, derive largely from social structures of varying visibility and depth.

The Impossibility of the Black Enslaved in Posthumanist and Humanist Social Theory

There are two other consonant notes of interest between Pickering and Sewell. First, though self-consciously historicist, both embrace distinctly ahistorical universalist ontologies. Pickering readily grants the multitude of folk or "'found' ontologies, the ontology of this group or that," which have existed in the past and the present (2017b, 138). At the same time, he posits a singular, unchanging, "true ontology" that can encompass or "sustain [such] a multiplicity of ontologies": the ontology of dances of agency and islands of stability—"how being in the world always has been and always will be" (Pickering 2008b, 4; 2017b, 139). For Sewell (2005, 369), across time, the social is the "ontological ground of our common life as humans." Further, actually existing structures are, to be sure, historical formations, but that structures compose the social is transhistorical. Second, and related, their clear disagreement on the relationship between the human and the nonhuman notwithstanding, Pickering and Sewell have in common an unquestioned assumption as to who belongs to the category of the human. How Julie Livingston and Jasbir Puar characterize "much of posthumanist thought," such as Pickering's, applies equally well to Sewell's humanist thought: They "suffer[] from . . . a philosophical resuscitation of the status of 'the human' as a transparent category" (2011, 5; see also Ellis 2018). The same goes for the category of the social. There may be deep divisions and inequalities among the human in the social, but the categories are all-inclusive all the same. Put simply, for both Pickering and Sewell, the human and the social implicitly, self-evidently, unproblematically include all *Homo sapiens*, conceivably the entire *Homo* genus.

Dubious of ontologies that call for the historicity and historicization of everything but themselves, we limit our analysis to modernity, the only era that Pickering and Sewell actually investigate. We agree with Sewell's conceptualization of the social as the ontological ground of being human but with

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the stipulation that it commenced becoming so just several centuries ago. Before that seismic shift, most of humanity had grounded their existence in some variety of the divine; one manifestation of modern disenchantment is that the sovereignty of modern states inheres in "the people." Modernity is also marked by the rapid, if incomplete, constitution of the social as an interconnected global whole, beginning in the fifteenth century. An emblem and embodiment of its solidification as the new foundation of human being and becoming, the social is likewise the "foundational term" for the newly scientific study of it (Sewell 2005, 329)—thus, the modern birth of the human and social sciences. In the wake of the ontological upheaval, we can speak of a historically modern human and a historically modern social, which we henceforth capitalize as proper nouns, the Human and the Social.[29]

Pickering offers an invaluable critique of the modern ontology that underpins the modern world and the modern disciplines that study it. Modern ontology is dualist, holding up the agentic Human/Social as apart from and above the inert nonhuman/natural. The very preeminence of this vision of reality continually affirms its taken-for-granted universality: "We live its truth," as the Human build and inhabit a world that has come to correspond to it (Pickering 2017a, 385). Consequently, for the most part, the Human, including social theorists, can and do go about ignoring and misrepresenting, as well as mistreating, the nonhuman. Pickering provincializes the Social, putting the Human in its place. Even in the most realized instances of human detachment and domination—on the stablest islands of stability—the Human and the nonhuman, he reminds us, are intertwined and evolving together, and resistance and instability are always already there lurking and chipping away.[30]

Pickering, rightly, faults humanist social theory, such as Sewell's, for its exclusive fixation on the Social, leading to misapprehension of not only the nonhuman but also the Social, which is inexorably entangled with the nonhuman. Yet neither Pickering nor Sewell, neither posthumanism nor humanism, do or can reckon with modernity's "most magnificent drama": the transoceanic enslavement of Africans and their agency (Du Bois 1935, 727).

One of the very few social theorists since Du Bois to contend with slavery seriously, Orlando Patterson draws on an extensive historical survey, going back to antiquity, and distills what is still the most compelling definition of it: "the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons."[31] The enslaved is "a socially dead person" or, alternatively, "a social nonperson" (Patterson 1982, 5, 13). Though a long-standing institution in most parts of the globe, slavery undergoes a transformation

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in modernity. As the Social coheres into a globally interconnected whole, foremost through processes of Western domination, enslavement assumes the status of "a fate worse than death" while Africans are progressively, singularly positioned—materially and symbolically—as the "slave race" (Eltis 2000, 71; Mills 2013, 35; see also French 2021; Grüner 2020; Seijas 2014).[32] In effect, as the world becomes one, previously dispersed practices of slavery and antipathy toward the enslaved are ever increasingly concentered and cathected on Africans. According to Charles Mills (2013, 35), "The peculiar experience of Africans under Western modernity, which originally turned them into 'negroes' (lowercase), creating a race where previously none had existed, impressed a forced diaspora on them that took them to Europe and the Americas . . . [and] made the extraction of their labor central to the making of the modern world, . . . leaving them globally identifiable as the people who were appropriately designated a 'slave race' in modernity, the very period when slavery was [otherwise] dead or dying in the West." This is the sense in which "modern life begins with slavery" that "broke the world in half . . . in every way" (Morrison as quoted in Gilroy 1993b, 178). Modern social life, the Social, begins with the modern social death of Black people, their violent expulsion from the Social in formation. Put differently, the modern human being, the Human, has a disclaimed and repressed twin: the modern human nonbeing, the Black enslaved.

Belying the assumed universality of his social ontology, Sewell does not and cannot account for the enslaved: The Social does not ground common life for all humans. Voicing the consensus opinion in humanist social theory, including Bourdieu's (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) and Giddens's (1984), Sewell delineates the baseline of being Human in the Social, "what it means to conceive of human beings as *agents*": "However unequally resources may be distributed, some measure of both human and nonhuman resources are controlled by all members of society, no matter how destitute and oppressed" (1992, 10; emphasis in original). The enslaved fall below this threshold. That the enslaved have no claims to resources, including their very "own" selves, and are not members of society is precisely their predicament (Patterson 2025, 17). As George Steinmetz (2016, 101–2) argues in relation to "slavery . . . and other extreme antisocial situations," "to lack control over any and all power or resources" is to be cast out of "social space," or the Social. Bound and confined to the Social, humanist social theory and social science are thus confounded in the face of extremely antisocial situations, or the *antisocial* for short, that lie beyond and against the Social (Jung 2019; Vargas and Jung 2021). Though not the only extremely antisocial situation in modernity—Nazi

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extermination camps being another obvious example—the enslavement and general dishonor of Black people stand out for their uniquely global scale and significance. This is the metaphysical Hell into which they descended.

Symptomatically, although the enduring empirical object of Sewell's historical scholarship, from his first monograph to his latest, is revolutionary France of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, slavery, much less its overthrow by the enslaved in Saint-Domingue/Haiti, figures not at all (Sewell 1980) or barely at all (Sewell 2021). In the latter work on capitalism and the ostensibly radical notion of civic equality taken up by the French Revolution, slavery is ignored in all but three of some four hundred pages. On those few, he briefly acknowledges that enslaved Africans were "analogous to cattle or horses," not wage laborers, and that "the slave-based plantations of the French colonies . . . were capitalist—indeed, in some respects, hypercapitalist—institutions" and "were the engine of the most profitable and rapidly expanding branch of eighteenth-century French commerce" (Sewell 2021, 62–63). Yet these inconvenient facts do not disturb the book's narrative of capitalist development, with increasingly commercialized *social* relations among (European) Frenchmen, paving the way for their, and only their, civic equality. That the enslaved would not qualify as members of society or human agents and, if analogous to domesticated farm animals, would have to be considered nonhuman resources does not perturb Sewell's humanist social ontology, which tautologically reproduces and reflects back on the "ontological order" (Trouillot 1995, 77) in formation in revolutionary France. A history grounded on a different, more adequate ontology that could duly behold the enslaved and their agency, including their truly revolutionary agency in Haiti, remains "an unthinkable history" of a "non-event," in the words of Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995, 70).[33]

Pickering refers to slavery in three of his works (2017a, 2022, 2025), most substantially in the aforementioned essay "In Our Place." Describing the seemingly matter-of-fact truth of modern dualist ontology, he writes, "One has only to look around to see endless instances of willful human beings who are genuinely in command of obedient material systems. My car, for example, is my slave. It regularly and predictably does my bidding. Every time I drive it, I act out a classically Cartesian scenario of a human agent in charge of a passive thing" (Pickering 2017a, 385).[34] Pickering wants to make a case for the lively agency of all things but realizes that modern things, such as his car, undermine him at every turn. They are essentially nonhuman resources for the Human, just as Sewell and other humanist social theorists would have them. They are socially dead. But they are not intrinsically so,

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Pickering insists; they are made that way through acts of detachment and domination by the Human and the tamed resistance of the nonhuman "*such that* the thing[s] acted as . . . slave[s] of the people" (Pickering 2017a, 389; emphasis in original).

In this modern deformation of the nonhuman, the Human are also reciprocally deformed: "To be masters, we have to become what our slaves turn out to require of us" (Pickering 2017a, 389).[35] The Human need not go on in this fashion, however, for there are "other ways of acting that are more appropriate to our actual place in the world." Pickering concludes, "That is, at any rate, my understanding of the politics of ontology" (2017a, 395). In effect, Pickering's politics is an abolitionist one, on behalf of the enslaved nonhuman, which would free the Human, too, from having to be the enslavers. But whither the enslaved *human* in Pickering's, and others', posthumanist social theory—the social nonpersons that enable and haunt his metaphor, if it is indeed a metaphor?[36] Nowhere. They are to be found among neither the (enslaved) nonhuman nor the (enslaving) Human. Surely, the Human and the Social need to be further, more radically provincialized, to clear conceptual room for the Black enslaved and the antisocial.

Dance Cadaverous: Sims's Medical Science and the Impossible Possibility of the Enslaved's Agency

Over the past several decades, J. Marion Sims's infamy, deriving from his experiments on enslaved women, spread steadily and then rapidly, leading to, among other things, the successful mobilization to have his statue removed from New York City's Central Park in 2018. For more than a century before then, however, he had been uncritically lauded as a pioneer of modern medicine and the Father of Modern Gynecology.[37] Credited with a number of innovations, he had garnered the greatest renown for developing, in the late 1840s, an effective surgical treatment for vesicovaginal fistula (VVF); a then all-too-common condition, not only among the enslaved, it refers to an opening that forms between the bladder and the vagina, usually during prolonged obstructed labor, resulting in continuous urinary incontinence.

Between 1845 and 1849, Sims performed experimental surgeries on Anarcha, Betsey, Lucy, and at least six additional unnamed enslaved Black women in his backyard hospital in Montgomery, Alabama. The story of what happened in his surgical laboratory has been told many times, but all those various narratives have necessarily drawn, either directly or indirectly, from the same few sources penned by Sims himself: principally a pair of

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articles in medical journals, a couple of published lectures, and an autobiography published in 1885, two years after his death (Sims 1852, 1854c, 1858, 1875, 1885). His descriptions of the surgeries therein were all retrospective, and if aided by contemporaneous notes or records, he did not cite them.[38] The enslaved women on whom he experimented left behind no written accounts of their own.

Sims was an enslaver from an enslaving South Carolina family.[39] Academically unremarkable, he pursued medicine, a fledgling profession of low prestige in the early nineteenth century, as his vocation.[40] After his graduation from Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia in 1835, he moved to Alabama, eventually settling in Montgomery in 1840. He identified as a surgeon and a family practitioner but one with no interest or experience at the time in "any diseases of women" or "midwifery" apart from when other doctors enlisted him for his surgical expertise. In fact, he would later confess, "If there was anything I hated, it was investigating the organs of the female pelvis" (Sims 1885, 226, 231).

Separately within a span of a few months in 1845, Sims was solicited to examine three enslaved women—Anarcha, Betsey, and Lucy—at the behest of their enslavers, one of whom was also a physician. The women all suffered from VVF, which Sims had no prior encounter with or knowledge of.[41] Examining the women and reading up on the topic, he quickly determined that nothing could be done (Sims 1858, 1875, 1885). Then, by chance, on the same day that he evaluated Lucy, the last of the three women, he was called to attend to a Mrs. Merrill, a white woman who was "throwed from her pony" (Sims 1885, 230).[42] As he treated her case of retroversion of the uterus, he had an epiphany about VVF: how to position the patient's body ("mounted on [a] table, on her knees, with her head resting on the palms of her hands") and place an instrument ("a pewter spoon") to give himself an unobstructed view. This idea occurred to him while caring for the white woman, but he tried it out for the first time on Lucy. Sims and his two medical-student assistants pulled and prodded, putting her in position and using the "bent . . . spoon" as a speculum. Still excited at the memory nearly four decades later, he would write, "I saw everything, as no man had ever seen before" (Sims 1885, 230, 234).[43]

Sims immediately sought more enslaved women on whom to experiment. He called Anarcha and Betsey back, and he "ransacked the country for cases . . . finding six or seven."[44] He expanded his hospital from eight to sixteen beds ("four beds for servants and twelve for the patients"), and he "made this proposition to the owners of the negroes: If you will give me Anarcha and

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Betsey [and presumably the other enslaved women] for experiment, I agree to perform no experiment or operation on either of them to endanger their lives, and will not charge a cent for keeping them, but you must pay their taxes and clothe them. I will keep them at my own expense" (Sims 1885, 236).

Conducting the first surgery in either December 1845 (Sims 1885, 239) or January 1846 (Sims 1858, 53), Sims supposedly expected to find a cure within six months but did not succeed to his satisfaction until June 1849. Along the way, there were countless failures. Through trial and error, he invented, abandoned, and modified the designs of his instruments (e.g., speculum, catheter). An implanted sponge caused sepsis. Different suturing techniques came and went. A childhood memory led to another epiphany, which turned out to be illusory. Silver replaced silk and lead as suture material. He "went on improving the methods of operating, eliminating first one thing and then another" (Sims 1885, 243).

As his missteps multiplied, Sims's social support faltered and faded. Nearby colleagues were eager to witness and help at the beginning. Then, Sims recalled, "at last, two or three years of constant failure and fruitless effort rather made my friends tired, and it was with difficulty that I could get any doctor to help me" (1885, 241–42). His brother-in-law, one of those dispirited doctors, pleaded with him to stop for the sake of his health, finances, and family (Sims 1858, 1885).

In the meantime, Sims's captives suffered. Without anesthesia, they repeatedly bore his experiments, which, he admitted, were "often so painful" (Sims 1858, 55). In fact, "Lucy's agony" during the very first trial "was extreme," and he "thought she was going to die" (Sims 1885, 238). According to Sims, despite the pain, the enslaved not only consented but were eager and, unlike everyone else in his life, did not lose "confidence" in him. After the surgeries, he administered opium in liberal doses (Sims 1852, 80–81)—"far too generously, by any modern standards," as an otherwise admiring biographer would remark a century later (Harris 1950, 100). When he paused his operations for three weeks to figure out his next course of action, the women reportedly "were clamorous" and "implored [him] to repeat [the] operations" (Sims 1885, 242–43; 1858, 55); as Deborah Kuhn McGregor (1998, 51) suggests, opium addiction may have been the source of any such clamor. Further, abandoned by his colleagues and assistants, he "performed operations only with the assistance of the patients themselves" whom he "trained" (Sims 1885, 242–43).

Sims did not keep a clear, consistent tally of "patients" and procedures,[45] but with six or seven enslaved women "to experiment on" at any given

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moment, "there was never a time that [he] could not, at any day, have had a subject for operation" (1885, 241). By his estimation, he operated on Anarcha, Betsey, and Lucy "about forty times" (Sims 1852, 60; also 1854c, 1)—Anarcha alone twenty, "more than twenty," or thirty times (Sims 1854c, 1; 1858, 60; 1875, 57; 1885, 245). With the unnamed enslaved women included, the total number of surgeries was undoubtedly much higher.[46]

For Sims, aside from "Divine guidance," he himself was entirely responsible for developing the first reliable surgical treatment for VVF: "The position of the patient for the operation, the speculum, the means of vivifying the edges of the fistulous opening, the suture apparatus, and the catheter which I shall describe, are, I believe, original with myself, having been suggested by the peculiarities of individual cases. The final perfection of these mechanical contrivances has been the slow work of experiment" (1858, 47; 1852, 60). Of his breakthrough switch to silver suture, he boasted full-throatedly in his lecture to the New York Academy of Medicine, "I declare it as my honest and heartfelt conviction, that the use of silver as a suture IS THE GREAT SURGICAL ACHIEVEMENT OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY. . . . [I]t was not the result of mere accident, but of long, laborious and persevering effort, based upon the immutable principles of science." Anxious that he would not receive his rightful credit, he recounted the process in detail to "place for ever beyond cavil [his] claims and agency in this discovery" (Sims 1858, 8–9; emphasis in original).

Sims's fulsome claims-making has proven to be wildly effective, but whether he knew or not at the time, others had employed silver suture, as well as what would become known as the Sims position and the Sims speculum, before him. Nonetheless, according to Harold Speert's (1958, 450) medical history, he was no charlatan: "It was Sims's genius to apply these methods and principles with new skill and perseverance, achieving a record of success hitherto unequaled." If less expansively than Sims himself, Speert and many others have validated him as the quintessential agent of nineteenth-century medical science.[47]

There is no posthumanist analysis of Sims's surgical innovation, but we can readily imagine the basic outline of such a study based on Pickering's paradigm of the bubble chamber. Even in Sims's humanist telling, we can already sense that his "discovery" had been temporally emergent. At the start of the experiments, Sims wanted to find a surgical treatment for VVF but had no clue what it would actually end up being or how he would get there: "In 1845, I conceived the idea of curing vesico-vaginal fistula. . . . After nearly four years of fruitless labor . . . lo! a new era dawns upon surgery" (1858,

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9). Following Pickering, we can reconceive of various nonhuman entities as not being passive but offering resistance along the way, frustrating Sims and directing him to accommodate by trying something different. Through this dance of agency, their intertwinement over time, the nonhuman pewter spoon evolved into the Sims speculum, for example, while the Human Sims morphed into the prototypical gynecologist avant la lettre, which his former self would have loathed.

So far, so good. However, there is a conspicuous absence, an aporia, at the center of this posthumanist narrative that cannot be made present within it. The primary source of resistant agency that repeatedly foiled Sims but at once shaped the trajectory of his experiments was not that of the nonhuman but of the enslaved human. Against Sims's desperate desires, through innumerable surgeries up to and including the penultimate one, the enslaved women's fistulae refused to close and heal. If rendered legible through Pickering's posthumanism, what in Sims's surgical laboratory constituted the apparatus analogous to Glaser's bubble chamber and other "free-standing machines . . . with their own agency, not reducible to adjuncts or delegates of human agency" (Pickering 2008a, 305–6)? The operating table and the "mechanical contrivances" played their parts, but surely, the captive women—neither free nor standing—were the sine qua non. But did they have "their own agency"? Or were they "reducible to adjuncts or delegates of human agency"? Would Pickering or any other posthumanist deem the Black enslaved to be nonhuman or insist on their Humanity? Before answering, recall Pickering's car.

Reversion to Humanism offers no solution. Humanist analyses of Sims's surgical treatment abound. Once hagiographic, they now bend toward the critical. As manifest in the past several decades of revisiting and revising Sims's legacy, the new humanist impulse is not only to call out his inhumanity, as well as his exaggerated claims and vainglory, but to restore retroactively the enslaved women's Humanity. To portray them as more than victims, academics and nonacademics alike "pay tribute" to the enslaved women by wedging them and their experiences into recognizable social identities and actions.[48] Put in Sewell's terms, the revisionists treat the enslaved *as if* they had been "members of society" and thus "agents . . . empowered by [social] structures" (1992, 10, 27).[49] Their suffering now doubles as their "contributions" to medicine, science, and society. The enslaved women who were made to replace Sims's defecting assistants and colleagues become "surgical nurses." The Sims speculum should be renamed for Lucy or Anarcha. If Sims is the Father of Modern Gynecology, his captive "patients" should be the Mothers of Modern Gynecology, positing a truly peculiar figurative family.[50] In these

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recent humanist revisions reverberates a strange echo of Sims's (1858, 55) own humanist judgment: "To the indomitable courage of these long-suffering women, more than to any other single circumstance, is the world indebted for the results of these persevering efforts."

The humanist urge may be understandable, but such recognitions misrecognize what took place and the antisocial condition of its possibility. They obscure as much as they reveal. The most incisive theorist of the agency of the enslaved, Saidiya Hartman (1997, 54) explicates what is called for: "The particular status of the slave as object and subject requires a careful consideration of the notion of agency if one wants to do more than 'endow' the enslaved with agency as some sort of gift dispensed by historians and critics to the dispossessed."

If enslavement is the elimination of the enslaved's "own agency," why did Sims continually insist that his captives gave their active consent? As Hartman (1997, 38) argues, "the simulation of consent in the context of extreme domination was an orchestration intent upon making the captive body speak the master's truth as well as disproving the suffering of the enslaved."[51] One amendment in this case is that given the nature of his experiments, Sims could not deny outright the enslaved's pain and suffering, so he instead averred that, far in excess of mere consent, the enslaved underwent the operations "not only cheerfully but with thanks" and "heroic fortitude" (Sims 1854c, 1). However, Sims himself betrayed the simulated, or dissimulated, character of the enslaved's consent: "For this purpose [of experiment] I was fortunate in having three young healthy colored girls given to me by their owners in Alabama, I agreeing to perform no operation without the full consent of the patients, and never to perform any that would, in my judgment, jeopard life, or produce greater mischief on the injured organs—the owners agreeing to let me keep them (at my own expense) till I was thoroughly convinced whether the affection could be cured or not" (1854c, 1). Illustrating Patterson's (1982, 4) idea of the enslaved as "an extension of [the] master's power[,] . . . a human surrogate," the capacity of the enslaved women to consent here derived from their enslavers, as Sims's agreements, including the one about not operating "without the full consent of the patients," were not with them but with "their owners" (1854c, 1). Had Sims violated the enslaved's exercise of "consent," the "wronged" party would not have been the enslaved but the enslavers. Under the extreme *antisocial* structure of slavery, "consent," "agency," and other *social* categories were "all thrown in crisis" (Spillers 2003, 221). Consent of the enslaved was inherently incoherent and "unseemly in a context in which the very notion of subjectivity

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is predicated upon the negation of will" (Hartman 1997, 111). As a corollary, with each and every one of his surgeries, Sims enacted and disavowed—or, more accurately, had no need to disavow—sexual assault. The experiments at once overwhelmed and evacuated the social category of *rape*, for the enslaved were always rapable and unrapable (Owens 2023).

If Sims is to be believed, why did the enslavers delegate their power of "consent" to the enslaved, and why did Sims give the enslavers specific assurance that he would not cause more harm to the "injured organs"? Under slavery, the organs in question were forced to perform monstrous tasks and assume grotesque meanings, beyond the pale of possible practices and meanings in the Social. Enslavement "dis/figure[d] Black maternity, to turn the womb into a factory producing blackness as abjection . . . and [turn] the birth canal into another domestic Middle Passage," as Christina Sharpe (2016, 74) discerns. For the enslavers, VVF was a costly interruption to slavery's *re/production*, two social categories mangled indistinct under the weight of antisocial semantic crisis. Sims's experiments took place not only during an economic boom in cotton but, relatedly, in the enslaved: Between 1810, two years after the Act Prohibiting the Importation of Slaves took effect, and 1860, on the eve of the Civil War, the enslaved population in the United States nearly quadrupled, and as of the latter date, the enslaved's monetary "value . . . was equal to all of the capital invested in American railroads, manufacturing, and agricultural land combined" (Johnson 2017, 27). The enslavers, including Sims, cared deeply about the enslaved's re/productive health and well-being but hardly in any Human or Social sense.

Sims the surgeon cared, too, for additional reasons. Upon his epiphanic treatment of Mrs. Merrill and pelvic examination of Lucy, he experienced a revelation:

> And thus in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, new hopes and new aspirations filled my soul, for a flood of dazzling light had suddenly burst upon my enraptured vision, and I saw in the distance the great and glorious triumph that awaited determined and persevering effort. . . . I thought only of relieving the loveliest of all God's creation of one of the most loathsome maladies that can befall poor human nature; and in this, I honestly confess that I was stimulated by feelings of national pride, as well as by a desire to advance our glorious profession. (Sims 1858, 52)

Thus had commenced his quest for personal, professional, national, and divine glory. His goal was to end the suffering of white women, "the loveliest

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of all God's creation," but his experiments could not be performed on them. As Elaine Breslaw (2012, 131) explains, "White doctors were free to perform procedures on black women that would have been socially unacceptable to white women, at the minimum violating the standard of modesty and at the worst performing highly experimental and painful surgery without anesthesia."[52] Sims had proceeded gingerly with Mrs. Merrill, treating her with "a large sheet thrown over her" and refraining from employing a particular technique that he had been taught for the sake of not offending her (1885, 232). Without visual access, he was initially baffled as to how his maneuvers had resolved her condition. Upon figuring out what must have happened, he instantly realized that alleviating the pain and humiliation of white women with VVF would have to go through the infliction of what would be socially unimaginable pain and humiliation on Black women, who were always already exposed to violence and dishonor.[53]

In Sims's laboratory and many others like it throughout the US South and beyond, the enslaved were transformed into a special category of the socially dead: *social cadavers*.[54] Nineteenth-century medical science certainly sought to establish physiological differences between white and Black people (Hogarth 2017), but at the same time, it also "generally assumed that information gained from observation of Negro bodies was applicable to Caucasians," according to Todd Savitt (1982, 332).[55] Sims's practices and recollections embodied this assumption. Apparently without hesitation, he applied knowledge gained from his treatment of Mrs. Merrill directly to his pelvic examination of Lucy and, later, straightaway started operating on white women upon "perfecting" his method on Black women (Sims 1854a, 1854b, 1854c, 1858, 1885; McGregor 1998). The enslaved women's status as human beings but Human nonbeings—biologically alive but socially dead—was the antisocial condition of possibility for Sims's intensive experimentation and all that ensued, including the formation of gynecology as a field (McCarthy 2024; McGregor 1998; Owens 2017). In medical settings, such as Sims's backyard hospital, enslaved Black people were "human surrogates" in a specific scientific sense.

To return to Hartman's concern, how do we conceptualize the enslaved women's agency in Sims's macabre laboratory? Agency in any socially intelligible sense disintegrates into nonsense. The enslaver is the social agent that successfully claims a legitimate monopoly over the enslaved and their agency. What is "agency" of the enslaved in this antisocial predicament of coerced agencylessness?[56] It is not a variety of social agency—agency with at least a minimal foothold in the Social. Rather, it is agency in spite of the

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Social, and insomuch as it is unauthorized or deviates from the intentions and desires of the enslaver, it is necessarily against the Social and the Human.

Read inversely, Sims's many failures were resistances of the enslaved women's bodies or, more precisely, "flesh"—bodies rendered bare by enslavement to "zero degree of social conceptualization" (Spillers 2003, 206); in other words, this resistance, even if unreflexively corporeal, was specific to the enslaved, for only they were or could have been in position to produce it.[57] Beyond this coerced/resistant agency, the enslaved women's agency in Sims's laboratory was lost to history, but at least some of them may have put up a physical struggle on the operating table: Sims made no mention, but Nathan Bozeman, his protégé and later foe, reported in one of his own VVF case studies of enslaved women "great resistance of the patient" and "much difficulty, owing to the resistance of the patient"; since he proceeded to complete the two grueling operations on Kitty, "an object of the most extreme commiseration," he undoubtedly met her resistance with greater force (Bozeman 1856, 96, 97).[58] What other instances of resistance did Sims, Bozeman, and others disregard or not record?

Aside from the archive's silence, the difficulty of reckoning with the enslaved's agency is ontological—the "paradox of non-being" (Spillers 2003, 156)—posing an aporia for any theory premised on an exclusively social ontology: "the paradox of agency for those who are in these extreme circumstances" and whose "existence [is] in the space of death, where negation is the captive's central possibility for action" (Hartman and Wilderson 2003, 187). Resistance to and reproduction of enslavement recurrently became indistinct as, for example, physically surviving Sims's torture was at once fulfilling Sims's and the other enslavers' wish. No unauthorized action was permitted, the obverse corollary of which was that any antiauthoritarian action was, from the vantage point of the enslaved, permissible and, from that of the enslavers, terrifyingly un/imaginable. What did the enslaved women discuss in Sims's hospital when he was not around? As in documented instances of enslaved resistance elsewhere, did they, individually or collectively, consider or carry out feigning illness, practicing their own medical care, harming themselves, burning down the hospital, running away, poisoning Sims, or killing him? Here, we simply note that Sims's enslaved servants were housed with the enslaved "patients" and that Sims's three-year-old son died in 1848 after "prolonged sickness" from diarrhea, the year after which Sims also "contracted diarrhea" and nearly died from it (Sims 1885, 248). How, if at all, did the dreaded anticipation of such possibilities shape Sims's agency? His insistence on the enslaved's zealous consent and his copious dispensation

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of opium could have been, among other things, attempts to allay his own anxieties. After all, in his autobiography, he confessed that one of his two primal fears, from childhood, was of "runaway n——," the other being "mad dogs" (1885, 56, 60; deletion added).[59]

Within the confines of Sims's hospital and without—"as the entire captive community [was] a living laboratory," Hortense Spillers (2003, 208) aptly observes—the dance of agency between the Human and the enslaved human was necessarily a "dance of death" (Wilderson 2010, 138) or, to borrow jazz composer and saxophonist Wayne Shorter's (1964) term of art, "dance cadaverous." It was predicated on social death of the enslaved that conditioned, on the one hand, the omnipresent threat and preemptive legitimacy of all manner of degradation and violence, including physical death, and on the other, the multiform resistance of the enslaved that was ever potentially deadly. The entanglement of the enslaved/antisocial and the Human/Social was always already a struggle in, for, and against death.

What about the dance of agency between the enslaved and the nonhuman? In Pickering's posthumanism, the nonhuman successfully resist the Human all the time: Scientific experiments fail; the Mississippi breaches levees; cars break down; and so forth. However, although Pickering convincingly shows the nonhuman to be agentic, nonhuman performances appear to have no political or ethical valence. Ironically, his posthumanist ontological politics and ethics are exclusively about "how we [the Human] conduct ourselves in the world" (Pickering 2011, 6). They only address how the Human should cease their quest for mastery of the nonhuman and instead "slow down" and "be careful," living experimentally and "self-consciously in the flow of becoming"—in other words, how the Human should decenter themselves and get along better with the nonhuman in an emergent and open-ended way (Pickering 2008b, 8, 13; 2011, 6–7).[60] Yet, if we are to truly recognize nonhuman agency, should we not question the tacit assumption of nonhuman neutrality, innocence, or perhaps even goodness, not only but certainly in light of the enslaved human?[61] Was the agency of the Sims speculum politically and ethically neutral relative to the captive women? The sharp scalpel? The hard operating table? The carceral hospital? Or, back on the plantations of their enslavers, what about the barbed cotton boll? The cutting sugarcane leaf?[62] The malarial mosquito? The scalding stove? The dank mangle? The lacerating whip? The bloodthirsty hounds? The hellish world? For the Black enslaved, slowing down, being careful, or going with the flow as politics and ethics hardly measures up to their abject predicament, certainly relative to the Human but also, if less uniformly, to the nonhuman.

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They may be, contingently, necessary survival tactics but are far from sufficient lines of fight and flight to a new world.

Here, to consider *dance cadaverous* on a different scale, let us briefly return to the Haitian Revolution, the aporetic absence in Sewell's humanist histories of revolutionary France. In his essay "Perfecting Slavery," Anthony Paul Farley (2004, 235n49) quotes from C. L. R. James's classic *The Black Jacobins*: "The slaves destroyed tirelessly. . . . [T]hey were seeking their salvation in the most obvious way, the destruction of what they knew was the cause of their sufferings; and if they destroyed much it was because they had suffered much. They knew that as long as these plantations stood their lot would be to labour on them until they dropped. The only thing was to destroy them" (James [1938] 1989, 88). No doubt, the enslaved directed their wrath at their French enslavers "from [whom] they had known rape, torture, degradation, and, at the slightest provocation, death" (James [1938] 1989, 88). Going further, Farley (2004, 235) interprets the enslaved's actions this way: "The slaves burned everything because everything was against them . . . the entire order in which they were positioned as worse than senseless things, every plantation, everything." In other words, not only the enslavers and their society, the Human and the Social, but *everything*, including the nonhuman, was against the enslaved, who were "positioned as worse than senseless things." Given how the enslaved had been antagonistically entangled with the Human and the nonhuman, the Haitian Revolution was a struggle to found a radically new "ontological order" (Trouillot 1995, 89), which France, the United States, and the rest of the modern social world rightly viewed as an existential threat and for which they have endlessly punished and banished Haiti.[63] Farley (2004, 236) laments, "The slaves burned everything, yes, but, unfortunately, they only burned everything in Haiti. . . . [T]he failure of their fire to cross the waters was the great tragedy of the nineteenth century."[64] And the twentieth and the twenty-first. Modern ontology, calamitously centered on the Human and the Social, prevails unabated.

Mississippi Goddam

The advent of the transatlantic slave trade was coeval with the scientific revolution.[65] From the outset, modern slavery and modern science were tightly intertwined. To take Sims's vocation as an example, from the seventeenth century onward, surgeons not only plied their trade on slave ships, trying to keep alive the human cargo and dissecting the dead in the name of science (Mustakeem 2016; Sheridan 1981), but many of them were additionally tasked

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with data collection for naturalists back home. Supplying empirical bases for *the* sciences of their day, they took, from places along the slave trade routes, specimens of flora, fauna, rocks, and minerals, as well as knowledge and remains of the enslaved (Kean 2019; Murphy 2013). In this way, "the wretched, miserable, and inhuman spaces of slave ships" were, Kathleen Murphy (2013, 669) argues, "simultaneously . . . spaces of natural history." Or, to switch to prerevolutionary Haiti, the prized French colony was a major hub of eighteenth-century science, Philadelphia and Boston being its only North American peers: "Few, if any other contemporary colonial settings matched colonial Saint Domingue as an enclave for organized science in the world outside of Europe," according to James McClellan III (2010, 5). In Haiti, as elsewhere, slavery was hardly peripheral to but rather was intimately entwined with science (see also Curran 2011; Manning and Rood 2016; Murphy 2016). Yet, while historians have increasingly documented and narrated the centrality of modern slavery to modern science, posthumanist social theory has remained indifferent and oblivious. Though "foundation[al]," the enslaved have "occupie[d] the position of the unthought" (Hartman and Wilderson 2003, 184–85).[66]

Modern ontology is not dualist but trialist. In other words, Sims's experiments are a more apt paradigm of modernity than Glaser's are. We do not mean that all modern science, or the modern world as a whole, bears a close resemblance to what happened in Sims's backyard hospital; there are innumerable dances of agency and death that vary greatly in their styles. Rather, his experiments call attention to the unnoticed aporetic absence in both humanist and posthumanist social theory: the Black enslaved/antisocial that is entangled with the Human/Social and the nonhuman/natural. To paraphrase Du Bois, Morrison, Mills, and others, there is no modernity without the global enslavement of Africans.

An exclusively social ontology, the basis for humanist social science and theory, is not sufficient. Provincializing the Social by more fully accounting for the nonhuman, the basis for posthumanist social science and theory, is necessary but also not sufficient. The retention of *social* in Pickering's comparative apposition of "humanist social theory" and "posthumanist social theory" is telling, for the latter reproduces the former's incapacity to see and make sense of the *antisocial* structure of enslavement, the social death of the enslaved human, that lies beyond and against but nonetheless entwined with the Social. To grapple with enslavement, as we do in this chapter, is to undertake what we call *antisociology*, or more broadly *antisocial science*, a subversive counterpart to normal social science and theory that further provincializes the Social and the Human (Jung 2019).

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We wholly agree with certain critics of posthumanism and liberal humanism that, in view of colonial, racial, gender, sexual, class, and other forms of social domination, we need to complicate the category of the Human, questioning and undermining its taken-for-granted transparency. The Human is, and has always been, internally riven intersectionally and hierarchically. Yet, this theoretical move is not enough to contend with racial slavery. The social death of enslaved Black people in modernity—singular in its global scale and significance—is sui generis and denotes not a commensurable subordination among the Human in but a constitutive expulsion from the Social. Social death is not a form of social injury among others, and a social nonperson is not a type of dominated social person among others. As seen above, one manifestation of the incommensurability of the enslaved/antisocial and the Human/Social is the incoherence, the loss/excess of meaning, of social categories—such as agency, gender, and consent—relative to the former (Jung 2019; Vargas and Jung 2021).

We close with the proposition that the modern trialist ontology obtains to this day. Chattel slavery proper may have ended, but the antisocial, antihuman predicament of antiblackness—the exclusion of Black people and blackness from the Social and the Human—that modern slavery begat persists. That the absolutely basic declaration "Black lives matter" resounds around the world, as it did in 2020, should remind us that the past is not past.[67] For example, in the United States, more than 150 years after formal abolition and some 170 years after Sims's embarkation on his prototypical career as a gynecologist, the maternal mortality rate for Black women was 3.55 times that for white women in 2016–17 (MacDorman et al. 2021; Joseph et al. 2021; see also Kennedy-Moulton et al. 2023). Around the globe, of the thirty states with the highest maternal mortality rates in 2023, twenty-seven were in sub-Saharan—that is, Black—Africa, one of the three exceptions being Haiti. The average rate of those thirty states was 128 times higher than that of the thirty, mostly European, states with the lowest rates.[68]

Let us end where we began, with the Mississippi River, and suppose that it is indeed a big enough example to say something meaningful about the modern world. In 1719, the first two ships with enslaved Africans for sale arrived in French Louisiana (Dart 1931). A year later, a settler named Claude Joseph Villars Dubreuil compelled his enslaved workforce to build New Orleans's first levee. For the next century and a half, the enslaved were indispensably, inextricably, and often fatally bound to the Human's Sisyphean project of dominating and controlling the river. Among other things, the enslaved's efforts made possible the sugar plantations along the river between

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New Orleans and Baton Rouge, on which generations of the enslaved toiled, suffered, and died (Mandelman 2020). There, in 1811, along the levees they were made to maintain, the enslaved organized and fought to the death in the largest armed revolt against slavery in US history (Rasmussen 2011). During the short-lived Reconstruction, the Freedmen's Bureau redistributed small parcels of land on the fringes of the plantations to the formerly enslaved. In the twentieth century, the large tracts of plantation land, still under white ownership, that had been remade by the enslaved attracted the investments of transnational petrochemical corporations, which promptly proceeded to spew pollutants. "Here petrochemistry, having leaked from the region's sprawling network of chemical plants and waste facilities, suffuse[d] and be[came] entangled with the landscape, ultimately oozing and wafting into the neighboring communities," Adam Mandelman (2020, 158) explains. Lying at the edges of plantations-turned-plants, Black communities have become ensnared in a life-and-death struggle against the Human and the nonhuman in what is now commonly referred to as Cancer Alley or Death Alley. The dance of death has been passed on to the descendants of the enslaved.[69]

As we come to grips with climate change and the other emergencies of the so-called Anthropocene that the Human and the Social have unleashed on the Mississippi as everywhere else, our theories, politics, and ethics need to be attuned to the incommensurable agency of the Black enslaved and their inheritors, living and dying in changing-same antisocial conditions of antiblackness, who continually make a way out of no way. The Haitian Revolution, before which its American and French counterparts pale by comparison, may cross the rising waters yet. For the sake of every one and every thing, the Human and the Social need to be more than cut down to size. As at the turn of the nineteenth century, nothing less than their abolishment will do.

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N O T E S

Prologue

Epigraph: Morrison in Gilroy (1993b, 178).

We thank Elizabeth Ault, Ben Kossak, Liz Smith, Mattson Gallagher, and the anonymous reviewers at Duke University Press.

1 Of course, we borrow *social death* from Orlando Patterson (1982), although, as explained in chapter 1, we deviate from his analysis in a couple of key ways.

2 With regard to sociology, see Jung (2019).

3 We capitalize *the Social* and *the Human* to specify their modernity, which we explain in chapter 1.

4 Although the empirical bases of our analyses are centered mostly on the United States, our theoretical claims are not confined to it. On the global scope of antiblackness, see Jung and Vargas (2021).

5 We suspect that the impulse driving this habit of thought is to redress retroactively the Black enslaved's exclusion from the Social.

1. Antiblackness Beyond (Post)Humanism

We thank Swati Birla, Freeden Blume Oeur, Claire Decoteau, Julie Livingston, Danielle McCarthy, Amit Prasad, Dave Roediger, Joan Scott, and Caroline Yang for their readings of an earlier draft.

1 Pickering's point that Mondrian's and de Kooning's paintings "thematize" disparate ontologies is well taken. Paradoxically but not necessarily contradictorily, however, Mondrian's "Cartesian paintings" may not exemplify

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the hegemonic ontological vision in modern art, a point Pickering implies but does not argue explicitly (2008b, 4). For every Mondrian or Kazimir Malevich, there appears to be at least one de Kooning or Joan Mitchell.

2 Drawing on the same source material, Bruno Latour (2014) makes a broadly similar point about the Mississippi River and the Corps of Engineers.

3 Pickering's penchant for the 1960s manifests periodically in his work, including in his monograph *The Cybernetic Brain* (2010).

4 The more or less synonymous terms *social sciences* and *human sciences* align with the idea that the social and the human are two sides of the same coin.

5 Other eddies can be found in political theory, anthropology, animal studies, feminist studies, environmental studies, and disability studies (e.g., Barad 2007; Bennett 2010; Braidotti 2017; Coole and Frost 2010; Goodley et al. 2014; Smart and Smart 2017; Wolfe 2009, 2010).

6 Fox and Alldred (2017) is an exception.

7 As Zahi Zalloua (2021, 156) declares, "A posthumanism worthy of its name must trouble the ontological difference between the human and the slave."

8 Staking out positions broadly similar to those of Pickering and Sewell, respectively, fellow sociologists Latour and Bourdieu may be the more obvious posthumanist and humanist social theorists to consider: They are both even more widely known and cited, and they have each commented on the other. We choose our pairing because it is weighted with less baggage and holds more potential. The two Frenchmen have cacophonous multitudes of admirers, critics, and interlocutors, and the direct engagement between them was a purely antagonistic one that produced heat but little light (Bourdieu 2004; Latour 2005).

9 We center Hartman for her singular focus on slavery and its "afterlife" and for her unparalleled analysis of the agency of the enslaved. For a generative engagement with Sylvia Wynter in relation to Latour and Sims, see Gillespie (2022).

10 We recognize that there are significant differences between Pickering's *dance of agency* and, among others, Karen Barad's (2007) *intra-action* and Jane Bennett's (2010) *distributive agency*. However, as these concepts all hail from the "'posthumanist' wing of STS," their commonalities, including their incapacity to comprehend the agency of the enslaved, are what is of interest in this chapter (Pickering 2024, 16; see also 2017a, 2025).

11 See Jung (2019) for an earlier discussion of *antisocial*, *antisociology*, and *underdiscipline*. With underdiscipline, we allude to Harney and Moten's (2013) *undercommons*.

12 The following synopsis draws from any number of Pickering's writings. The fullest elaboration of his theory can be found in *The Mangle of Practice* (1995).

13 In much of his work, Pickering uses *nonhuman* and *material* interchangeably.

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14 Teasing Pickering, Pinch (1999, 145) continues:

> Try this: the other day I observed my four-year old daughter, Benika, struggling to put on a new pair of socks. Her toe obstinately got stuck in the wall of one sock. Her old discipline of wiggling her toe didn't work. She looked at her daddy—no doubt with the conceptual and phenomenal alignment in mind that daddy would help out—but then much to her (and her daddy's) delight she creatively came up with a new extension of her culture; she folded the sock back on itself and tried again—this time with success. She had successfully stabilized material agency—her sock—by tuning her conceptual and phenomenological models of sock pulling. The interactive stabilization of her sock with her foot, the dance of agency between accommodation and resistance, were all there to be seen.

15 Omar Lizardo (2010, 670) rightly refers to Sewell's theory of structure as "without a doubt the most influential statement regarding the idea of structure in contemporary American sociology."

16 Here, Pickering's relative lack of substantive engagement enables him to caricature humanist social theories as stasis-obsessed, thereby heightening the iconoclastic effect of his own position: the world as perpetually, thoroughly changing. In our view, this stance is either banal—of course, nothing stays *exactly* the same over time—or untenable. Likely, his primary interest in science studies predisposes him to seek out and see novelty and change, for science itself ever values and searches for the new, but there is little reason to expect this value to hold consistently for the rest of the world beyond science.

17 Pickering's insular concept echoes the title of Sahlins's book, *Islands of History*.

18 At some level, no material object is ever static either. For example, as "ontological theater," art in the modern West projects an immobile vision, according to Pickering: "Paintings just hang there, doing nothing" (2015, 243). But even under the most scrupulous care in the best of circumstances, in modern museums, paintings themselves, not just interpretations of them, inevitably change, if ever so slowly (Domínguez Rubio 2020).

19 Pickering refers to "dualism" more than "duality," but there is no significant difference in his usage of the two terms.

20 Rather unusually, relative to most social theories, Pickering implies that modernity, characterized by unprecedentedly successful projects of practical dualism producing countless islands of stability, is less in flux than prior eras were.

21 According to Pickering, dualism is not confined to the social sciences and the humanities: "The natural sciences and engineering take as their object a material world from which the human is excluded; the social sciences

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and the humanities focus on the residuum—the world of humans amongst themselves" (2000, 309).

22 Even in Pickering's rendering, a representational reconstruction based on another's representation (Galison 1985), Glaser is often not truly passive in his ostensive moments of passivity, as he is observing, recording, and presumably thinking. On a related note, Pickering's conflation of agency and activity warrants scrutiny. For the human and the nonhuman, passive resistance, for example, should not be a conceptual aporia.

23 For instance, while the Corps of Engineers may pause to gauge and monitor its latest feat or to figure out its next step, the Mississippi blithely keeps on flowing and churning. Relatedly, "free-standing machines (e.g., cannon, steam engines[, bubble chambers])—machines with their own agency, not reducible to adjuncts or delegates of human agency"—may be exponentially more numerous in the modern age and, in their profusion, distinguish it, but they scarcely stand in for the nonhuman in general (Pickering 2008a, 305–6).

24 Pickering's (1997, 328) distaste for the invisible is related to another bane discussed earlier, humanist social theory's supposedly exclusive fixation on reproduction: "The problem that arises is that when one postulates an invisible quasi-object to account for reproduction, social change becomes inscrutable." Conversely, "If one stays with the visible, however, one finds that cultural change, not constancy and reproduction, is the order of the day" (Pickering 2008a, 293).

25 We should note, however, a residual anthropocentrism in Pickering's posthumanist theory. Especially beyond the laboratory, *resistance* hardly does justice to what the nonhuman do. In its dance with human agency, nonhuman agency is resistive only relative to human intentions and desires. To the willful groundhog or gopher in our backyards, *we* are the vexing agents of resistance. Furthermore, in Pickering's dance of agency, the human is always there as a partner. Surely, almost everything that happens in the universe does not involve humans, even during the fleeting few million years of *Homo*'s existence.

26 In light of accumulating counterevidence in biology, Pickering's exclusive assignment of intentionality to human agency is another instance of his residual anthropocentrism.

27 As a corollary, agency is no longer just action but "consequential action" (Pickering 2017a, 382).

28 As Dave Elder-Vass (2015, 113) notes, "human beings are *different* inhabitants than entities of other types because we are composed of certain characteristic types of parts, in certain characteristic dynamic relationships with each other, which give humans a distinctive set of powers and capacities. This is not to claim a special metaphysical status for humans: we could say the same of laser pointers and yeasts" (emphasis in original).

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29 We keep the words lowercased as adjectives.

30 In other words, even acts of detachment and domination are unavoidably acts of entwinement, misrecognized moves in the dance of agency. Or, as Latour (1993, 46) puts it, "we have never been modern."

31 Patterson's historical survey relies and builds on the work of anthropologist George Murdock. Historians and other students of slavery often find fault with Patterson's definition, primarily around questions of agency that we discuss later, but none offer a more adequate conceptualization. On sociology's silence on slavery, see Jung (2019); and Patterson (2019).

32 On death often being preferable to enslavement, Patterson (2025, 19) notes, "Throughout the Americas, the enslaved celebrated rather than mourned the death of kinsmen and friends, since physical death brought a merciful end to the living, social death of slavery and the hope of return to Africa."

33 We may think of Trouillot's (1995, 70–107) "An Unthinkable History: The Haitian Revolution as a Non-Event" as the disclaimed and repressed twin of Sewell's (1996) "Historical Events as Transformations of Structures: Inventing Revolution at the Bastille."

34 The analogical invocation of slavery in posthumanist theorizing is hardly unique to Pickering. It is de rigueur.

35 "An enslaved river is, after all, put to work for the purposes of the master," as James Scott makes a similar point in his posthumous book on rivers, *In Praise of Floods*. "From another and equally plausible perspective, however, humans are the captives and even the slaves of their domesticates" (2025, 169, 167–68).

36 This question echoes the one posed by Wilderson (2003, 225)—"Whither the Slave in Civil Society?"—in relation to Gramscian Marxism.

37 Sims is also referred to as the Father of Gynecology and the Father of American Gynecology. Among his many honors, Sims was elected, in 1876, as the president of the American Medical Association, founded in 1847. He was also a founder, in 1876, and the fifth president, in 1880, of the American Gynecological Society.

38 Sims (1885, 237) mentions "my notes" that he shared with doctors who witnessed his VVF experiments, but we have yet to determine whether they have been preserved and, if so, where they may be.

39 As of the 1850 census, Sims claimed ownership of seventeen Black people, twelve of them women (Schwartz 2006, 237).

40 In fact, Paul Starr (2017, 82) draws from Sims's autobiography, particularly his recollection of his father's disapproval, to illustrate the inferior status of medicine in the nineteenth-century United States.

41 In addition to VVF, Anarcha was afflicted with a rectovaginal fistula, an opening between the rectum and the vagina.

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42 Not unusually, Sims referred to enslaved women by their first names only (if by any name at all) and to white women by their last names preceded by honorifics.

43 Sims's (1858) earlier narration of this episode differed in some details—for example, containing no mention of the bent spoon.

44 In 1858, Sims had stated that his "ransacking" had yielded "some seven or eight cases" (1858, 52).

45 As Snorton (2017, 22) points out with regard to Sims's (1875, 1885) miscalling of Lucy as Betsey, this inattention evinces what Hartman (1997, 21) refers to as "the fungibility of the enslaved."

46 In an 1854 article, Sims mentioned "upwards of ninety operations performed in my experiments on the treatment of this affection, in the last eight years" (1854b, 111).

47 Even today, "while historians, ethicists and the popular press have debated Dr. Sims' legacy, medical sources have continued to portray him unquestionably as a great figure in medical history" (Spettel and White 2011, 2427).

48 We choose not to cite the works that make the claims in this paragraph, for criticizing particular authors is not our aim. They have collectively done the all-important work of delegitimating Sims and centering the enslaved women.

49 Consistently, in his conceptual reflection on Walter Johnson's (2003) essay "On Agency," Sewell (2024) illustrates the universality of *agency* by seamlessly analogizing "enslaved persons" to nineteenth-century French workers.

50 For an insightful analysis, see Snorton (2017, 42).

51 The question of *consent*, however dissimulated, is one index of the distinction drawn by the Human between the enslaved and the nonhuman, even if both are socially dead. Like other drivers, Pickering, we suspect, does not bother to solicit even the simulated consent of his car.

52 Not using anesthesia in the 1840s was not unusual or unique to Black "patients." The point is that such painful experimental surgeries would not have been systematically carried out on white women.

53 Sims began his medical education at the Medical College of South Carolina, which, according to historian Rana Hogarth (2017, 178), "owed much of its success to the appropriation and use of slave bodies for teaching."

54 Similarly, Kenny (2015, 13) and Gillespie (2022, 13) refer to "living cadavers" and "cadavers," respectively.

55 In fact, ready access to Black bodies, alive and dead, was the very basis of medical education in the South.

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56 Hortense Spillers's (2003, 208) famous subordinate clause comes to mind: "and no one need pretend that even the quotation marks do not *matter*" (emphasis in original).

57 Snorton (2017, 27) reflects on body odor as a mechanism of protection and perhaps resistance: "The recurrent descriptor of Anarcha's body odor also provides an opening to imagine what modicums of protection might have been afforded one by smelling noxious to one's enslaver. As a sign of a disability that made one unfit for work—reproductive or otherwise—smelling badly signals an unruly body within plantation economies." Along this line, VVF itself was, in one sense, resistance of the flesh to the early and frequent pregnancies, as well as malnutrition, that the enslavers imposed upon enslaved women (Ojanuga 1993; Schwartz 2006), deterring further sexual violation and thwarting slavery's re/production.

The captive women must have also screamed at times on and beyond the operating table. Reflecting on the enslaved's scream, in a chapter titled "Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester's Scream," Fred Moten (2003, 7) quotes Édouard Glissant (1989, 123–24): "Since speech was forbidden, slaves camouflaged the word under the provocative intensity of the scream. It was taken to be nothing but the call of a wild animal. This is how the dispossessed man organized his speech by weaving it into the apparently meaningless texture of extreme noise."

58 Schwartz (2006, 232) led us to this source. For many other ailments, enslaved women would often resist by hiding their conditions, but Schwartz (2006, 233) writes that "keeping obstetric fistulas private was next to impossible."

59 In 1851, another respected southern doctor, Samuel A. Cartwright (1851, 707), gained notoriety for naming a condition that was hitherto "unknown to our medical authorities" but the "diagnostic symptom" of which was "well known to our planters and overseers": *drapetomania*, "the disease causing slaves to run away."

60 Pickering's sketchy "politics of experiment" for the Human warrants skepticism. Was Sims not engaged in his own ontological politics of experiment with, in his own mind, nothing but good, even divine, intentions?

61 Zakiyyah Iman Jackson (2020, 16) makes a related point that we should not "presuppose black(ened) people's relative power and privilege *as human*, vis-à-vis nonhuman animals" (emphasis in original). In relation to the environment, see Wright (2021). On the political properties of certain technologies, see Winner (1980).

62 Reflecting on the comparatively high death toll in sugar-producing areas of the Americas, Trouillot (1995, 18) writes, "Sugarcane was the slaves' most sadistic tormentor."

63 The original and ongoing punishment of Haiti is an open secret. For a recent investigative report, see the *New York Times*'s "Haiti 'Ransom' Project,"

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May 26, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/spotlight/haiti. See also Pierre (2023).

64 Embers of the revolution did ignite and stoke relatively smaller fires throughout the Americas (Scott 2018).

65 Of course, the section title is borrowed from Nina Simone's (1964) classic song.

66 Ellis (2018) is an exception. For critiques of the silence from Black studies, see Jackson (2020); and Weheliye (2014).

67 Of the linguistic and related turns in the humanities and social sciences, Barad (2007, 132) writes, "Language has been granted too much power. . . . [I]t seems that at every turn lately every 'thing'—even materiality—is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation. . . . Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which the only thing that doesn't seem to matter anymore is matter." Of posthumanism, one could add that there is an important sense in which the only thing that doesn't seem to matter is Black lives.

68 Our World in Data, "Maternal Mortality Ratio, 2023," https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/maternal-mortality-ratio-sdgs. War-ravaged Afghanistan and the world's smallest republic, Nauru, were the other exceptions.

69 One part of this struggle involves the dead enslaved, as their graves became a focal point of contention between community activists seeking to locate and protect them and a petrochemical corporation wanting to build a gigantic plant. See Dembicki (2022); Descendants Project et al. (2022); and Groner (2021).

2. Antiblackness Beyond Genocide

An earlier version of this chapter appeared as "Killing the Dead: Genocide and Antiblackness," in *Beyond Sanctuary: The Humanism of a World in Motion*, ed. Ananya Roy and Veronika Zablotsky (Duke University Press, 2025), 77–95. We thank Josh Kaiser, Veda Kim, Jorge Vásquez, and the editors of that volume for their readings.

1 On the history of lynching in North Carolina, see Newkirk (2009).

2 "Nature of Genocide," *New York Times*, June 14, 1953, E10. We acknowledge that Lemkin's emphatic dismissal of the CRC's petition was of a piece with the Cold War realpolitik he was engaged in and that his private, unpublished thinking may have contradicted his publicly aired views, including those concerning the lynching of Black people (Irvin-Erickson 2017, ch. 7).

3 Power's remarks on genocide relate to her political allegiances and context, which include the following: Between 2009 and 2013, Power served as special assistant to the president and senior director for multilateral affairs and

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