

Racial Technics:
Media and Machines in the Long Civil Rights Era

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INTRODUCTION

RACIAL TECHNICS; OR, REINVENTIONS OF THE HUMAN

Slaves became extensions of slave owners— their arms, legs, the parts of them they wished to harness and use with none of the usual care of their own bodies. These captive bodies represent parts of their own bodies they wish to rationalize or make mechanical or inhuman... These captive bodies then become the tools sent out to conquer the natural world. Of course they aren't merely tools but the projections of the sensibilities, consciousness, needs, and desires of the captor.

—Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*

Black existence does not represent the total reality of the racial formation— it is not the beginning and the end of the story— but it does relate to the totality; it indicates the (repressed) truth of the political and economic system. That is to say, the whole range of positions within the racial formation is most fully understood from this vantage point.

—Jared Sexton, “People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery”

The cyborg's existence is premised on the slave.

—George Caffentzis, *In Letters of Blood and Fire*

1.1 EXERGUE (ON EXTENSION AND EXTERIORITY)

Among the many technocultural memes disseminated through Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media*, it is perhaps the aphoristic statement on media as "extensions of man" whose lineages remain most fraught and whose volatile trajectories remain most occluded by the ascension of "McLuhan" as the patron saint at the foundation of media studies' disciplinary origin story. Writing on the eve of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, McLuhan's interest in the profound changes wrought by the growth of what he called the electric media led him to develop a general theory in which, as his monograph's subtitle suggests, *extension* would designate the proper order of man's relationship to media technology. With this expansive definition of media as "any extension of ourselves" (7), McLuhan would claim a vast repertoire of disparate objects and infrastructures under its banner (e.g., wheels and roads, radios and light, advertisements and money), allowing him also to elaborate in quite capacious terms what, exactly, it is that the media extend. Working upon substrates that encapsulate and collate multiple scales, media are variously said to extend the reach of the human body in physical space, the organization of the human sensorium, the affinities of human community, and "the condition of consciousness" itself (60). Understood in the subjective genitive, McLuhan's thesis thus pivots upon the ways "man" extends himself elsewhere and otherwise through the use of technical artifacts, which foremost instantiate prosthetic exteriorizations or "outerings" (152) of human organs and processes. Yet these media that amplify man through his extension outward do not leave sheltered the regions of interiority but rather deeply "affect the whole psychic and social complex" (4). Advancing an organicist metaphysics that established man's position as an equilibrium-

seeking creature,¹ McLuhan wagered that every auto-extension doubled as a fundamental disfiguration, one that required the reorganization of man's internal sensory apparatus so as to recalibrate biophysical and social homeostasis. Through extensions, or technological media, men, to borrow from Dionne Brand, "use with none of the usual care...their own bodies" (*Map* 30). Yet according to McLuhan, this harnessing of— and substitution through— technical objects necessitates a strategy of "auto-amputation" of man's own sense organs; "in the normal use of technology" (46), the shocks and disturbances accrued through these external extensions are managed through a "numbness or blocking of perception" (43) with the aim of preserving internal balance.

Read in the objective genitive, then, "man" can no longer simply be said to extend himself willfully through the use of media technology but rather is extended, which is always also to say amputated, by it. As the undecidable grammatical structure of McLuhan's aphorism indeed brings into view, the logic of extension cannot be reduced here only to a celebration of expansion, conquest, or accumulation without reserve. Significantly, the apparent promise signified by the extensions *of* man mutates into a genuine crisis *for* man at the moment of failed incorporation, that is, when man's exteriorizations cannot be "properly" interiorized, contained, or sublated. In his exposition of the myth of Narcissus, for example, McLuhan posits this crisis in terms of

¹ In the logic of technological organicism that underwrites McLuhan's thought system, both the body and the body politic "respond[] to new pressures and irritations by resourceful new extensions— always in the effort to exert staying power, constancy, equilibrium, and *homeostasis*" (98, emphasis his). In this regard, McLuhan's prosthetic imagination, and the (humanist) figuration of homeostatic origin it occasions and reinscribes, finds itself firmly embedded in the truth-procedures that Jacques Derrida has identified as the signature maneuver of western metaphysics: "The enterprise of returning 'strategically,' 'ideally,' to an origin or to a priority thought to be simple, intact, normal, pure, standard, self-identical, in order then to think in terms of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident, etc." (*Limited Inc.* 236).

the transfer of power to the specular image and to the attendant breakdown of sovereign responsivity as well as organistic form that this transfer augurs: “This extension of himself by mirror numbed his perceptions until he became the servomechanism of his own extended...image” (41). His interior perceptions overwhelmed and his being transfixed by the technical extension that “forbids self-recognition” (43), Narcissus, as the mythological avatar of McLuhan’s “man,” discloses the general threat of exteriority unleashed by what are alternatively labeled “media” and “technology.” Subjected to an “*extroversion*, marked by the incapacity to designate anything as properly his...own” (Cherniavsky, *Incorporations* xvii, emphasis hers), in this recounting it is Narcissus, our tragic protagonist, who emerges in the maligned form of the servomechanism— that is, etymologically, as the *slave motor*.

The momentary appearance of the slave in this meditation on the wayward power of the media-technological prosthesis instantiates a cut in what is otherwise offered largely as an undifferentiated and transparent treatment of “man.” In the existential predicament obtained through McLuhan’s reading of Narcissus, the chiasmatic reversal of “man” into a function of the media’s extension registers a more profound difference between freedom and unfreedom forged by the existence of media technologies. But this syntactical difference is itself circumscribed—which is to say decomposed— by a mutual dependence upon the founding grammar of slavery that delimits this field of freedom’s movement, as well as the vectors of its operation and allowance. Indeed, that McLuhan’s man— and the dangers presented by his improper relationship with media technology— gain conceptual coherence through a discursive suture between slavery and extension signals the inheritance within *Understanding Media* (and, arguably, in understandings of

media more broadly) of a signifying history in which the figure of extension has enjoyed an extensive, if oft-degraded, career in western humanist projects of self-actualization. In his foundational “discovery” of the cogito in *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes famously furnished the metaphysical privileging of the faculties of rational mind/soul by elaborating its distinction to that other finite substance—the *res extensa* or extended thing (76). The thinking thing (denoted, in contrast, by the active present-participle *cogitans*) designates the realm of human consciousness and was exempted by Descartes from the principles of mechanistic reduction, whereas extended things, which inhabit space and incarnate the realms of body and mere matter, are subject to the mechanistic determinations of external stimuli.² While this radical differentiation instantiated a veritable break with earlier philosophies of soul in terms of the fundamental non-identity between cogito/matter it posed, the Cartesian outline nevertheless rearticulated an already established ontological primacy of man over and against the extension, its materials and its figures.

For Aristotle, like McLuhan’s Narcissus, the position that at once embodied and condensed *this* relation of extension was that of the slave. “Since there is the same relation,” Aristotle asserted, “between soul and body, artisan and tool, and master and slave, between each of these pairs there is no partnership; for they are not two, but the first term in each is one, and the second a part of this one...For the body is the soul’s congenital tool, while the slave is as it were a part and detachable tool of the master, the tool being a sort of inanimate slave” (*Eudemian* 1241b 17-24). In the chain of analogies

² On the Cartesian assertion of “the failure of exteriority to signify the proper (‘true’) mode of being man,” I have benefited from Denise Ferreira da Silva’s *Toward a Global Idea of Race* 41-4; as well as John Protevi’s *Time and Exteriority* 132-5. On the human soul’s demarcation from automatism and mechanism in Descartes, see Jones, *Racial Discourse of Life Philosophy* 32-3.

Aristotle offers, each latter term exists in a relation of subordination, dependence, and extension of the former. These extensions, moreover, twin as incorporations. While soul-artisan-master form autonomous unities, body-tool-slave are said properly to exist only insofar as they are bound to a proprietary structure—that is, insofar as they are held in possession. Whereas artisan and master possess the capacity for auto-causation, tool and slave are understood to be divisible, exposable, and disposable, and thus lacking possession of the juridical and (meta)physical standing necessary to actualize the capacity for self-movement. It is this proximity between tool and enslaved, technical being and human captive, that simultaneously haunts and displaces the origin of McLuhan’s media concept: a concept whose conditions of articulation emerge through this proximity and, more emphatically, through its singular sedimentation within the chattel logics of American *racial* slavery.³ This is the condition of world (un)forming violence that

³ Appeals to the authority of Aristotle within U.S. American defenses of racial slavery reached a peak in the nineteenth century, particularly through the writings of the Virginian George Frederick Fitzhugh. In his proslavery treatises *Sociology for the South, or, The Failure of Free Society* (1854) and *Cannibals All! Or, Slaves without Masters* (1857), Fitzhugh reasoned that natural slavery lay at the foundations of “modern civilization.” Professing that the black “is but a grown up child, and must be governed as a child” (*South* 310), Fitzhugh asserted that the despotic paternal order of the plantation offered a benign or “protective” alternative to the fictions of universal equality professed by Lockean doctrines of contract and consent. This was rationalized on the grounds that, in apparent contrast to the slave mode of (capitalist) production, “[i]t is in the interest of the capitalist and the skillful to allow free laborer the least possible portion of the fruits of their own labor” (*Cannibals* 39). On Fitzhugh’s ambivalent rejection of and disavowed consensus with the imperatives of (racial) capitalism, see Barrett, *Blackness and Value* 151-6.

Yet despite Fitzhugh’s adamant exchange of Locke, as well as the political economy of Smith and Ricardo, for Aristotle (specifically his prolegomena of a racial theory of natural slavery advanced in Book I of the *Politics*) in defending racial slavery against the wage system of liberal industrial capitalism—and, indeed, precisely because chattel slavery inaugurated the very conditions of U.S. liberalism and capitalism—the internal contradictions and variations within Aristotle’s own texts on slavery means that the status of the Aristotelian heritage within the liberal tradition cannot be taken as simply adversary. In short, an appeal to the theory of natural slavery does not exhaust the logics of racial slavery and their legitimation strategies made available by the Aristotelian text. Although such lineages and their vocation in the modern regime of raciality are not the subject of my study *per se*, it is notable that the Lockean conception of self-ownership (that is, property in personhood) shares with the “ancient function of property (in the tradition recorded by Aristotle)” the objective of “preserving personal autonomy,” that is, individual self-sovereignty. As Stephen Michael Best explains, “Property provided personality with *both its extension and prerequisite*” (*Fugitive’s Properties* 156-7, emphasis

secures for McLuhan a specific epistemological engagement with the problematic of “man.” It is a condition, furthermore, that is adamantly denied yet that ineluctably resurfaces in the authorization of man *through* his extensions, his (living) tools. Such a resurfacing is accomplished by way of a brief though telling transaction in racial blackness, one in which the reduction of the “Negro” to the metaphysical slave or animate tool marks its predicating and material imprint on McLuhan’s media as and at the limits of man.

Signposting the particular technocultural formations of extension allegedly intensified in the “electric age,” McLuhan avers that media increasingly operate through a convivial process of double incorporation whereby the individual body is incorporated into a collective body politic and, in turn, this collective body is incorporated into man himself. These media work, we are informed, to “involve us in the whole of mankind and to incorporate the whole of mankind *in us*” (4, emphasis mine). Yet the universalist ideology underwriting this inscription of mankind, codified in planetary terms under the compressional sign of the “global village,”⁴ is soon interrupted by the arrival of a specific set of anxieties that is given, among others, the name “the Negro.” “They can no longer

mine). We should note the resemblance here to Locke’s account of the “justly” enslaved who undergoes “subject[ion] to the Absolute Dominion and Arbitrary Power of their Master” and, accordingly, “cannot be considered as any part of *Civil Society*” (*Second Treatise* 45, emphasis his).

For some philosophical treatments of the relationship (alternatively understood as a constitutive contradiction and as a founding paradox) between Aristotle’s renderings of the slave qua tool and of the slave qua human personality, see Pagden, *Fall of Natural Man* 38-41; Reiss, “Descartes’ Silence on Race and Slavery” 22-3; Mills, “Non-Cartesian Sums”; and Derrida, “Recoils.” For a suggestive intellectual history of Aristotle’s itineraries across liberal and non-liberal proslavery discourses in the Atlantic world, see Campbell, “Aristotle and Black Slavery.” While not interested specifically in the conceptualization of the enslaved as the avatar and analogical embodiment of the tool, Sylvia Wynter (“Unsettling the Coloniality” 275) has also read the “reconception of the human in Aristotelian Unmoved/Mover terms” in the wake of the instituting event of 1492.

⁴ McLuhan first introduced the term “global village” in his co-edited 1960 volume (with anthropologist Edmund Carpenter) *Explorations in Communication*. The now-tired adage also appears in slightly altered form in *Understanding Media*.

be *contained*,” McLuhan warns, “in the political sense of limited association. They are now *involved* in our lives, as we in theirs, thanks to the electric media” (5, emphasizes his). While the accented *involved* functions to foreground the motifs of immediate contact, deliberative activity, and reciprocal communication central to McLuhan’s narrative invention of an electrically-mediated mankind, the uneven dispensations of violence constitutive to this invention are betrayed by the plural possessive *our* that signifies those in whose lives “the Negro” is now involved. This dramatic contraction of the referent “mankind,” accomplished through the discontinuity between the first deployment of this rhetorical figure and the rhetorical function of the pronominal form to which this figure later becomes attached, achieves a revisionary certitude: McLuhan’s man is inexorably established as the corollary domain of whiteness or, more accurately and more decisively, of non-blackness.

Yet although the semantic structure of this passage firmly places “the Negro” outside— *exterior* to— the referent *our* and hence the parameters of man, the thematic coupling of extension with incorporation that scaffolds McLuhan’s anthropology of technology, as well as the affective framing that this (over)proximity incites, renders this relation of exteriority more vexing. That is to say, at the very moment “the Negro” is grammatically sutured to a position of exteriority cut off from the compositional and conceptual field of mankind, “the Negro,” simultaneously and ambivalently, comes to mark a discernible fracture *within* this field— quite literally, an internal variation inside man, an anomalous introjection “in us.” This pivot is periodized as the “Age of Anxiety” (5), exacted in terms of an anxiety over the traumatic or radical disorganization— to use McLuhan’s preferred expression, the “implosion” (25, 51)— of man from the inside that

the non-containment of blackness already solicits, enacts, and brings forth.⁵ This implosive force (“They can no longer be contained”) stalks the historical and philosophical margins of McLuhan’s discourse of technology. In this passage, however, such a force is both censured and censored through a subsequent *containment* of “the Negro” in the desire for “political association” and its associated image of the world that this figure is made to signify and endorse. Stated otherwise, in despotic response to those (unspoken) movements and rebellions that open the present and future possibility of dissolving man, McLuhan’s discourse of the Negro labors to resolve man’s boundaries by ascertaining black non-containment as *the desire for the extension of, and incorporation into, man’s proprietary house and heading*. To wrest a formulation from the theorist Nahum Chandler, we can thus say that in McLuhan’s canonical treatment of media technology the “so-called Negro question announced as exorbitant to the true concerns of [McLuhan]’s discourse” inscribes “a movement that announces another kind of exorbitance, one that remains irreducible within his discourse” (X 29). This movement of exorbitance and the fundamental problematization it entails is, in Chandler’s terms, “the practical theoretical horizon of the *question* of ‘world’” (17, emphasis mine) and “the general possibility of the otherwise” (17-8) that this question releases. This is the question and the possibility unthought by McLuhan’s internment of exteriority and the

⁵ In her extended engagement with the political and theoretical problems that racial blackness and black existence pose for treatments of indexicality in digital studies and digital cinema, the film and media theorist Kara Keeling deploys a strikingly similar vocabulary to that of *implosion* to advance how that which has been forcibly made to “reside within” a particular conception of the human holds in reserve the potential to destroy this (hu)man “from the inside.” “My argument,” she writes, “regarding this [European Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment] ‘human’ will be that it ought to be exploded from the inside (or, more accurately, that it has been exploded from the inside so we might as well develop a critical repertoire to deal with it). In this way, what resides within it (as its Other) might be unfettered and transvalued” (“Passing for Human” 239). I am drawing on Keeling’s insight in my reading of McLuhan.

res extensa to the world of man. The *conditions* of this question and this possibility, however, are nevertheless disclosed in his hesitant but intractable articulation of the technological problematic and its related itineraries of (un)freedom to the elusive (dis)appearance of “the Negro.”

The same year as McLuhan’s *Understanding Media* hit the North American scene, the Alabama-born and Detroit-based intellectual, organizer, and autoworker James Boggs would deliver a lecture, later published in 1966 under the title of “The Negro and Cybernation,” that weaved together the topoi of (media) technology and exteriority with (the question of) “the Negro” in ways that take on distinct, in fact revisionary, significance. Bringing together community organizers, activists, philosophers, technologists, and philanthropists from a variety of political orientations, the First Annual Conference on the Cybercultural Revolution in New York aimed to take stock of the political, social, and economic groundswell wrought by the “historic conjuncture” between cybernetics and automation (“Triple” 5).⁶ In opening his talk, Boggs urged that any radical program seeking to address a then-emergent “cybercultural society” demanded an analysis of black people’s “past rôle in American society,” their interwoven relationships to the nation-state apparatus as well as technological apparati, and “what this means at the present stage.” Boggs’s inaugural maneuver was to dispel a progressivist historiography of technology that asserted the development of machinery

⁶ The conference was organized by Alice Mary Hilton, who, along with Boggs, Bayard Rustin, Irving Howe, and many others, were members of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Triple Revolution. The Committee sought to address the “revolution” marked by the “combination of the computer and the automated self-regulating machine” explicitly in terms of the contemporaneous revolutions in “weaponry” and “human rights,” most notably in an open memo sent to U.S. President Lyndon Johnson in 1964 that was also widely circulated through its reprinting in the *International Socialist Review* (“Triple” 5).

and the industrial forces of mechanical production had brought about the displacement of the trade in human flesh and indeed the displacement of slavery altogether, a historiography, in other words, that brokered a structural homology between slave and machine and therefore also established the technological determination of abolition's past and future unfoldings. Noting that the cotton gin "led to a tremendous demand for slaves" (168), Boggs asserted, first, that mechanical technologies and black bodies were welded together to form the political, economic, and epistemological machinery of slavery and, second, that such entanglements had continued in formal emancipation's wake.

For Boggs, though, the decisive transformation inaugurated through cybernation and computing was the mass expulsion of black people from the interior operations of the (postindustrial) machine: "cybernation is going to make their occupational rôle obsolete" (170). In the speculative tense of Boggs's materialist proposition, the obsolescence of this "occupational rôle," however, must be understood as not only political-economic but also metaphysical in character. While painstakingly aware of the massive devastation politically manufactured through this planned and organized abandonment, Boggs also located in a (re)new(ed) relation between blackness and exteriority a social resource and political potential occasioned (but not determined) by the problem of technology. "Negroes are still at the bottom," he stressed, "but on the *outside* rather than on the *inside*" (171, *emphases his*). Contra McLuhan's partnering of extension with incorporation and assimilation, Boggs's treatment of technology thus brought into view a very different mode of "outering," one revealed by the "technical question" but in the last instance "political" in its form (171). In "The Negro and Cybernation," Boggs argued that such processes of outering brought to veritable crisis the (American) dream of

incorporating an exteriority that cannot be an incorporated— that is, “integration” as “a solution for our old problems” (171). “With automation and cybernation, we have to have a much bolder and more radical approach to society,” he championed, “and because they [black people] have the least gain from this society, they also have the least responsibility to this society” (168, 172). In his 1963 *The American Revolution*, Boggs elaborated this (non)relation to contemporary society in terms of “being stateless,” a position occupied by those at perpetual war with the state but also those who might and who have already brought into ex-istence⁷ social forms exterior to and otherwise than those imposed by the state (qtd. in Robinson, “James Boggs” 312; see also *Black Radical’s Notebook* 113).⁸ Elsewhere, read through the twin lenses of automation and cybernation and articulated to the historicity of antiblack domination, such a condition of statelessness and its politicization is further specified:

Outcasts, castaways, and castoffs, they are without any future except that which Black Power can create for them. Automation and cybernation have made these blacks expendable to the economy, but they have also liberated blacks for the first time in their history on this continent from the necessity to work on behalf of white development. After the Civil War blacks were legally free, but they could be re-enslaved because they were still economically necessary as agricultural, domestic, and industrial servants

⁷ I hyphenate “ex-istence” to signify that the social form of “being stateless” or “stateless being” elaborated by Boggs ineluctably places the dominant protocols of existence under erasure insofar as the Latin *–sistere* (to cause to stand) is precisely that which is refused in Boggs’s account. That is, drawing on a formulation from the literary and cultural historian Bryan Wagner that is remarkably similar to Boggs’s, “blackness indicates... existence without standing in the modern world” (*Disturbing the Peace* 1). Cut from *sistere*, then, *ex-* no longer calls “forth” standing, but designates a position “without” standing or, more exactly, marks a withdrawal “from” and an outlaw movement “out of” standing. All quoted phrases are various meanings of the prefix *ex* found in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

⁸ For a compelling study of Boggs’s account of, and proleptic interventions into, postindustrialism, post-fordism, and their critiques in the sociological literature, see Johnson, “James Boggs, ‘the Outsiders,’ and the Challenge of Postindustrial Society.” For a very idiosyncratic mention of Boggs’s understanding of cybernation qua cybernetics by a media studies scholar (the only one of which I am aware), see English, “African Influences in Cybernetics.”

in the tasks disdained by whites. In the present period, however, legal recognition of the civil rights of blacks has coincided with the separation of blacks from their traditional relationship to the economy. Pushed out of the system by the system itself, they have become outlaws, at war with all the values and legalities of white America. (*Black Revolutionary Party* 208)

In Boggs's text, the name *technology*, specifically in its cybernetic mode and in the shadows of an internally contradictory civil right, precipitates an engagement with the politics and the ontology of ex-istence announced by that form of life he nominates the outlaw. It compels for him the diagnosis of a hidden war that has been ongoing, but also a speculative elucidation of the political, cultural, and epistemological relationships necessary for the production of new social forms and, moreover, of a new society. Indeed, this consideration of the question of technology opens onto a figuration of black freedom based upon a reading of the politics and the problem of exteriority, one fundamentally antagonistic to McLuhan's rendering of media and of man as the reincarnated and extended form of the captor.

The (missed) encounter between McLuhan and Boggs brings into relief the forces of black thought and/as the thought of blackness, as well as their concerted unthinking, that dislocate and relocate the intellectual foundations and political destinations of discourses of media technology in twentieth-century U.S. modernity. In the first instance, this encounter alerts us to a willed unthinking of the material trace of racial captivity and the terroristic unfolding of its *longue durée* that endures in and through what is perhaps the most deeply institutionalized and widely circulated understanding of media technology. But also, and more crucially, it gleans an "unthought"⁹ terrain from which

⁹ The terrain of the unthought is given by Saidiya Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson in "The Position of the Unthought" 184-5.

the general problematics of media and technicity have been differentially established, addressed, disfigured, transformed, and re-invented; it informs us, that is, toward an *already existing* strain or tradition of thought that nevertheless remains unthought by the operations of media study's disciplinary institutionalization, one that (it will be argued) interrupts the institutional protocols of our present. This double, though profoundly asymmetrical, unthinking raises a set of questions at once philosophical, historical, and meta-disciplinary in their orientation: What would it mean to think media and technology, including the history of media theory, through the formative prism of racial slavery and its afterlives? How would attending to the constitutive forces of blackness and antiblackness in U.S. modernity provoke a fundamental rethinking of media theories and their "proper" archival locations and political affordances? And to what extent might such an attention reveal anew radical praxes and philosophies of mediation and technicity? That is to say, what would it be to *begin* the study of media and technicity from those philosophies and praxes that seek and convene release from the grips of that mode of terror, (un)freedom, and Being that McLuhan and— in a vastly different idiom and to vastly different ends— Sylvia Wynter have both referenced through the mononym Man?

1.2 RACIAL TECHNICS

Racial Technics: Media and Machines in the Long Civil Rights Era takes these questions as its point of departure to examine how competing conceptions of humanity and human freedom have been articulated at the nexus of racial blackness and technicity. Attending to twentieth and twenty-first century public cultures, media practices, and

diverse domains of intellectual history, this dissertation centrally ushers two distinct but related claims. First, discourses of racial blackness and of the human-machine relationship have been mutually constitutive within the U.S. cultural imaginary and within twentieth-century transatlantic thought. This proximity between technics and race, I show, has been alternatively resolving and unsettling to national discourses, state practices, and media cultures predicated on black dispossession. In advancing this claim, I pursue race as a contradictory site for the organization of social knowledge about media, technology, and the human both within and beyond the political terrain of U.S. modernity. While studies of race and technology have often centered on media technologies as *tools* for the production of racial representations, I alternatively trace the reciprocal circuits of racial knowledge through which the very meanings of the tool and its cognates—as instrument, as prosthesis, as technê, as the other than human—have been consolidated, secured, and disrupted. In so doing, I demonstrate how media technics— as conceptual figure, as material and discursive resource, and as terrain of social struggle— instantiate one particularly pervasive and contested field that discloses the regimes of power through which race and (the afterlife of) racial captivity institute and order the world.

Accordingly, the second major argument of this dissertation is that, during the twentieth century, a heterogeneous cohort of black diasporic and African American cultural workers seized upon the question of technology as fertile terrain for interrogating and re-imagining the question of the human beyond the horizon of the human-machine distinction and the topographies of racial humanism in which this distinction is embedded. Reading twentieth-century black freedom struggles both with and against

contemporaneous upheavals in the cultures of mediation, I situate the theoretical excursions and case studies that comprise this dissertation's core in the extended period that historians Nikhil Pal Singh and Jacqueline Dowd Hall have each hailed *the long civil rights era*. For Singh, "the long civil rights era" refers to the emergence and persistence of "traditions of black dissidence" (*Black is a Country* 2) whose complex inter-articulations and "unfinished" reverberations have been foreclosed by a state narrative of the years 1955-1965 that resolves in the racial mythologies of U.S. American liberalism, and I redeploy the phrase here less to denote a definitive periodization than a guiding heuristic that indexes overlapping and contiguous traditions waged in the interface between struggle and invention. Each chapter of *Racial Technics* therefore proceeds with double-vision, excavating the deployment of media technologies on behalf of the administration of black life and its violent condensation with nonhumanity, alongside others that theorized, radicalized, and fundamentally re-routed the transactions between race and technicity in writing and re-writing modernity's "ontological statement" (da Silva, *Toward* xiv) on the contours of human being.

This expansive constellation of discourses and practices is best understood through the framework of what I call *racial technics*, which I wield both as a conceptual pair and as an analytic category. By racial technics, I refer to the ways in which contestations over the status of technology— as, paradoxically, an extension of and a threat to liberal visions of self-sovereignty— are constitutive to the contradictions of racial formation and attendant mediations of the human itself. In particular, the conceptual unit *racial technics* highlights how the emergence and persistent regulation of protocols of "the human"— understood as an autonomous, self-posessed, and

proprietary unity—cohere through a political and discursive economy of *use* that finds its staunchest metaphysical articulation as the distinction between Being and being-for. What Judith Butler has described as the post-Kantian “moral charge...that humans only use instruments but are themselves never instrumentalized” (“Figural Dispute” xviii) illustrates a prohibition on human instrumentality that grounds the distinction between humans and technics, tool-users and tools, as it signals the primary repression upon which the birth and survival of this particularly brutal and contradictory incarnation of humanity depends. Put differently, the cut inscribed by and as “the human” obscures the historicity and structurality of this positivity’s own engendering; it “*misperceives*,” as Hortense Spillers has written in a distinct context, “the conditions of its own production” (“Idea” 21, emphasis hers). Here what is misperceived is the field of force-relations through which this human enunciates and enacts the terms of its (self-)authorization vis-à-vis the constitution of, and its possession over, the instrument. In this context of the human and the instrument’s (mis)naming, my dissertation argues such a misperception foremost indexes a collective disavowal of the murderous dreamwork, depreciation, and violation that have facilitated the diacritical elaboration of each term within the racial calculus of U.S. modernity.

In *Racial Technics*, I thus contend that the formations of property, propriety, and the proper that scaffold this liberal architecture of the human and that accumulate through (t)his wanton right to use constitute, in the last instance, the present-trace of the world (un)making violence of racial chattel slavery and of what Saidiya Hartman has influentially theorized as slavery’s afterlife, its haunting structuration and (dis)possession of the present. The trace of antiblack desire and white prerogative that suffuse the

conceptual margins of instrumentality and its next of kin, technics, suggest that racial slavery and the unfinished project of abolition (“we are still looking for an exit from the prison,” writes Hartman [*Lose* 133]) inevitably inform, and place considerable pressure upon, the key philosophemes, archives, and procedures that limn the theory and history of media technology. It is hence my contention that the conjugation between figurations of blackness and technicity is inextricable from racial modernity’s invention of the human. In my study of intellectual production and social practices, moreover, I find that it is also precisely at this oft-overlooked intersection that a set of black radical experiments in the *reinvention of the human* have been strikingly envisioned and decisively advanced. As an analytic category, then, “racial technics” seeks not simply to mark a pivotal doubling that characterizes the organization of U.S. modernity but to ask *how* “race” and “technics” have gained meaning in relation to one another; how this relation directly bears on an array of philosophical conflicts and political antagonisms (over the practice of freedom, over forms of relation, over consolidation of the nation-form, over the futures of the human); and how these categories themselves have been unfixed and transformed through the subterranean trajectories of their articulation.

My understanding of the question concerning technology as necessarily a question concerning race is given focus by Hortense Spillers’ tremendous observation that “slavery’s critical agency in Western self-conceptualization...is nothing short of foundational” (“Peter’s” 17). In her ground-clearing essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Spillers tracks how a regime of terror that founds and crystallizes the New World order— a relation “written in blood”— is intimately linked to particular technologies of inscription, namely the ritual “woundings, fissures,

tears, scars, openings, ruptures, lesions, rendings, punctures of the flesh.” The constituent accumulation and mutilation of the captive body that initiates U.S. modernity and is repeated continually as its condition of persistence, Spillers demonstrates, compounds a caesura between the putatively organic form of the self-possessed person and the exposable and disposable flesh of the captive, who, “reduce[d] to a thing... *being for* the captor,” provides the enabling foundation of the incorporated body of the free human being (67, emphasis hers). This deliberate *opening* of black flesh inaugurates “the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation” that ground “the ruling episteme” and its still-unfolding variations of endurance (68). Such metaphors— and the un/humaning procedures of “total objectification” that they at once index and enact— form what Spillers calls “a hieroglyphics of the flesh,” a writing of (un)freedom through the instruments of marking, branding, *and* their “various *symbolic substitutions*” that is impressed upon black flesh as its primary medium (68, 67, emphasis hers). By outlining how racial slavery’s “scene[s] of *actual* mutilation, dismemberment, and exile” (67) continue to cohere through repetition as a hieroglyphic of violation and negation by which blackness obtains an essential and privileged relation to inscription, Spillers directs us toward the materialities of the graphic mark, its reproduction, and its transmission that co-constitute the field of racialization. In so doing, she addresses how these techniques that (un)make the “divided flesh” (68) in irreducible difference to the body of the “liberated subject” (67) condition and subtend— but do not determine— the very horizon of anthropogenesis, the birth of the modern(’s) human.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, the relationship between the human and technics has been most clearly spoken by the exigencies of racial domination and its metaphysical

apparatus when this relation has been posed as one of pure opposition. In the history of ideas, the *autonomy* of the cogito's self-generating capacity for *spontaneous* thought stands in marked contrast both to the tool, which actualizes its capacities only when it is implemented and put to use by humans, and to the *automaticity* of the machine, which, programmed for mere *reaction* rather than proper *response*, has figured a prominent metonym of stupidity and, in some cases, the failure of response-ability and thus very sign of radical evil. The philosopher of technology Bernard Stiegler, in the opening of the first volume of his trilogy *Technics and Time*, succinctly ascertains this founding gesture that grounds the human/technics difference in terms of the belief that "[n]o form of 'self-causality' animates technical beings" (1). Stiegler's diagnosis makes clear the figural function of technicity in dominant constructions of the human that posits its singular capacity for autonomous freedom, self-production, and self-organization qua organic being. But despite the deconstructive impulse that underpins his outline of the co-constitution of humans and technologies (which he describes as a "maieutics" through which the "who" and the "what" call forth one another), Stiegler's project nevertheless remains tethered to a particularly ethnocentric and transparent conceptualization of "the human," one somehow uninformed by the procedures of racial, sexual, or colonial difference that secure its institution. And yet, as Alexander Weheliye observed in a brilliantly polemical essay more than a decade ago, "the erasure of race severely limits how we conceive of the complex interplay between 'humans' and... technologies" ("Feenin" 22). *Racial Technics* responds to Weheliye's polemic and his implicit call to intervene in this characteristic and persistent inattention to histories of racialization and critical theories of racial blackness in particular within the philosophy of media technics

through a theoretical centering of the field's troubled and troubling conditions of possibility.

Advancing a genealogical critique of these disavowed lineages, it is hence my argument that within the scene of western modernity iconographies and valuations of technics have been foundationally entwined with the workings of what ethicist Denise Ferreira da Silva dubs *raciality*. Da Silva defines raciality as “the strategies of productive *nomos* in the delimitation of the place of the transparent I,” European Man, wherein those “others of Europe” who are deemed affectable— “effect[s] of exterior determination”— stand as and at the limits of the human, “always already before the horizon of death” (*Toward* 262, xxxvii, 26). In the pages that follow, I trace how these constitutive oppositions between self-causation and mediation, transparency and exterior determination, autonomous personhood and captivity, profoundly weave together the racial with the technological imagination, while simultaneously bringing each to crisis. My aim is not to make continuous the structuring imperatives that guide the Black/Man¹⁰ and human/technics distinctions, or to profess anything like an equivalence between their

¹⁰ In her far-reaching genealogical and philosophical investigations, Sylvia Wynter argues that the onto-epistemological category “Man” emerges and is secured through the irreducible negation of the Black. This elaboration of Man against his human others begins at least with the Portuguese slave-trade in 1441. She stresses, moreover, that the enslaved/enlavable black is established as the negative foundation of not only European Man’s “descriptive statement” but also as that which makes possible a “consppecificity” between Man and *all other* non-black populations in the wake of the 1550-1 Valladolid debates between Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda and Bartolomé de las Casas (which on the question of African enslavability, she observes, was in fact a *non-debate*). Wynter writes, “As the liminal category whose mode of excluded *difference*, based on the hereditary slave status of its members as *the only legitimately enslavable* population group, they would also generate the principle of similarity or of conspecificity that would come to bond, if on the terms of sharply unequal relations, the incoming Spanish settlers with the indigenous peoples” (“1492” 12, emphases in original). For Wynter, “Man” ultimately names one particular *claim* to the human authorized by the metaphysical violence and epistemic regime of racial slavery, but is nonetheless irreducible to the form and possibility of the human as such. I provide an extended reading of one strand of Wynter’s oeuvre in Chapter 3.

ethical and political stakes, but rather to ask how attending to their peculiar entanglements and alignments reframe the genealogical conditions of each pair's discursive coherence while opening onto other histories and technologies of freedom's enactment beyond racial slavery's hold on the ontological conception of human being.

Although I thus chart raciality's inscription in technics insofar as this amalgam has served to cleave a certain configuration of the human from its conceptual others, I contend that the twentieth-century career of racial technics has been organized not only through relations of pure opposition but also ideologies of integration, fantasies of proximity, and protocols of recognition and mutual constitution that give cover to the pernicious contortions and dispensations of antiblackness. Tracking these complex articulations means, methodologically, bridging analyses of select intellectual, political, and media histories with close readings of the figurative language that congregates in the lacuna between racial blackness and media technology through a host of watchwords such as mechanism, repetition, exteriority, opacity, and self-organization. This emphasis on the politics and practice of figuration stems from my conviction that is in this realm that the (im)possibilities of existence are most acutely sedimented but also “desedimented,” resolved but also brought to crisis.¹¹ Against a re-entrenched positivism that would demarcate the field of technicity from the machinations of rhetoricity, the turn of trope, and the mediating activity of cultural grammars (a reversal rather than a

¹¹ The concept-metaphor “desedimented” is Nahum Chander's (*X* 15).

deconstruction of the ancient privileging of *epistêmê* over *technê*),¹² I insist that rhetorical *devices* can serve and have served as technologies that participate in the institution of the very field of the human (Chapter 2) and that the mediatic rhetorics of bio-graphy and liveness, for example, must be understood in a strong sense as bio-technologies that have sought to secure and protect the *property* of life per the racial mandates of possessive individualism and, alternatively, have been wielded with the aspiration of deadening entire populations (Chapter 4). More pressingly, as Dionne Brand suggests in this Introduction's epigraph, the transmographication of the captive into tool and extension of the captor's dominium necessarily brings into relief the vast repertoire

¹² In "The Question Concerning Technology," Martin Heidegger would notably seek to retrieve the rich rapport between *technê* (craft), *epistêmê* (knowledge), and *poiêsis* (bringing-forth) against their philosophical disarticulation, an unthinking which he aligned with the apotheosis of the Cartesian subject/object, *res cogitans/res extensa* distinction: a drive toward domination and calculability bespoken by technics in their "modern" form. Recalling that "[t]here was a time when it was not technology alone that bore the name *technê*" (34), Heidegger set out to reanimate the connection between *technê* and *poiêsis* as a mode of unconcealment that "brings forth" Being, thereby famously asserting that "the essence of technology is by no means anything technological" (4). Yet if this assertion once led critics such as Jacques Derrida (*Spirit*) and Avital Ronell (*Telephone*) to argue that a desire for ontological *decontamination* animated Heidegger's effort to protect the thought of technology's essence from ontic technics, one might argue that today we witness a distinct but structurally analogous dream of decontamination that undergirds certain (post)critical efforts to distinguish firmly between *technics* and *technology*, between technics as concrete ground and technology as its non-essential figure.

The suffix "-ology" subjects technics to the mediations of study, discourse, historicity, knowledge, power, desire, rhetoric, and figuration. Techn-ology displaces the concrete givenness of technics authorized under the (misnamed) sign of "materiality" (which, as Jonathan Beller has so rightly noted, is today often invoked on behalf of a politically, ethically, *and* theoretically anemic "deracinated materialism," one that "strains to separate the insights regarding the material-technical articulation of cultural form from the fundamental historical antagonisms that inform knowledge practices: race, class, gender, nation, colonialism, capitalism, imperialism" ["Capitalism without the Dialectic" 37]). But I would insist that it is precisely a displacement and contamination of the proper ground that the problematic of technics already brings forth. In other words, technics and the figural are always and already fused to one another insofar as both are fused to an entire tropology that announces their distance from— and their *de-naturing* of— the essential, the organic, and the proper. This is the great irony of some recent misguided attempts to ground media theory against those "studies" concerned with culture and the politics of figuration through a disciplinary appeal to the concrete and solid ground of technical materials. Although I do not take up these debates explicitly in this dissertation, I emphasize here that the technics/technology distinction is undecidable, and it is hence not one that I seek to observe rigorously in this project.

of projections, fantasies, and desires that support and sustain white existence. So while the signature of white life under global white supremacy may very well be its singular capacity *to actualize and materialize* fantasy¹³ in the mode of terror (white projection is a projectile that aims to capture), our approach to the itineraries and permutations of the tool and its cognates must exceed the referential lure of physical substrates or the concreteness of materials and instead map— via their figural drifts— the political, psychic, and metaphysical labors to which those who Brand names “the tools” have been conscripted. More still, then, *Racial Technics* tracks the variegated effects of the convergence hailed by my titular figure to the realms of intellectual and political struggle, cultural and imaginative practice, because it is foremost in these arenas, I submit, where alternative, antagonistic, and affirmative figurations of race, technics, and the human have been most incisively engendered and collectively projected toward the possibility of otherwise futures.

Over the course of three chapters, I ground this argument in case studies that elaborate the entanglements of raciality, black radical thought, and the technological imagination across three moments: automation, cybernetics, and electronic media. Each chapter pairs readings of the haunting, if inchoate, status of racial blackness in canonical transatlantic theories of technology with cultural and historical studies that uncover the role of technological discourses in both imagining and managing black freedom struggles in the twentieth-century United States. This encounter leads me in the pages that follow to consider anew several traditional sites of media-theoretical investigation including well-established media apparati (e.g., television) as well as analytic apparati developed

¹³ See Marriott, *On Black Men* 11.

within history of media (e.g., cybernetic systems). But it also compels me to test the limits of the media concept and ask how the problematic of “medium,” both explicitly and implicitly, has served as a critical compass in orienting the form and function of less obviously mediatic imaginaries and technical institutions central to the architectural scaffolding of our modernity (e.g., the color line and the prison). Although this undertaking is ineluctably interdisciplinary in its theoretical shape and its fields of articulation, while writing this dissertation it became clear that much of my polemical energy (perhaps through virtue of my own institutional location) was directed toward provincializing certain axiomatic claims within the discipline of media studies. While each of my chapters looks backward to map a more dialectical image of the relationship between media technics and the afterlives of racial slavery than previously pictured, each case study is also inflected by, and doubles as, a consideration of the covert operations of (racial) blackness within prominent variants of contemporary media theory: deconstructive, systems-theoretical, marxist, and archaeological. The ambition of my engagement with these perspectives is offered as neither an endorsement nor a simple condemnation, nor as a systematic study of their foundational claims. Rather, I am interested in the theoretical and political conditions— the erasures and the abstractive points of departure— through which these diverse knowledges regarding the interrelation between media technics and the human have cohered across popular and academic locations.

Through this interruption of the field imaginary, however, it also my hope to *de-provincialize* the object(s) of media studies by differentially inscribing and re-situating some of its key concepts, frameworks, and histories, that is, by producing a shift in the

field's discursive terrain.¹⁴ The capacity of media studies to address and to be addressed by cultural workers from other arenas acting on and against the urgent problems of our contemporary, I am convinced, depends precisely upon our willingness to critique, and to depart from, the reified objects, naturalized categories, and insular archives that we too often (re)circulate. To be sure, my methodological gesture of moving beyond media studies— of turning to knowledges that have hitherto been illegible to the field— in an effort to return differently to problematics of media and technology is not without its political risks. This is especially the case within the material configuration of an academic industrial complex that increasingly administers and disciplines both knowledge and labor through a certain institutionally-sanctioned and institutionally-celebrated rendering of media that today often traffics under the name of “the digital.” Indeed, in this methodological précis, the reader may hear echoes of the now familiar proclamation made by some disciplinary imperialists, in their apparent discovery that “everything (bodies, the biosphere, rocks, etc.) is a medium!,” that everything already is— or should be— media studies. While acknowledging the necessarily fraught nature of my endeavor, my response is that this dissertation is not primarily offered as an effort

¹⁴ On articulation and reinscription as reading practices through which it becomes possible for knowledge formations to “critically interrupt” one another, see Spivak, “Practical Politics of the Open End” 67. On “the field imaginary” as “the field’s fundamental syntax— its tactic assumptions, convictions, primal words, and the charged relations bringing them together,” see Pease, “New Americanists” 11. Pease’s generative notion of the field imaginary shares a family resemblance with the concept of the problematic. On the “shift in terrain” as the “violent, deliberate, and politically motivated” effect of a reading that “produces ‘discontinuity,’ an irreducible gap between problematics,” see Rooney, “Better Read than Dead” 198. A “shift in discursive terrain” should hence be heard here as my attempt to produce a discontinuity in the field’s problematic, one that subjects the field imaginary to the critical pressures of what Pease, writing with Wiegman, has elsewhere dubbed (following Cornelius Castoriadis) “the radical imaginary,” which “activates the knowledge of the historicity that the field-imaginary has disavowed” and, in so doing, “open[s] spaces for the emergence of futures that do not reproduce the field’s contours and that cannot be reduced to its [present] categories” (“Futures” 22).

to expand the reach of media studies, nor is it really offered as a “corrective” to the field as such. Rather, by considering anew a set of cultural workers as insurgent theorists of media and the technological condition, I trace the movements of blackness and antiblackness that suffuse the “fields” of media and technicity in their modes of conceptual actualization in ways that do not simply “expand” but deeply unsettle the very premises that underwrite these terms and, with them, modernity’s constitution of “the human” itself. To do so, I argue that it is essential we bring together heterogeneous archives and bodies of thought concerned with “the invention of the human”—ones that have been left unarticulated, as Stuart Hall might say, due to the methodological norms and the periodizing impulses of dominant (inter)disciplinary protocols.

In the following chapter, ““John Henry was born with a hammer in his hand,”” I begin this project of articulation by examining the discursive labor of racial blackness in negotiating U.S. anxieties over the threat of mechanization. I focus on the emergence of the racialized figure of mechanical repetition as a synecdoche for the threat of the machine to national vitality even as this metaphor was precariously incorporated into ideals of national progress. To elaborate this contradictory movement, I turn to the mass circulation of the African American folktale of John Henry, a nineteenth-century steel-driver and captive of the convict-prison lease system who died while racing a steam drill. Charting Henry’s resurrection across popular culture and media, I show that the activation of Henry as a national allegory of the human’s (masculine) triumph over the machine served to dissimulate the iconography of black death upon which the folktale—and, indeed, the dominant vision of the human—depended. The chapter argues that by following John Henry’s circulations against the grain we find a countersignature to the

history and philosophy of technology that links the abolitionist theft of freedom to the insurgent interruption of (white) sovereignty. This countersignature provokes another thinking of “extension,” one that does not proceed by extending the subject’s dominium over objects but rather breaks open and extends outward, like the hand, toward others.

Chapter 3, “The Closed World and the Open Society,” builds on this discussion of the racialization of machinery as critical to the machinery of racialization, but does so by emphasizing the coincidence between post-war cybernetic pursuits of human-machine integration and liberal pursuits of black-white integration. While the critical literature on cybernetics has situated the birth of the cybernetic science of relationships within the political culture of the Cold War period—with paranoia emerging as its exemplary affect—these studies have been less attuned to how the reparative ambitions of a hegemonic racial liberalism also textured this dense imbrication. This chapter thus reorients the critical historiography of cybernetics by considering the under-explored operations of racial reconciliation and antiblackness in early cybernetic thought, demonstrating how cyberneticians (Wiener, Rashevsky, Deutsch) sought to reframe the color line as a liberal democratic communications medium. I then move to consider how cybernetic models of communication have been radically leveraged and détourned within the oeuvre of Caribbean philosopher Sylvia Wynter. Through Wynter, I ask how the arsenal of race that at once scaffolds and haunts this knowledge formation leads us toward a reconceptualization of the otherwise resources of cybernetics found not in the cybernetic black box but in a certain black radical tradition.

In Chapter 4, “Fugitive Signals,” I move from early cybernetics to broadcast television, charting the imbrication of broadcast TV and the expanding U.S. prison/neo-slave regime in the early 1970s. Highlighting the constitutive twinning of neoliberal and carceral formations through the lens of media ideologies and practices during the formative moment of the neoliberal period, I historicize and theorize the concurrent rise of in-cell television inside U.S. prisons with the decline of print-based disciplinary techniques such as bibliotherapy that had once aimed to resurrect the souls of those condemned to the legal fiction of civil death. Recalibrating television studies of “liveness” and media theories of a post-Fordist economy that pivot upon the expropriation of “life itself” as “free labor” through George Jackson’s writings on televisuality and anti-black violence, I place the prison and its reanimation of the originary violation of blackness at the center of media governmentality in order to adumbrate the racial political and cultural economies of television, its socialization of (prison) time, and its attempts at the capture of what I dub fugitive signals. In so doing, this chapter traces how media technics have been variously activated both for and against the racial mediations of punishment and their metaphysical inscriptions of life and death.

Taken together, *Racial Technics* draws new lines of contact between comparative media theory, Black Studies, the philosophy of technology, U.S. American Studies, and Critical Ethnic Studies. In so doing, it assembles an archive of black intellectual, media, and cultural production that provides new platforms for thinking the question concerning technology beyond the protocols of racial humanism as well as recent posthumanisms. Setting to work the heuristic of racial technics as an analytic bridge that links heterogeneous cultural sites, intellectual histories, and media forms, I ultimately re-

conceptualize technicity as a vexed and overdetermined resource that pervades and perforates multiple, often incommensurate, genealogies and imaginations of black freedom.

CHAPTER TWO

“JOHN HENRY WAS BORN WITH A HAMMER IN HIS HAND”: RACIAL BLACKNESS AND ORIGINARY TECHNICITY

Although no longer the extension and instrument of the master's right or dominion, the laboring black body remained a medium of others' power and representation.

—Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*

I, the man of color, want only this: That the tool never possess the man.

—Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

Can we offer a history of revolting hands?

—Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*

Within the early pages of Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days* (2001), the reader is made to bear witness to the fin-de-siècle resurrection of the novel's namesake more than a century after his alleged burial: "American Folk Hero Comes to Life in Stamp Series" (16). The announcement of this less than spectacular scene of reanimation, cribbed from a U.S. Postal Service press release, follows closely after the introduction of the novel's protagonist and occasional narrator, J. Sutter. J. is a young black free-lancer from New York sent to Talcott, West Virginia to cover a celebration of the John Henry commemorative stamp's unveiling. He is witty, hard-edged, and embattled in a race to write back-to-back press "junkets" each day for a year, "kept abreast of the latest advances in information technology" (54). He also knows that "the South will kill you," its residents "liable to eat [him]" alive (15, 14).

While J. cranks out press junkets from the belly of the post-industrial service economy— indeed, at the precipice of a post-postal economy marked by the nascent arrival of what he prefers to call "the Information Superhighway" (185)— John Henry's immortalization at the moment of the U.S.P.S.'s impugned decline remembers a different transformation in the mode of production and, in fact, a different highway altogether. John Henry was a former slave and steel-driver— according to recent historical accounts a captive of the convict-lease system— tasked with tapping coal reserves and blasting mountains for the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway during Reconstruction. "Born with a hammer right in his hand," the folk legend and work song recalls, Henry's signature and originary prosthesis would anticipate his eventual death at the hand of another technological prosthesis. In the novel's retelling, when a new steam-powered drill arrives that threatens to make him and his fellow black steel-drivers obsolete, Henry challenges

the steam drill to a race at Big Bend Tunnel. While Henry the human triumphs over steam drill the machine, ensuring his fame and continual reactivation within the political memory of U.S. labor movements,¹⁵ this immortal iconicity is achieved at the expense of his own mortality: upon beating the machine, Henry dropped dead on the scene. In *John Henry Days*, it is Henry's availability to violent death that forms the condition of his emergence in the institutional archive of the nation-state and its trade in his circulation. Moreover, it is this finitude that confirms "John Henry" as the territory of national prosopopoeia, as the principle cipher through which both the face of "America" and the identity of the American person are articulated and rehearsed. As poet and essayist Sterling Brown tellingly suggested in 1930 in the pages of *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*, "To the more 'philosophical' [Henry] served as a tragic symbol of Man in his losing fight against the Machine" ("Never No" 382). Yet between these imbricated dramas of humanity and technology, between the finitude of the flesh and the infinitude of national meaning parasitic on this flesh, what does it mean that this death provides the occasion for a grammar of the human against the menace of the machine, indeed provides the very occasion for a weekend celebration? As J. concludes as he looks around the overwhelmingly white room at the opening dinner for the John Henry Days commemoration, "They know how to watch a nigger die" (79).

John Henry Days is a novel preoccupied with the constitutive and repeated loss that accompanies the incorporation of an exteriority that cannot be incorporated. It attends to the conjoined histories of mass disposability and mass dissemination that render figurable the black icon—and the proper name it wields—as well as the crises of

¹⁵ For an account of the Ballad of John Henry as "the definitive folk song of the American working-class" and thus also a contested site of interracial labor solidarity, see Lipsitz, *Time Passages* 109-16.

personhood this icon authors. In *John Henry Days*, this crisis takes the form of an absence or, more precisely, an anamorphosis of historical biography marked paradoxically through the repetition compulsion toward black presence within “the dominative mode” (Spillers, “Interstices” 157), in which the imposition of a state-sanctioned presence that seeks the transparency of the originary (and irretrievable) subject can appear only in the aftermath of a perpetual displacement. In this chapter, I read Whitehead’s novel as a critical meditation on the preeminent role of racial blackness in configuring and interrupting U.S. discourses of autonomy and automation, machinery and humanity. Asking how, for Whitehead, John Henry at once exceeds and intercedes the racialized architectures of authenticity and autochthony that govern dominant elaborations of the modern human, I redeploy the novel’s methodological energies to trace the dissemination of the name “John Henry” across popular culture, folk historiography, and animated film. Focusing on the effaced conditions of criminality, captivity, and maternity that fall away in Henry’s articulation to the project of racial democracy, I argue Henry’s hand and his hammer provide a counter-signature to received understandings of technology, one that announces the machine’s constitutive and contradictory entanglements with blackness, racialization, and reproduction.

2.1 REANIMATING THE MACHINE

It is a story that cannot be told; a story that in not telling must tell itself... The story that cannot be told must not-tell itself in a language already contaminated, possibly irrevocably and fatally.
 —M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*

In Talcott, J. is confronted with the deadly collaboration between presence and annihilation when John Henry achieves valorization through a discourse of national

exclusion/inclusion that displaces, precisely by administering, a discourse of racial fungibility.¹⁶ When Parker Smith, a representative from the Post Office, takes the podium, he laments:

Part of what we at the Post office hope to achieve by our issue of the Folk Heroes commemorative is to create awareness of the trials of men like John Henry, to invite Americans to walk in their shoes. That each time they use one of our Folk Heroes stamps, they think about the men who died to get us where we are today... John Henry was an Afro-American, born into slavery and freed by Mr. Lincoln's famous proclamation. But more importantly, he was an American. He helped build this nation into what it is today, and his great competition with the steam drill is a testament to the strength of the human spirit. (66)

In Smith's address, the progressive amputation of "Afro" and its sublimation into the generic "American" announces the post factum integration of the black male laboring subject— and this subject's status as laborer and male are not incidental— into the purview of the nation. In the sentimental terms offered by Smith, "spirit," enunciated as the mark of a generic humanness but whose nationalized inscription betrays its (political) theological trace, is confirmed only when severed from the time of life; it returns and garners value only in the afterlife, in Henry's resurrection as citizen-saint. Smith's paramnesic narrative is also one echoed in the press packet for the John Henry Days celebration: "The C&O railroad provided a great opportunity for slaves freed by Mr. Lincoln's Proclamation" (233). It names formal emancipation as a direct outcome of "Mr. Lincoln's" linguistic utterance, and in so doing tethers abstract citizenship to a decorporealized speech act that telegraphs the (legal) fiction of chattel slavery's end, and

¹⁶ Saidiya Hartman has theorized the logic of fungibility in contradistinction to both the logic of exploitation and the logic of inclusionary recognition and redress: "the fungibility of the slave... makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the project of others' feelings, ideas, desires, and values" (*Scenes* 21).

thus the unproblematic generalizability of “the person,” under the aegis of the white executive voice.

Within this suture of nation-state belonging to the idealization of human value and community, the name “John Henry” figures the connective tissue as he becomes available to what visual theorist Nicole Fleetwood has called the “limitless mobility” of the black icon. According to Fleetwood, black iconicity traffics through the paradox of referential lure and mythological abstraction. On the one hand, the icon, following Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotic trichotomy, functions as a “‘diagrammatic sign’ that ‘exhibits a similarity or analogy to the subject of discourse’” (*Troubling* 33). The icon issues a declaration of correspondence between sign and referent, a signifying procedure that functions to condense the singular, the authentic, and the exceptional. But if the iconic sign often works in service of “narratives of exceptionalism” (47) that designate the singular individual as proxy for the universal, the icon’s contractual structure of analogy simultaneously allows for its boundless circulation and its availability for appropriation and expropriation by multiple, often incommensurate, ideological projects, “carrying both the weight of historical narrative and a decontextualized vague strain of its pastness” (37).¹⁷ This dual operation of exceptionalism and abstraction accompanies the iconization of John Henry in Whitehead’s novel, for at every turn John Henry, quite simply, is made *to mean*. He proliferates; he is constantly invoked, reanimated, resurrected, annexed as the simulation of the (super)human par exemplar. While “John Henry” stands to issue the decisive positive content of the human, this name—through its dispersion, iteration, and

¹⁷ The trappings of the analogical, specifically the perceived contract between technological mobility and racial mobility in the idiom of uplift, are also the centerpiece of Whitehead’s first novel, *The Intuitionist* (1999), which focuses its allegorical energies on the vertical form of the elevator.

entanglement in a mode of circulation that evinces, at the very least, a fundamental non-proprietary—also marks the point of the human’s most resolute dissolution. In *John Henry Days*, this unstable transitivity signals an attenuation of the black proper name at the very moment of insistence on the unity of its referent; it signals, that is, how blackness places the proper (name) under erasure, which is related to but ultimately distinct from an erasure of blackness.

Something about this distinction goes missing in the critic William Ramsey’s analysis of the novel, when he argues that *John Henry Days*’ refusal to recuperate a coherent counter-narrative of Henry to the one activated by the U.S. state marks a significant departure from an African American literary politics spanning at least from the Harlem Renaissance to the work of Toni Morrison. Whereas *Song of Solomon* (Ramsey’s primary source of comparison) writes into existence a black historical presence against the white supremacist erasure of black existence and black life— a generative repertoire of folklore, intergenerational knowledge, and communal practices of resistance to urban capitalism all set forth from the biography of Milkman Dead— *John Henry Days* installs instead what Ramsey diagnoses as a “metaphysics of absence” (“End” 780).¹⁸ In every attempt to reconstitute the event of John Henry to a name, to *the name* John Henry, he is ineluctably lost in “the post,” and, in Ramsey’s estimation, particularly in the “postmodern” (771) proliferation of micronarratives. For Ramsey, Whitehead has simply let Henry go postal. Much of the critical reception of *John Henry Days* has privileged such a reading, contending that the novel’s metafictional and

¹⁸ On community as an antagonistic force to industrial capitalism in *Song of Solomon*, see Willis, *Specifying* 12-13. See also Madhu Dubey’s important *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism*, which reconstructs the question of presence/absence as a problematic of media and mediation and, specifically, of orality and writing-as-prosthesis as key metaphors of in/authenticity.

intertextual form betrays an obsession with the promiscuity and opacity of the signifier, the inevitable vulnerability of History to varied and contested interpretations. Although I submit that Whitehead foregrounds the dissipation and disappearance of John Henry into the circuits of U.S. civil society and national life, this is less a navel-gazing infatuation with the failure of reference than a reckoning with the conditions of the sayable, the violence of apprehension, and how a certain saying and apprehension that seeks repetition of the story in the present mode reproduces the fatality of its occasion.

While J. provides the frame story for the novel, his hot pursuit of “John Henry” is intercut with a montage of characters that allows for a kaleidoscopic view of Henry’s entangled accretion and effacement across the mediated circuits of the U.S. imaginary. There is Pamela Street, who travels to West Virginia to scatter the ashes of her deceased father, an avid collector of John Henry statues, paintings, figurines, and other “memorabilia...pose[d] in matrydom” (346). There is also Jake Rose, a Jewish immigrant and composer who succeeds in the 1940s in transforming the Ballad into a popular cultural hit by publishing the sheet music after overhearing a nameless and faceless black man “singing that John Henry song” (204) on a New York street, and whose rise to low-level fame at once ambivalently mirrors John Henry and brings into stark relief the limits of efforts to incorporate the subject of post-slavery into a white state mythology of immigrant settlement.¹⁹ In Jake’s chance encounter, the vagrant black male singer designates both the native source of the Ballad and an ever-receding resource who threatens to fade away in the song’s graphic reproduction and the cultural-juridical

¹⁹ My use of the phrase “subject of post-slavery” and my understanding of this subject’s parameters is indebted to Christina Sharpe, who notes “while all modern subjects are post-slavery subjects fully constituted by the discursive codes of slavery and post-slavery, post-slavery subjectivity is largely borne by and readable on the (New World) black subject” (*Monstrous Intimacies* 3).

articulation of white transcription to intellectual property right.²⁰ Laying on the ground having fallen on a snowy night, “[t]he man came up the street singing. Jake never saw his face” (204). Caught off guard, Jake is interrupted by this disembodied voice, heard but never seen, that will catapult him to the bourgeoisie and differentially enshrine his and Henry’s names alike in the novel’s portrait of U.S. mass culture.

For Jake, this is a fortuitous scenario. The encounter *itself* is almost the stuff of folklore. It is indeed one whose radically contingent circumstance echoes the anecdotal and apocryphal conventions that the literary and cultural historian Bryan Wagner, in his *Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power after Slavery*, has observed as paramount to the ethnographic practice of twentieth-century collectors such as Howard W. Odum and Alan Lomax, who narrated their apparent discovery of an authentic yet disappearing black folk culture through happenstance run-ins with “black men who were wandering, or who looked like they had been wandering” (30). Like the amateur Jake Rose, these collectors found the index of the black vernacular for which they were looking in the “social type” of the “ragged songster [who] is not individuated except as a vagrant” (37). As with Thomas Alva Edison’s fabled sighting of George W. Johnson (the first black recording star) whistling on the Hudson River, W.C. Handy’s accidental “discovery” of the blues upon awakening to the sounds of a traveling man at a Mississippi train station, or Guy B. Johnson (who appears in fictionalized form in Whitehead’s novel) and his 1926 statement in *Negro Workaday Songs* on the allegedly inescapable self-referentiality of black work songs in which black people were said to be

²⁰ On intellectual property and competing claims on the properties of black culture in the wake of sound reproduction and shifting technical modalities of sonic inscription, see Gitelman, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines* 124-36.

“at once singers and subjects” of their songs (qtd. in Wagner 248n.4), Jake finds “John Henry” in a scene that necessarily bridges transience with biographical reference. Foremost, Jake locates the origin of the black song in the voice of the vagrant. He attributes an auratic black expressivity to an errant movement and a practice of sonic (re)production untouched by mass communications media and technologies of mechanical reproducibility— a movement and a practice that is embodied, above all, in the sound of vagrancy. In this attribution, Jake, we can say following Wagner, indexes the consolidation of postbellum police statutes and other modalities of state terror that codified *and* criminalized blackness in terms of an outlawed wandering or unsettled, ante-disciplined movement, even as he disavows these legal and extrajudicial determinations by interpreting vagrancy through the signs of individual and cultural property.²¹

Jake’s story formally embeds within the novel a structure of knowledge and desire that seeks out John Henry in the absolutely singular and unrepeatable, in the originary immediacy of reference without deferral or delay. It is a structure that seeks to locate a black humanity untouched by the mediations of (mechanical) reproduction and seeks evidence of the irreducible difference of the human in the singularity of the voice (both as material substance and as a metaphor of personhood). This effort falters, of course, in that

²¹ As Wagner brilliantly argues, through a disavowal of the criminalization of blackness, folklorists worked “to reinvent black tradition as a folk tradition” by making “legal inheritance...discernible as cultural property.” In so doing, they sought “to describe the [black] tradition in *positive terms apart from the law* that is broken whenever black speaking begins” (*Disturbing* 222, 223, 230, emphasis mine). Below I further expound the implications of Wagner’s insight that the ethnographic rendering of the black tradition as a vernacular folk culture at once participates in and effaces the material history of state violence to which this tradition responds. On wandering, see Sarah Jane Cernavek’s recent monograph, which has made this analytic newly available to think the “philosophical performances of racial and sexual freedom” that inhere in practices of the “wayward, nonsensical, unenlightened, and offtrack” (*Wandering* 16).

the retrieval of the voice and of John Henry are only made possible through an intricate network of technologies and machines upon which the “living” history of John Henry is dependent. Jake can only archive and propertize the alleged authenticity of the song through a process of mechanization that subjects it to the possibility and the necessity of reproduction. Thus, while Jake’s anecdote gives face to the Ballad by confirming as its authoring and authorizing sign the union between song and singer, sound and person, the singer’s identity nevertheless dissipates in his movement on the street and in the attendant dispersion of the voice that is redoubled in its re-possession by the composer’s proprietary claim.

To assign retroactively the song to a personality as its possession relies upon a disavowal of the technical mechanisms that sever sound from source and that allow for its re-sounding. But to press the problem this way is to misattribute to a narrowly-defined technological innovation what the singer’s innovation at the level of practice has already put into to play; it is to recapitulate a more fundamental disavowal of the severing of sound from source that takes place even *before* the black singer’s vocalization begins. In other words, I mean to argue that the dis-possessive procedure that might be said to have been inaugurated by Jake’s graphematic (re)production of the singer’s phonic performance must be rigorously understood as only a *compensatory* gesture, one that aims to fix in the unitary property of the singer’s persona what is *already* a reproduction, *already* a repetition.

The singer bears and reproduces the trace of John Henry in the repetition of the work song. He acts as surrogate to and as substitute for Henry also, and more profoundly, in the relation to the state and to the world that his movement on the street elaborates and

moves against. We can only understand this relation of substitution, inheritance, and reproduction when we ask what is dissimulated in the state's allegorical harnessing of technological progress as the sign of the progress of racial democracy. That the vagrant refuses and is refused individuation, as I have noted, indexes the criminalization of black movement, of "his" black movement, a movement that cannot properly be said to be "his" own since it registers the mark of a "[c]riminality," as Wagner incisively writes, that "is prior to individuation" and thus cannot be owned (*Disturbing* 229). This refusal confirms a kinship with Henry that is both embedded in and in excess of the law. Crucially, as film historian Allyson Nadia Field documents building on the work of historian Scott Reynold Nelson, "the real John Henry [was] arrested for theft, tried under the 'black codes' of Virginia in 1866, and sentenced to ten years in the state penitentiary." She continues, "convicts," such as Henry, "leased from the Virginia Penitentiary worked side by side with a steam hammer" (*Uplift Cinema* 132). This persistent threat of enchattelment and forced immobilization undercuts the U.S.P.S.'s mobilization of John Henry through which the modern infrastructure of the railroad is articulated to post-emancipation formations of democratic mobility.²² As Field indeed alludes, in the immediate afterlife of racial slavery, John Henry was placed firmly on the side of the machine rather than as its noble antagonist. While the vagrant cites this proximity between Henry and the machine through his own mimetic practice, Jake leaves *unrecorded* this history of political terror and the ontological dissolution of the human-

²² Indeed, by pursuing the racial and technological conditions of the railroad and by showing how the postbellum criminalization and policing of blackness placed John Henry in an ambivalent proximity to the machine, Whitehead thus pressures a certain established iconography of the railroad as a figure of "unrestrained mobility and unlimited freedom" (11) made canonical by Houston Baker's *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*.

machine distinction it underwrites when he attributes the Ballad to an individual person, leaving its necessarily itinerant and iterative status unheard. That is to say, the effort to capture the song and its origin in the event of the encounter is co-terminous with the claim to white ownership and (self-)possession through the disqualification of the antinomian counterhistory that is (un)disclosed, barred and withheld, by the vagrancy of the singer and the vagrancy of the voice itself.²³

What Jake cannot bear to hear, in other words, is that the vagrant's song was already a recording, one embedded within what Fred Moten might call "the phonographic *mise-en-scène* [that] records []his illegitimate birth" ("Phonographic" 278). We will need to return to the trace of sexual difference that is encrypted here in the interracial erotics of Jake's face-down homosocial encounter—to the mark of the (m)other that is *handed* to John Henry, that is passed on and reproduced everywhere in and as the reproduction of his phono-graphy, and that is the occluded condition of the question that his hand will have brought to bear on the history and the philosophy of technics. For now, let us only note that the vagrant's voice and his movement inscribe and transmit a mode of reproduction that precedes both its phonographic archivization and its remediation through Jake's sheet music. In this scene, there is already a copying machine, a "form of a phonography,"²⁴ by which I mean in the vagrant's music inheres the repetition of a graphic inscription, the inscription of an inheritance, and an inheritance that takes the form of a wayward movement that re-plays not *the name* John Henry but what W.E.B.

²³ On the materiality of black sound as the antinomian other of transcendental speech in the schematics of western metaphysical (de)valuation, see Lindon Barrett's *Blackness and Value* 82-3.

²⁴ See Alexander Weheliye (*Phonographies* 36, emphasis mine) on "the surplus gift inherent to Afro-diasporic consciousness...in *the form of a phonography* that rebuffs any separation of the two forces in this compound [sound and writing]."

Du Bois, in *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, once referred to as a “philosophy of life and action,” with “the symbol of it all, still unspoiled by petty artisans, the legend of John Henry” (11). While there is much more to say about this form of life and action that is given in the hand’s (originary) opening to the hammer and the techno-social mediation of the human it implies, Du Bois’s consideration of John Henry as the symbol of a philosophy that is irreducibly social in its shape, against what he dismisses as this symbol’s attempted corruption by petty (bourgeois) artisans, suggests a gathering of black life and collective action under the heading “John Henry,” one (re)generated through an iterant mode of repetition that strains against the repeated scenes of subjection that takes place each time “John Henry” is gathered by the nation-state as the proxy of citizen-man. In this regard, Jake’s “discovery,” which is as much a resurrection of John Henry as it is his burial, mirrors the novel’s broader treatment of the human-machine interface as a decisively racial problematic of U.S. modernity insofar as it calls attention to the covert operations of the “forgetting machine” (Césaire, *Discourse* 52) upon which racial humanism and its hostile drive toward inclusion depend for futurity.

For Whitehead, the problematic of technicity is thus inseparable from the question of Henry’s inscription and circulation as (the) human, and it is one that is staged most provocatively at a re-enactment of the battle of Man versus Machine during the novel’s fifth chapter:

Steam drill, can we get a soundbite? Silence only greets the quiver of jabbing microphones. No comment, no comment, sweatshirt hood cinched tight for anonymity on the perpwalk. Even if its lawyers hadn’t given strict instructions, it is just a device, it cannot answer. It is only a machine, and it keeps its own counsel. (342)

In this passage, the machine is death personified. The irony here, however, is that in order to push this death-machine on stage, J. must first *bring death to life*. He must recast bios in the role of technê, through the device of apostrophe, the trope in which, as Barbara Johnson defines it, an “absent, dead, or inanimate entity addressed is thereby made present, animate, and anthropomorphic” (*World* 185). In the first utterance, Steam drill (no longer bound to *the* singular generality of the definite article) is addressed directly, denominated with a proper name and imbued with culpability: “Perhaps a quote from the engine itself might shed some light on the situation” (341-2). Humorously miming the codes of a television journalist, J. hallucinates Steam drill as a “perp,” head ducked low as to avoid the invasion of cameras and the barrage of reporters who hope to “[l]et the other side speak” (ibid). In specifying its unwillingness to comment, Steam drill’s silence functions to establish the engine’s volitional capacity on a negative semantic register. Yet it is significant that Whitehead establishes Steam drill’s volition only to mark its failure, its refusal—or is it its inability?—to produce a response. J.’s severe diminution of the inhuman(e) villain, his cunning assurance that in our midst is *only* a machine, *just* a device, functions retroactively to shore up the plentitude and agentic capacity of the human, and would thus seem to corroborate Paul de Man’s observation that anthropomorphism arrests the turn of trope by establishing the fixed parameters of human being in the substance of the proper name.²⁵ As (one of) the human’s negative conditions of possibility, the anthropomorphic treatment of the machine therefore acts in service of

²⁵ According to de Man, anthropomorphism is importantly not a trope; it is with-out turn. It is a device that cancels its own structure of rhetoricity, arresting tropic movement through recourse to the essential positivity of the proper name and a denial of the device’s own powerful procedures of heurisis: “Anthropomorphism freezes the infinite chain of tropological transformations and propositions into one single assertion or essence which, as such, excludes all others. It is no longer a proposition but a proper name” (*Rhetoric* 241).

annexing what it means to be human as and at its limit. Whereas the human garners the promise of a singular transparency, within Steam drill's "No comment, no comment" inheres a mechanical repetition that discloses nothing, a compulsory iterability pre-programmed by "the law" of twentieth-century mass media conventions. Whereas the human might divest motive, Steam drill coldly refuses the soothing pathos of explanation. Securing the epistemic production of the human's integrity in the face of "man-killing machines" (139), the novel suggests throughout, is one of the supreme ideological functions of "John Henry" as state allegory.

But if J. anthropomorphizes the machine by investing in it a silence that comes to register as speech, an absence that simulates full presence, in doing so he also jams the racial economy of anthropomorphic identification that motors and circulates the steam drill's mimetic double: John Henry. Indeed, up until this point in the novel, various incarnations of the John Henry narrative are repeated ad nauseam but "[e]ven this late in the performance, there is one more member of the ensemble yet to make an appearance" (341). The entrance of the machine therefore performs a startling closure of the gap between "villain" and "hero" insofar as it calls attention to the relations of force that have instituted this (misrecognized) catachresis, that have, as Kara Keeling might put it, made John Henry pass as (the) human.²⁶ Through the "rhetorical animation" of the machine that finally dissipates in the sound of a plaintive silence, Whitehead produces a formal mirroring that poses as a problem the revisionary discursive procedures by which the nominally human icons attains to the status of Stream drill's ontological foe.²⁷ The

²⁶ See Keeling, "Passing for Human: *Bamboozled* and Digital Humanism."

²⁷ The phrase "rhetorical animation" is Barbara Johnson's. See *A World of Difference* 185.

simultaneous sub- and surplus humanity ascribed to Henry and circulated in his figure thus corroborates, as it signals the racial limit to, de Man's reading of anthropomorphism and its technology of the proper name. What is at first *given* as an identification of pure reference soon unravels into a structure that makes the black name available for infinite expropriation and substitutability. When the fabrication of Henry's self-possession is thus refracted through the physical and metaphysical labors that the repetition of his death performs for the nation-state—first through consignment to the convict-lease system and then to the commodity system of liberal nationalism's self-narration—the absolute difference between human being and its instrumental double unravels. Through this rereading, Whitehead desediments the opposition between the human and the machine, *anthropos* and *technê*, issued by the national traffic in racial blackness that brokers this transaction.

2.2 JOHN HENRY'S HANDWORK

Being a nigger appearing as a human, the bad nigger indicates the identification of human with thing, that the human can only be among things, cannot be beyond or abstracted from things... The difference between the bad nigger and the simple nigger, then, is that the former indexed the open-ended possibility of being among things—lawlessness.

—R.A. Judy, "On the Question of Nigga Authenticity"

Whitehead's novel sets into motion a critical methodology for reading the circulation of the narrative of John Henry and its role in alternatively unsettling and resolving the co-articulation of racial blackness and machinery in the twentieth-century United States. Importantly, Henry's first appearance in *The Journal of American Folklore*, relayed by Louise Rand Bascom in an article on the songs of Western North

Carolina, recounts only two lines (“Johnie Henry was a hard-workin’ man / He died with his hammer in his hand”) to surmise that the Ballad could not be indigenous to Appalachia, “for no highlander was ever sufficiently hard-working to die with anything in his hand except possibly a plug of borrowed ‘terbac”’ (149-50).²⁸ If Henry’s industrious work ethic led Bascom to cast doubt on his fabled origins, when the Ballad was revisited by former West Virginia Governor W.A. MacCorkle in 1916 we find that it is no longer a question of geographic location but instead of moral character that is most under scrutiny. In a letter addressed to Dr. H. S. Green published three years after it was penned, MacCorkle begins by recounting in vivid detail the steel-driver’s size, weight, and masculine prowess, as a told to him by an informant, remarking that he was “a magnificent specimen of the genus *Homo*.” The objectifying overtones of MacCorkle’s anatomizing gaze are bolstered through a hypersexualized imagery by which John’s labor is described as a particularly “spectacular performance along the lines of drilling” (qtd. in Cox, “John Hardy” 505). Yet while it is through this lens of an intensely gendered and fleshly corporeality that brutal physical labor defines the “natural” ordering of post-slavery blackness in MacCorkle’s letter, it is soon revealed that such labor, and the race against the automated drill that simultaneously deified and spectacularized this labor, was not indeed the cause of John’s death. In a revisionary departure from those narratives activated in *John Henry Days* that pivot upon the fight against the steam drill, the folklorist John Harrington Cox testified in 1919, “There remains the belief that John

²⁸ Bascom’s essay is related by folklorist Richard M. Dorson in his 1965 contribution to the journal *Western Folklore*, “The Career of ‘John Henry,’” esp. 157-8. I have leaned on Dorson’s review essay, as well as Alan Dundes’s preface to the essay for its reprinting in *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore*, in locating several of the sources discussed in the following paragraphs.

Hardy died from the effects of the drilling-contest. In answer to inquiries concerning this, Ex-Gov. McCorkle [sic] writes, ‘You are mistaken when you say John Hardy died from the drilling-contest’” (510, emphasis mine).

In Cox’s and MacCorkle’s narrations, the steel-driver no longer dies in defeat of the machine. Here, too, John Henry momentarily becomes John Hardy, and he does so during what has become known as the “Nadir” period of Progressive Era anti-black terrorism.²⁹ According to MacCorkle and the other sources upon which Cox draws, John Hardy was a steel-driver, but he was also a “bad, bad man” (514), accused and convicted for murdering a man over a game of craps and hung by the state in 1894. For one informant, incarceration and institutionalized killing proved the immediate backdrop of the Ballad’s emergence: “While in jail, he composed a song entitled ‘John Hardy,’ and sung it on the scaffold before the execution” (506). By way of R. L. Johnson, the West Virginian constable who allegedly made the arrest, another informant reported that Hardy, along with his friend Webb Gudgin, first sought escape on the railway only to be captured about sixty miles south of Talcott. Johnson “took charge of them [Hardy and Gudgin] and guarded them that night, and they come and threatened to lynch him.” This passing and vague reference to the lynch mob is here made to signify a heterogeneity to the law only later to find itself commensurate with the law in the next paragraph when Johnson testifies, “I believe I come down the next morning and put them [Hardy and Gudgin] in jail” (507).

Between John and John, what should be made of this duplication, this repetition with a difference, this crossing of Henry with Hardy? According to Cox, not very much

²⁹ On the Nadir, see, canonically, Logan, *The Negro in American Life and Thought*.

at all. Although he admits the existence of “a ballad called ‘The Steel Driver,’” he concludes, “[t]he name change to John Henry...is not significant, and is easily accounted for by oral transmission” (510). Against Cox’s claim to the contrary, I find profound significance in this brief encounter between Henry and Hardy, as well as their subsequent estrangement. What this (ex)change between John and John exposes is a mark of non-identity in “John Henry,” and therefore an exteriority impressed in the interior regions of “the human” itself, through the archival trace of blackness, lawlessness, and their condensation, as well as their violent confrontation with the law of the state. This is a trace that is later encrypted when Henry is reanimated as the cipher of humanity’s confrontation with technology. Attending to this transposition—the dual substitutions of black criminality for humanity and anti-black assault for technology achieved through the work song’s permutations—begins to disclose, I argue, the centrality of post-slavery blackness to delineating the significations of the machine in various, seemingly opposing directions within the modern American idiom.

The first question that we must then ask is where and to what ends the machine meets John Hardy if, apparently, it no longer presages his death. There is perhaps no better way to enter this problematic than by tracing the movements in narrative and address that occur in one version of the Ballad of John Hardy documented by Cox:

John Hardy was but three days old,
 Sitting on his mamma’s knee,
 When he looked straight up at her and said,
 “The Big Bend Tunnel on the C. & O. Road
 Is bound to be the death of me,
 The Big Bend Tunnel on the C. & O. Road
 Is bound to be the death of me.” (515)

In this first stanza, Hardy's foretold death is attributed, if ambiguously, to the inanimate entity of the Tunnel. The speaking newborn addresses his mother directly and informs her of his knowledge of a premature death that follows him from natality. The tragedy of this scene is established in its intimate familial composition, in its initiating presentation of maternal nurture, care, and love that cannot ultimately provide sanctuary for John from the devastating truth of his prophetic knowledge. This originary abrogation and displacement of the familiar/familial is inseparable from its anticipatory revelation in the maternal scene,³⁰ and so the question remains as to where the infant first acquires his (ante-)foundational knowledge. If this can in part be explained through generic conventions that ascribe to the folk hero a secular magic that anticipates his super-human strength, it is also suggested, through the stanza's prosodic features, that the mother's touch functions as the silent/silenced bearer of this knowledge.

The near-rhyme of the endings of the first ("old") and fourth ("road") lines allows one to hear "ode" in "old," a generic designation that bolsters Hardy's position as the primary subject of the song and that is further heightened in the final four lines when he emerges as the first-person speaker. John speaks for himself and he speaks about himself. In contrast, his mother sits but says nothing. In this regard, the inverted exchange of speech and muteness in this scenario impresses a conventionally racially gendered discourse that renders the mother's voice unrepresentable, a dynamic exacerbated by the male infant's miraculous semantic vocalization that would seem to cancel the parental function in language acquisition. That said, the agential subjecthood implied by Hardy's

³⁰ On the relationship between slavery and "natal alienation," see Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* 1-14.

speech is acutely tempered by the fact that he does not assume the active voice and instead appears as the indirect object in the repeated line-group: ““The Big Bend Tunnel on the C. & O. Road / Is bound to be the death of me.”” The Tunnel is the subject of this statement; Hardy (“me”) the recipient of the object (“death”) that it brings. But if Hardy is ineluctably bound to the Tunnel and hence to death, it is still not entirely clear from the content of his address alone what sutures this binding nor to what else or who else the speaker’s “me” might be bound. However, when Hardy’s address is read back through the entire stanza, as demanded by the ballad’s rhyme structure across the third-person narration and the quotation, it becomes apparent that, in contrast to the approximate rhyme of “old” and “road,” the only “true” rhyme present is between “knee” and “me.” Accordingly, the mother and her knee are echoed each time the “me” is later invoked. This reverberation, especially when contrasted with the other “imperfect” sound patterns established in the stanza, directly passes on the mark of *mamma* to Hardy’s *re*-marks on the destiny and duress of his “me.”

This formal accentuation registers a nonsemantic inscription *of* the black mother, at once preserved and encrypted in this scene, whose haptic embrace *prescripts* in advance, as their effaced condition, both the Ballad’s narrative unfolding and John’s semantic utterance. This, therefore, is to highlight that in the Ballad’s opening stanza the infant’s knowledge of death and of the spectral threat of his anticipated castration, confirmed by Johnson’s invocation of the lynch mob, comes not from the symbolic violence of the (here, absented) father’s reprove but instead an actual violence that is

articulated, first, through a “bodily encounter with the mother.”³¹ Everything Hardy can say about himself, about C. & O. Road, about his premature perishment, begins with and comes back to mamma and her knee. Her irrepressible, resounding presence emanates in spite (or perhaps because) of the fact that the manifest discourse of the stanza’s conclusion places her status as mother under erasure, as if to ask: what is it to mother the dead? Her stolen motherhood stands vestibular to any idealized “essential motherhood.”³² On the one hand, then, the narrative coincidence of John’s preemptive knowledge of death with a structure of maternity brings to crisis any rendering of this mother-child dyad as a preoriginary haven of unbroken plentitude. On the other hand, we find that mamma nevertheless returns incessantly to the scene of C. & O. Road, in the reproduction of the sound embedded within Hardy’s objective pronoun, at the precise moment of her presumed disappearance.

Hortense Spillers gifts an indispensable framework to interpret the vicissitudes of this encounter in her canonical rereading of *partus sequitur ventrem*, the enslaving doctrine that demanded the child take the status of human property through following the maternal line. In an inversion of the patriarchal common law principle by which children inherit the father’s name and property in civil society, *partus sequitur ventrem* at once seized ownership of black women’s wombs and codified the interminable theft of their

³¹ The phrase “The Bodily Encounter with the Mother” is from Luce Irigaray’s essay of the same title, in which she contends with the matricidal impulse that undergirds the psychoanalytic account of the infant’s entrance into language. In this sentence I think alongside her essay, if not entirely faithfully, as well as with Anne McClintock’s reminder that “black women vanish...[in] the white phallocracy of the Lacanian castration scene” (*Imperial Leather* 68).

³² Idealized “essential motherhood” is Eva Cherniavsky’s term for the construction of the white bourgeois maternal body as a specifically modern and particularly naturalized metonym of origin, which, in turn, has proved discursively central to the “naturalization” of U.S. nation-state formation and colonial expansion. See *That Pale Mother Rising*. The “vestibular” is Hortense Spiller’s remarkable formulation: “black is vestibular to culture.” See “Interstices” 157.

progeny, enforcing sexual and reproductive terror as a constituent component of the slave regime. Critically mining the undecidability of the term *condition* used to describe the transfer obtained through this doctrine of conferral, Spillers asks, “But what is the ‘condition’ of the mother? Is it the ‘condition’ of enslavement the writer means, or does he mean the ‘mark’ and the ‘knowledge’ of the *mother* upon the child that here translates into the cultural forbidden and impure?” (“Mama’s Baby” 79, emphasis hers). The two alternatives that Spillers offers in her second question are mutually imbricated while nevertheless remaining irreducible to one another, and both of these speculative propositions also coexist in the Ballad of John Hardy. An explication of the first “condition,” when read alongside John Hardy and subjecting the Ballad to the critical pressures of black feminist theory, will allow for us to return to the second “condition” for the incipient (counter)violence it potentially unleashes on the former. Spillers’s first assertion registers the expropriation of black women’s reproductive and gestational capacities in and after slavery and, furthermore, reveals the totalitarian regulation of these reproductions as central to the reproduction of the slave mode of production in the absence of any protections of juridico-culturally sanctioned kinship. That the black maternal is made to pass on an originary condition of dispossession is evident in the thematization of an external horizon of violence that occasions John’s enunciation of the “me” (with the maternal trace that it bears within), even as the structure of his address undercuts the mode of self-possession implied by the first-person speech act. This articulation presages his eventual capture and brutalization by the police power and, as I have noted, his execution that appears in most versions of the Ballad.

As Christina Sharpe writes, the sedimentation of *partus sequitur ventrem*, even beyond its formal legal annulment, serves “to turn the womb into a factory producing blackness as abjection much like the slave ship’s hold and the prison, and [to] turn[] the birth canal into another domestic Middle Passage with Black mothers, after the end of legal hypodescent, still ushering their children into their condition.” In echo of Spillers’s elucidation of the condition of the mother, Sharpe’s recalibration of the womb’s transmutation into a *factory* in “the long dehumaning project” (*Wake* 74) brings to view a covert figuration of the machine that remains within the narrative despite the substitution of Henry for Hardy. In this substitution, however, the steel-driver’s relationship to the machine is subjected to a profound reversal. As I already suggested in my analysis of Whitehead’s novel, John Henry emerges in the U.S. civic formation as the terrain of national prosopopeia through a concerted unthinking of his exchange between the state of Virginia and the Chesapeake & Ohio Railway company. The twentieth-century national trade in his commodity-image at once mimes and obscures his nineteenth-century exchange between state and capital through the convicting-leasing apparatus. If the obscurity of this trade in flesh bespeaks the aphasia of a historicist paradigm of modernization unable “to think the articulation of slave and commodity” (Moten, *Break* 17) as simultaneously conditional for and irreducible to the modern accumulation regime,³³ so too does it efface the “dehumaning” relations of force, in Sharpe’s terms, that allow John Henry to garner value as (hu)man against the technical apparatus. Or, as Lindon Barrett neatly puts it in *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double*, “Within the

³³ The classic interventions in the historicist demarcation between slavery and capitalism are made by W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, and Eric Williams.

concentric vertigo of processes of valorization, value as force becomes itself a displaced Other, at the same time it effects a displaced Other” (32). This displacement of force central to the violent arbitration of value sets in a motion a chain of further displacements of Henry, who here is briefly replaced by Hardy only later to be (mis)placed at the human altar. But this entire alchemy of value and personhood is itself initiated through a more primary displacement, one that names a fundamental crisis in this fraternal genealogy of human and machine.

Through the invocation of a pre-individuated horizon of bondage that syntactically precedes the enunciation of the (first-)person, the “mistaken” fusing of John Henry with John Hardy brings into relief the otherwise submerged history of Henry’s death during his ten-year sentence to captive labor for theft. Yet if, to deploy Barrett’s figure and method, “seeing” John Henry’s “double” allows one to see the doubleness of property-in-person and captive labor power— that is, the exemplary modernity of their coincidence— Sharpe’s critical treatment of the womb as a factory renders clear what goes unseen beneath and before Henry’s ever-shifting coerced vocation as an instrument of the state: the social order’s reciprocal dependence on the triple incorporation of black women as commodity, as productive labor, and as a captive or fixed asset that must outlast the production cycle. These final two designations are usually held distinct. Here is Karl Marx, almost, on this very matter:

The distinction between labour-power and machine here does not consist in the fact that the machine is bought once and for all (which is in fact not the case when it is paid for by instalments, for example), while the worker is not, but rather in that the labour that the worker expends enters entirely into the value of the product, while the value of the machine enters only bit by bit. (*Capital* V2 275)

In his elaboration of the difference between labor power understood as circulating capital and the machine as the characteristic form of fixed capital, Marx stresses that where the worker expends the entirety of his total energy in the production process before needing replenishment, only a portion of the machine's value is transferred to any particular commodity. Machinery enters the value cycle processually, "bit by bit," over a protracted length of time. In the calculus of capitalist reason, when the machine is bought, what is purchased is the potential of a gradual rate of return on an investment over the duration of the machine's "lifespan," a futural capacity that is not immediately "used-up" in the manufacture of "the value of the product." This temporal distinction between the worker and the machine is also an epistemological and rhetorical one between the organic and the technical, the living and the dead. It is, moreover, one that falls apart in the womb-factory—the belly of the modern world, as Hartman ("Belly") frames it—where industrialized, de-naturalized bio-reproduction is identified with the duration and valuation of machinery. Recalling Fanon's warning that "a Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched when it comes to addressing the colonial issue" (*Wretched* 32), in the terrain of fixed capital's expansion and the worker/machine distinction in which this history of value creation and expropriation is embedded, there remains at the center the conscription of black women's reproductions toward the interminable production, "bit by bit," of fungible life in the form of captive labor populations and of fleshly commodities made available for arbitrary use and exchange.³⁴

³⁴ For accounts of (bio)technology, reproduction, and fixed capital that do not centralize their connections to racial slavery but nevertheless bear on my thinking, see Cooper and Waldby, *Clinical Labor* and Thacker, *Global Genome*. For an abbreviated history of U.S. economic development that follows Eugene Genovese's insight that "Slavery requires all hands to be occupied at all times" to argue that racial capitalism values the enslaved as a form of fixed capital, see Anderson and Gallman, "Slaves as Fixed Capital." More recently, Maciel Santos and Ana Guedes have reframed this argument as follows: "The difference between the devaluation of the labor force induced by

At stake in the line drawn between the aggrieved worker and the machine is therefore, in part, an arbitration of sentience linked to an economy of expenditure and the adjudication of humanity. Insofar as the worker is a sentient being whose energy dissipates through the output of force during the production process, this worker's inevitable fatigue must be counteracted, at least minimally, through allowances for his regeneration (i.e., his physical and social reproduction). In contrast, although the machine may need intermittent repair and maintenance so as to keep it working properly, the daily necessity of replenishment is not required for, quite simply, the machine is unfeeling and insentient. In the historical instance, this partition was articulated as a thoroughly racialized and sexualized difference between the human tendency toward exhaustion and the domain of the excessive and the *inexhaustible*. While, as intellectual historian Anson Rabinbach has amply demonstrated, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scientific and social scientific discourses often analogized the human body as a thermodynamic motor susceptible to heat-death, hence refiguring labor management as a problem of energy conservation, Donna V. Jones and Bernard Doray both highlight that such figurations were not only inflected by the dominative exigencies of race but, more decisively, in the case of the African American worker this relation of analogy collapsed into one of alleged identity between racialized laborer and the means of production. As Jones summates, "for [Frederick] Taylor and other exponents of scientific management 'the Southern Negro' was especially suited for mechanical work, given *his* unthinking

intensification of time *t* can, in each case, be summed up as such: in the developed capitalist relation, the devaluation is borne by the laborer, owner of the merchandise 'labor force'; in the capitalist relation with 'slaves,' it is borne by the capital, which owns the laborer as a fixed capital asset" ("Time Effect" 13).

nature” (*Life Philosophy* 35, emphasis mine).³⁵ This mechanized portrait of the archetypal black worker figures an extension of what Sylvia Wynter posits as the *pieza*, or “the name given by the Portuguese, during the slave trade, to the African who functioned as the standard measure.... as the general equivalent of physical labor” (“Jamesian Poesis” 81). Yet the *she* that goes missing in this mechanized portrait of labor registers, more fundamentally, the obscurity of the reproductive “machine” that *passes on this originary mark of technicity* to “the worker.” Put differently, the unthinking of black humanity required to cultivate the image of the “unthinking” laborer is occasioned by a regimented regime of unfeeling through which whiteness establishes and reproduces its claim to humanness in relation to the image of black women as unfeeling. As Jennifer L. Morgan observes, “the construction of an image of pain-free reproduction... diminished Africa’s access to certainty and civilization, thus allowing for the mass appropriation that was the transatlantic slave trade” (*Laboring Women* 47). Within the supremacist optics of the dominant order, the unintelligibility of black women’s pain in child-bearing, Morgan continues, “effectively naturalized the enslavement of Africans” (49) and, as Dorothy Roberts and others have shown, persisted well beyond formal emancipation in the criminalization of black women’s (excessive) sexualities, as well as through overexposure to medical control and abandonment.³⁶ This racial-sexual denial of sentience culminates in the image of *an inexhaustible machine* that exists outside the

³⁵ See Rabinbach, *Human Motor*, esp. 66-7 and 73-84; Jones, *Life Philosophy*, esp. chapter 1 “On the Mechanical, Machinic, and Mechanistic”; and Doray, *From Taylorism to Fordism* 83-4.

³⁶ On the persistent willed obscurity of black women’s sentience addressed by Morgan, see Roberts’s documentation of “the common belief” among contemporary black drug-dependent mothers that “hospital nurses intentionally ignored them during labor and withheld pain medications” (*Killing the Black Body* 174). See also “Punishing Pregnancy: Race, Incarceration, and the Shackling of Pregnant Prisoners” for Priscilla Osen’s historically-nuanced account of the juridical underpinnings of the refusal of prenatal care and pain management treatment to incarcerated pregnant black women.

thermodynamics of accumulation and expenditure, at once infinitely re-productive and uniquely invulnerable to decline, depletion, and fatigue.

Such an image of the “purported immunity of blacks to pain” (Hartman, *Scenes* 51), moreover, inherits and brutally materializes the Cartesian outline of the *res extensa* discussed in Chapter 1. As we will recall, for Descartes, the *extensa* is subject to the determinations of external stimuli; the *res extensa* does not self-consciously act or knowingly respond to these stimuli but instead automatically reacts to them. This led Descartes, famously, to place the automaton and the animal together under the conjoined heading of the animal-machine (*bête-machine*). The difference between the extended thing and the thinking thing is thus established in terms of a difference between the mechanistic capacity for simple reaction and the rational soul’s proper ability to *respond*. The philosophical distinction between the automaton and the self-determining subject therefore comes to hinge on the thing’s capacity for *suffering*. Reading Descartes’s statement that it is possible to “conceive of a machine... [that] cries out that you are hurting it,” Jacques Derrida explicates the giving and withholding of suffering central to this metaphysical partition:

Descartes already spoke, as if by chance, of a machine that simulates the living animal so well that it ‘cries out that you are hurting it’... Can they suffer? For it is simply a matter of knowing whether the automatons in this hypothesis can allow us to conclude that there is a ‘true passion,’ a ‘true sentiment.’ The answer [*réponse*] is well known: no, and precisely because these automatons are incapable of responding. (*Animal* 81)

Although this machine might empirically cry out, the onto-epistemological issue for Descartes becomes one of whether the cry is truly authentic and truly singular or if it is only a “mimetic simulacrum” (81). Accordingly, the machine’s incapacity for suffering is attributed to its assumed incapacity to respond spontaneously to pain by intelligibly

communicating that it is suffering. The issue of authentic suffering and singular response therefore pivots, foremost, around their legible registration within the governing terms of the present sign-system. (This despite the fact that one could argue the requirement of intelligibility proves supremely at odds with the requirement of absolute spontaneity and absolute singularity; intelligibility demands both convention and repeatability, that is, a structure of iteration through which any image or sound, any one's sound, comes to make sense as suffering or unmake *this* sense of suffering in the terms of a social order. The arbitration of suffering as singular, in other words, is always already preceded by a structure of reproducibility, of an iterable mechanism or grammar that forcibly renders certain cries, screams, sounds, and shouts insensible or, more precisely, what Sharpe [Wake 76] calls *anagrammatical*.)³⁷ Although Derrida's foray into the question of the *bête-machine* and hence of the human leaves this unsaid (and, perhaps, this unsaying must be said to be the very condition of possibility of the question), the adjudication of suffering that conditions the response to this question makes clear the racialized and sexualized substratum of automatism's form and function in the actualizing procedures of western "civilization": the illegitimacy and illegibility of the consciousness of black pain, of black women's pain, that underwrite the philosophical protocols of western (racial) humanism in its foundational dealings with the machinic. At the same time, the dominant order's *inability to respond* affirmatively to the question "Can they suffer?" might be said, within Descartes's own terms, to cast doubt on this order's own self-authorizing claim to humanity.

³⁷ The formulation of the "grammar of suffering" is Frank B. Wilderson III's. On blackness as the issue of a "grammar of suffering beyond signification itself," see "Gramsci's Black Marx" 230.

This detour through the racial and sexual determinations that give suture to “the human” in contradistinction to “the machine” now prepares us to return to the Ballad of John Hardy and so, too, to John Henry. If, in the transposition of Henry into Hardy, the character of the steam drill goes missing, I submit that the motif of the machine nevertheless remains a focal point in the maternal scene that opens the Ballad, though Hardy is firmly figured on her side rather than as its antagonist. To say that this relation issues the mnemotechnical trace that Hardy carries with him throughout the remainder of the Ballad demands that we reread once more his declaration that ““The Big Bend Tunnel on the C. & O. Road / Is bound to be the death of me.”” In a striking reversal of the presumed meaning of this assertion that the train of his death will arrive right on time, we learn that Hardy is neither killed by a train (that grand icon of American modernity) nor does he die while driving steel or laying rail. What takes place at the scene of Big Bend Tunnel is indeed something different altogether:

John started to catch the east-bound train,
 So dark he could not see;
 A police walked up and took him by the arm,
 Saying, “John Hardy, come and go with me, poor boy!
 John Hardy, come and go with me.” (515)

By the seventh stanza, Hardy has been established as a felon and a fugitive. The death to which he is bound comes not in the form of a machine but, crucially, of state terror. In fact, it is the train here that serves as a medium of his movement and potential escape; Hardy runs to catch the train in flight from the police power that tries to catch up with him. In this regard, the diction of the first line cites the inaugural stanza’s invocation of the “death-bound subject”³⁸ while repurposing the practical affordance of its terms.

³⁸ See JanMohamed, *The Death-Bound Subject*.

Bound in its later appearance signifies primarily not as “destined” or “fastened” but as the propelling directionality of the train that at once aids and mimes Hardy’s bounds, his “run with leaping strides.” While the forward thrust of this second *bound* seemingly moves against the immobilized form of boundedness as *bondage* highlighted in the first stanza, it seems essential to interrogate their mutual imbrication and constitution.

Etymologically, the verbal *bound* (the act of leaping) derives from the Old French *bondir*, meaning “to leap, jump, rebound; make a noise, sound (a horn), beat (a drum),” which itself comes from the Latin *bombitare*, or “to echo back.”³⁹ The degraded connotations of “bound” in the modern idiom indeed echo back, as it were, to the racialization and feminization of the echo as irreducibly derivative and inessential, improper and never one. The social form of the echo violates the liberal conception of freedom understood as autonomous, self-sufficient personhood or linear emancipation attained through transparent self-knowledge, for it installs the necessity of repetition, relation, (impossible) return, and the non-singularity of any sounding. If to be “bound” is to “echo back,” it is to respond to a call where the difference between the call and the response becomes difficult to discern and hence what is broached is what Wagner refers to as “the possibility of hearing the sounds of others in your own voice” (*Disturbing* 237). What seems central, then, is that this bo(u)nd, this echo of “bound” in the Ballad, marks an encrypted exteriority (the mark of others) as the condition of possibility internal to the bound, the run or the leap (and perhaps, too, of what Fanon named “the real leap,” the one that “consists in introducing invention into existence” [*BSWM* 179]). When John

³⁹ These definitions and etymologies of “bound” are culled from the *OED* and the *Online Etymology Dictionary*.

Hardy runs with and toward the train, he brings each of these meanings and practices of the bound with him.

The precarious promise attached to the train as a sign of life and fugitive mobility again places Hardy in an intimate proximity to the figure of the machine. This promise is derailed, however, when Hardy is seized by the police who occupy the train and immobilize Hardy, grabbing him by hand of the state. This scene of bodily seizure and theft registers formally in the turn from Hardy's quoted speech and the vocalization of his "me" to the commanding voice of the police. In the policeman's directive "come and go with me," an interdicting force occupies the signifier of subjectivity formerly designated as Hardy's in the first stanza's address, though, to recall, the grammatical and prosodic features of Hardy's discourse, as well its content, had already made it difficult to read his subjection to the "me" in terms of (self-)possession, as the instantiation of an "I" properly his own. On the train, the (dis)possession of Hardy occasions the enunciation of the "me" as the police's property—indeed, as the police's capacity to lay claim to Hardy as property. In one way, the police occupation of the "me" culminates the attenuation of Hardy's "me" presaged in the first stanza, when Hardy is touched by his mother while sitting on her knee. In another way, however, the police seizure commences with an interpellative hail that seeks to bind the fugitive to a proper name, to the singular position of a self-same "me," in ways that counter-act or suppress the dissipation of the "me" performed in the introductory stanza and the irreducibly relational encounter to which the subjective pronoun proves inarticulate, both unavailable and wholly inadequate.

Between the *paralyzing grasp* of the hand of the state and the *receival* of a touch that sets the entire Ballad *in motion*, between the originary dispersal of Hardy's me in "a

life...made fugitive before the theft could occur” (Williamson, *Scandalize My Name* 119) and an affirmative valuation of fugitive machinery, we are brought back to the terrain of the double conditional opened by Spillers: “Is it the ‘condition’ of enslavement the writer means, or does he mean the ‘mark’ and the ‘knowledge’ of the *mother* upon the child that here translates into the cultural forbidden and impure?” In the first condition, the maternal reproduction of blackness is consonant with the reproduction of a total abjection from the civic (“human”) order, a line of criminal descent that follows Hardy to his state-sponsored execution. But in slavery’s absolute displacement of the patronymic syntax and the architectonics of hetero-gendered domesticity, Spillers argues, the maternal imprint marks the child— ““all her remotest posterity”” (“Mama’s” 79)— with a “forbidden” or outlaw knowledge *of* the mother, rigorously understood in terms of the double genitive. The mother’s knowledge, as Eva Cherniavsky writes, is that “U.S. national culture coheres only on condition of muting the subject Spillers here invokes... [T]he consensual Euro-American state forms itself in the act of countering the potential insurgency of the black female subject” (*Incorporations* 16). These relations of force that found and re-found the nation-state are inseparable from those that found the human/machine distinction, and this a knowledge that Hardy bears with him in his mimetic run with train. If Hardy is positioned beside and on the side of the machinic, the possibility of freedom thematically bound up with the signifying trajectory of the machine is short-circuited by a bodily abduction that is concomitant with the hand and the call of the state. Yet the mother’s mark and the mark of those who are touched by her, for Spillers and in the Ballad, too, are irreducible to what we might call a critical knowledge of antiblack racial and sexual terror as the enabling conditions of the nation-

state, of capital, and of a certain genre of the human. In other words, it is not simply that Hardy's capture returns him to a congenital knowledge of death foretold, but that his run to and with the train returns to the mark and knowledge of the initial scene as well. Heterogeneous to a linear narrative of forward escape from bondage, this otherwise knowledge and practice of freedom are predicated on a mode of escape that paradoxically returns to the bond to which Hardy remains bound.

As Spillers makes clear, the scandal of black maternity— of the mother's knowledge, of the child's knowledge of her— scandalizes a phallographic common sense that the topoi of vagrant mobility and hard machinery might otherwise potentially issue and that are potentially re-issued in the repetition of the name John (Hardy and Henry, badman and "citizen"-saint). Spillers continues, "The African-American male has been touched, therefore, by the *mother*, *handed* by her in ways that he cannot escape, and in ways that the white American male is allowed to temporize by a fatherly reprieve" (80, emphasizes hers). According to Spillers, the unspeakable and enduring violence through which the Middle Passage suspends the patronym and the patriarchal symbolic "reconfigures, in historically ordained discourse, certain *representational* potentialities for African-Americans," namely the insurgent possibility of preserving and affirming the "heritage of the *mother*" (80, emphasizes hers). This, to be sure, is only one possibility registered in "The Ballad of John Hardy," one *touched* upon in the opening stanza, given in a haptic interlocution with a "Law of the Mother" that places Hardy outside of the law, that places him in an outlawed relation, but that nevertheless then appears, at least explicitly, to vanish from the Ballad's manifest discourse altogether; mamma never speaks. Still, if we read relationally between the insurgent scene of (social) reproduction

at the Ballad's opening and the reproduction of that insurgency in the stolen movement of the seventh stanza, and if all of this is then read back as John Henry's (disavowed) *relations*, "certain representational potentialities" are made available.

First, as I have said, the conjuncture between Henry and Hardy enacts a reversal in Henry's position within the received national diagram of the human-machine relation. When the two meet, the political emplotment of Henry as the exceptional exemplar of the former reveals itself as the symptom of a profound historical aphasia that represses the murderous regime of captivity and fatality that simultaneously establishes and impugns something like a relation of kinship between Hardy and Henry. Second, if this lineage or criminality is, following Spillers, inseparable from the reproduction of blackness and the reproduction(s) of the mother, we can say that John Henry's originary prosthesis ("Born with a hammer in his hand") is necessarily given to him by the mother, "*handed* by her in ways that he cannot escape." Here, the hand would receive before it possesses. Or, put more forcefully, the muscular portrait of the hand that grabs the hammer is preceded, if not interrupted, by a prior opening of the hand to an other, by the mother. From this vantage, the hammer is less the icon of a tool or autotelic equipment simply *used* in the world than the trace of a *re-opening* of a world that is never absolutely self-given. This, it seems, produces an antinomian logic of *the other hand* that counters the absolute violence of the hand that extends itself, untouched and unchanged, through the possession and mastering of objects—that is, the metaphysical hand of the sovereign embodied by the "police [who] walked up and took [Hardy] by the arm." The anteriority of the hammer, its givenness, reorients commonsense conceptions of the tool as an instrument that transforms nature or estranges of the natural, such that the promise of technology

becomes, in the words of Pheng Cheah (*Inhuman Conditions* 117), the possibility of “humanity’s freedom from the given.” Instead, John Henry’s hammer, when read with John Hardy and the suppressed maternal, figures the potentiality for radical transformation that is ineluctably handed off through an errant practice of reproduction, even as the “natural” or organicist connotations of this term have already, forcibly, come undone. The point isn’t to say that Henry does not hold on to the hammer, gather it in his hand, and act with it,⁴⁰ but rather that anything that might be done with the hammer first

⁴⁰ In an essay titled “*Geschlecht* II: Heidegger’s Hand,” Derrida turns to the thematic of the hand and its essence in Martin Heidegger’s *Parmenides*, a lecture which includes an extended treatment of “the typewriter,” which, apparently, “tears writing from the essential realm of the hand” and which has rightly become a canonical text in the field of media studies. (The lecture is reproduced as “The Hand and the Typewriter” in Friedrich Kittler’s *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*.) Derrida reads *Parmenides* for the disjunctive relation between the (human) hand and technics it sets up in ways that anticipate the German philosopher’s more well-known essay on “The Question Concerning Technology.” He argues that when Heidegger insists, in “The Question,” that the essence of technology remains uncontaminated by ontic technologies, his motive is to guard the thought of essence against the instrumentalizing, and ultimately destructive, “encounter between global technology and modern humanity” (*Metaphysics* 213). Here, for Heidegger, modern technics appear foremost as a metaphysics of enframing that set-upon the world as a standing-reserve, as the concretization of this metaphysic inflicted upon *physis* linked to the violence of calculative reason. Scholars working at the intersection of race and technology have productively leveraged this evaluation of a distinctly modern epoch of planetary technology as a potent heuristic to apprehend the taxonomizing, administrative, and annihilative logics of racial modernity. Falguni Sheth (“Technology of Race”), for example, describes the enframing of race as a technology of classification and management that produces particular populations as raw material available for extinction and extraction. In a distinct but related vein, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun has argued in her important essay “Race and/as Technology” that “Heidegger’s discussion of the experience of the human as not even an object also resonates with the historical experience of people of color” (20). Such readings are crucial and are clearly necessary to approach the trade in both Hardy and Henry. But while, like Sheth and Chun, Derrida underscores the political animus by which Heidegger conducts an indictment of “biologicist and racist ideology” (“*Geschlecht*” 165) vis-à-vis his indictment of the technological calculation of Being, this is but one stop along the way toward his ultimate concern. Arguably, what principally interests Derrida is not the collaboration between technology and Nazism suggested by Heidegger but rather an internal difference in Heidegger’s text, the way in which his protest against the racial protocols of technologization dissimulates a deeper distress over that which is broached or debased by the force and figure of technics. This is, more fundamentally, a problem of the human and of the modern world, which to say it is the problem of race.

In attempting to demonstrate how modern technocratic reason threatens the ontological relation between humanity and Being, Derrida shows that Heidegger unwittingly risked replacing a faith in the progressive determination of technoscience with a faith in the primordial determination of being gathered in the figure of the hand. There bears, then, an unacknowledged neo-Aristotelian trace in Heidegger’s desire to protect the essence of the hand from the tool and, foremost, from the opening of the hand to the anti-essentializing abstractions that the tool is said to introduce. In Derrida’s hands,

comes back to the perspective of its conditions of *possibility*. What is held in the hand and what meanings the hammer might hold cannot be grasped if Henry's grasp of the hammer is rend from the gathering to which, before his birth, he is first given— that is, if, to borrow from Terrion L. Williamson (*Scandalize My Name* 117), Henry is made “a symbol without relationship.”

To insist, even speculatively, on this interpretation of the originary technicity of this hand requires that we ask what is given and gathered in John Henry's hand. It is worth querying, then, what it would mean to read the substitution of Henry for Hardy otherwise than in terms of an error or as merely unwanted noise induced through “oral transmission,” as Cox put it in his 1919 essay. That is to say, what takes place in the transmission of the “improper” name that is cancelled out when the “proper” name is restored and, with it, John Henry to the face of the human? What history of transmission, knowledge of catastrophe, and practice of relation are no longer transmitted when this

Heidegger's problem with technics becomes one of the essential impropriety the technical grafts onto the hand— “the properly acting hand” (qtd. in Kittler, *GFT* 199) being the sign of essential species difference, the difference between human life and animal life, and hence that which gathers the human. “The hand,” Derrida writes, “cannot be spoken about without speaking of technics” (169). The technical tears open the propriety of the hand and its capacity *to gather*: “Gathering together [*Versammlung*] is always what Heidegger privileges. On the other hand, nothing is ever said of the caress or of desire” (“*Geschlecht*” 182). Derrida's deconstruction of Heidegger's metaphysic of the hand that gathers but neither caresses nor is caressed comes back to a single word: *Geschlecht*, which “can be translated as sex, race, species, genus, species, stock, family, generation or genealogy, community” (162). What is gathered by the hand is *Geschlecht*, and what the technical introduces is what Chandler (*X* 16) calls “the *problem* of purity, or the problem of pure being.” This problem is the problem of race, of sex, of the human.

For Derrida, gathering thus gathers Being; it aims towards unity, identity, and purity. It speaks the jargon of authenticity, of the absolutely idiomatic, and, in particular, of the idiom *Geschlecht*: Man, stock, race, mastery. The gathering that masters is a gathering of masters, and Derrida is right to say this gathering inflicts its violence through a profoundly irresponsible unthinking of the pre-originary cut of difference and the dissemination that precedes and intercedes Being. However, in pursuing how John Henry theorizes the contrapuntal encounter between gathering and dissemination, I mean to ask about a kind of collective gathering that Derrida, in his suspicion of the gathering of self and group identity, might avert his gaze: where gathering and dissemination are not opposed but rather each other's mutual conditions of possibility.

certitude of identity is achieved? What revisionary force do such histories, knowledges, and practices bring to bear on the human-machine interface?

The answers to these questions begin to emerge when we note that by 1928 John's duplication had been deemed duplicity: the hybrid Hardy-Henry rendition fell out of favor. In collector Newman I. White's *American Negro Folk-Songs*, White confirmed that Henry "died of overwork" and that, while "John Henry and John Hardy were both steel-drivers in West Virginia," Henry was decisively not "John Hardy the murderer" (189). By 1953, Hardy and the specter of his state-sanctioned murder had been so effaced from the Henry archive that John Greenway concluded in his collection on *American Folk Songs of Protest* that "The best-known (and best) Negro ballad, the best-known Negro work song, the best song of protest against imminent technological unemployment, 'John Henry' has all the stature of the man whose memory it immortalizes" (107). It is useful underscoring here that Greenway's anaphoric "best-of" list is punctuated by the technological as the incarnation of a threat to employment, which is to say a universal peril for the waged laborer. In this fraternal assertion of the primacy of production and the wage relation, the heterogeneous relations between reproduction and captivity (reproduction in captivity, the reproduction of captivity, and reproduction as the inheritance of a collective refusal of captivity) fall away, and so too does the unspoken (pre)history of the machine. An enemy relation, a "general antagonism" (Harney and Moten, *Undercommons* 76) to the state and its murderous capture of blackness and black life transmutes into a fable of contractual labor and/as the reproduction of man. That Henry was not a waged worker but a prisoner under a system defined— as Hastings H. Hart wrote in his 1919 address to the National Prison

Association—by the principle “One dies, get another” appears impervious to Greenway’s analogizing machine.⁴¹ In this way, the deletion of John Hardy the “Negro desperado” and his replacement with a Manichean drama of technology marks a shift in the dominant interpretative rubric through which the Ballad was read, one inseparable from what folklorist Richard M. Dawson tellingly diagnosed as John Henry’s “revival into a national property” (“Career” 163) that, Alan Dundes added, “allay[ed] the stereotypic white fears of the ‘bad nigger’” (“Career” 568). No longer a badman, no longer marked out for extermination but instead for sacrifice, Henry is now called (on to play the) human.

The erasure of John Hardy is coterminous with the erasure of his relationship to train as a vehicle of fugitive flight from state-sanctioned slaughter, and both must be understood as an interdicting response to what R.A. Judy, in this section’s epigraph, calls “the open-ended possibility of being among things” or, simply, *lawlessness* (“Authenticity” 226). This interdiction, moreover, is intractably bound up with a heteropatriarchal response to the black maternal and to black reproductive possibility. In other words, if Hardy’s capture and execution, as well as the “real” Henry’s capture by the convict-leasing apparatus, disappear into the machine and the story of heroic martyrdom it entails, so too does the knowledge of freedom *handed* to John by the mother and held in reserve in the hammer in his hand. John Henry can thus only be recast in the protagonistic role of Man against the Machine by necessarily obscuring the material and ontological identification of black women’s reproductions with the development of machines— *an identification that nevertheless leaves its predicating*

⁴¹ See Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another* 3.

imprint on John Henry and his hammer. As will become clearer through a turn to the specular modes of national-homosocial reproduction to which Henry was conscripted, Henry's nomination as human was constitutively entangled with this expulsion of the unruly specter of black female sexualities and the libidinal feminine: a negation of "the power of 'yes'" that Spillers ascribes, as pure potentiality, to the affirmation of "the 'female' within" ("Mama's Baby" 80).

In his book *Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture between the World Wars* (2003), the Americanist Joel Dinerstein situates the rising popularity of the John Henry narrative alongside broader cultural and economic anxieties over mechanization in U.S. public culture. He suggests that a machine aesthetic exemplified by jazz and big band swing, and inaugurated by Henry's hammer, worked to allay national fears of machine (re)production's atrophy of individuality by "humanizing" emergent technological and industrial forms. Breathing life, as it were, into the corpus of a national body viewed as increasingly mechanized and congealed by a Taylorist pattern of accumulation and regime of management, black expressive culture's play with repetition and rhythmic flow interacted dialectically with the "soulless" (34) march toward machine-driven progress. In so doing, Dinerstein contends, it assured the nation against techno-alienation's triumph by "model[ing] the possibility of individual style within a technological society" (130). Thus, according to his account, "Euro-Americans created the nation's *technology* while African Americans created the nation's *survival technology*" (22, emphases in original), the latter which he designates as "public rituals of music, dance, storytelling, and sermonizing that create a forum for existential affirmation" and that could "be appropriated by any society in crisis" (22, 113). Keeping

with the “middle ground somewhere ‘between’ . . . man and not-man” characteristic of the American “cultivated” pastoral ideal once described by Leo Marx in *The Machine in the Garden* (23), Dinerstein locates in African American culture a national prosthetic able to reconcile “the human/machine interface” (222). Yet while Dinerstein moves to recover black cultural forms from their repression in the canon of U.S. American modernism, an analysis of the racialized configurations of personation that scaffold the interface between human and machine, both securing its borders and enabling its crossing, is strangely absent from his text. Indeed, it should not be missed that Dinerstein is quick to repeat what Evelyn Hammonds has called “the myth of black disingenuity with technology” (qtd. in Nelson, “Future Texts” 6), placing technology “proper” on the side of whiteness and thereby oddly re-inscribing the very primitivist impulse that his engagement with African American machine aesthetics seeks to counteract. But more troubling, and more immediately pressing for our purposes, is the ambiguous object and aim of “survival” that Dinerstein uses to qualify black technologies mobilized in service of quelling *national* fears over the machinal attenuation of personhood. Underlying his argument is the capitulation to a multicultural logic of incorporation that offers, with a curious nod to Du Bois, “the ‘gifts’ of African American culture” (27) as gifts *to* the legible narration of the human qua U.S. personhood. Refusing to ask what is the mode of the human that survives the machine and whether this particular redemption and retrieval of the human can be apprehended outside the historical repertoire of personhood made available within the parameters of a racialized humanism, Dinerstein’s apologia for American survival and the reproduction of national belonging forgets that this survival is enlivened by the

virulent trauma and repeated death of Henry and of those for (and against) whom Henry stands.

Although Dinerstein does not engage it, this enlivening *and* deadening logic, one which cannot but speak an antagonism to the reproduction of other technologies of survival, is precisely that which animates director George Pal's 1946 Oscar-nominated "puppetoon" *John Henry and the Inky-Poo*. I close this chapter with Pal's animated film because it symptomatically discloses the racialized violations and gendered foreclosures that accompany John Henry's dominant circulations through the circuits of the civic order in ways that fail to account for the potential history of his hammer. As a media form that relies upon intense processes of mechanical reproduction to impress the vitality of a unitary character, the formal and ideological properties of the puppetoon allow for a particularly ripe case study of the constitutively racialized vocations of mechanicity and fungibility, automation and autonomy in cohering the modern human. Mark Sawiki explains: "The technical process is replacement animation in that you place one figure in the shot, take an exposure, and then remove that figure and 'replace' it with the next figure in the sequence" (*Animating* 52). The puppetoon is produced with many wooden puppets—in Pal's case, over nine thousand—that are each filmed one frame at a time and edited together to impress the spectator with the near-seamless, if still somewhat rigid or mechanical, motion of each diegetic figure. The puppetoon therefore incarnates a mode of mechanical animation that requires at once multiplicity and substitutability. As a technique of "replacement animation," each character is comprised of a plurality of uniquely posed puppets, though the tactic of continuity editing effects the impression of a single puppet that persists, alone, throughout the entirety of the animated film. Unlike the

case of the marionette, then, the aesthetic force of replacement animation does not derive primarily from a relation between the puppet and the puppeteer who pulls her strings but rather the complex *relations among the puppets themselves*.⁴² This means, first, that each puppet is absolutely fungible; after serving its role, it can be discarded. But it also means that (the perception of) movement in the puppetoon comes not from a “pure” dynamism or continuity intrinsic to the “life” of any discrete figure; rather, it is only through the exchanges *among* the puppets that the effect of movement or liveliness can be achieved and endured. However, mirroring the ideological mythologeme of John Henry, the formal techniques of continuity editing conceal these exchanges and relations, as well as their cuts, in the insistence on the single character.

Unlike cel animation, puppetoons were composed of filmed three-dimensional materials, which, in Pal’s short, were crucially deployed to accentuate the physicality of Henry’s musculature (the persistent point of visual fascination in the film). Before Henry enters the frame, however, *John Henry and the Inky-Poo* first opens with an establishing shot of a quiet railway and then cuts to a pan of the immense landscape of a bucolic South rendered in a diorama. Reminiscent of the centrality of romanticized pastoral imagery in Walt Disney’s *Song of the South* (dir. Wilfred Jackson and Harve Foster, 1946), these images serve to “naturalize” the clear artifice of the puppetoon, and the representational commitments held within, while also dramatizing the disruption that is to follow when the stream drill arrives on the scene. In an optical remediation of the nationalist dilemma that Leo Marx dubbed *The Machine in the Garden*, the windswept

⁴² To pursue the full social and aesthetic implications of this comparison, we would need to engage the very complicated discourse on the marionette, the machine, mediation, and movement addressed by Heinrich von Kleist and his interlocutors. I defer this task to a future version of this project.

flora register visually the intrusive preposition *in* that brought together the two symbols named by Marx's title in distinction to the more accommodating *and* that may have taken its place. The pastoral long shot then fades to a cabin beside a river, slowly zooming towards its interior before cutting to the mise-en-scène of a bedroom with the camera carefully framed around a window. An arm raises from the bottom of the frame, almost unnoticeable at first given the camera's intense focus on the window placed at the shot's center, until a female voice identified with the arm calls out, prolonged and melodically, the name "John Henry." Lightning strikes, the windows burst opened, and John Henry appears in the bedroom, like an apparition, fully grown and shirtless. The camera lingers on his near-naked body, inspecting his flesh like a commodity to be consumed from a severe low angle that serves to amplify Henry's stature, which appears almost statuesque.

"To incorporate," writes David Marriott (*Black Men* 27), "to eat, through the eyes; to want to look, and look again, in the name of appreciating and destroying, loving and hating. How do you start to tell the difference between the two?" The erotic, pedophilic charge through which the newborn becomes *caught* in an aestheticized scene of looking that Marriott might describe as devouring anticipates the sadistic pleasure that the spectator knows is coming in the form of Henry's annihilation and his reincorporation into the body politic of racial democracy, which feeds endlessly off his cadaver. The conjuncture of sex, race, death, and natality established in this early scene confirms that, in a sense, John Henry was never born so, in another, he can never really die, for his immaculate conception and his ghost-like appearance through the window introduces the newborn Henry in the mythological form of a massive, virile adult. The negation of human finitude and (congenital) vulnerability established here visually is bolstered by an

extradiegetic song cued upon Henry's first appearance, one that re-impresses the steel-driver's inhuman character and proportions: "John Henry was big / John Henry was strong / He was four-foot wide and twelve-foot long." To state the obvious, Henry can have no childhood, no biography that exceeds the life he must live to death so that a national portraiture of the human can survive. There is no impression of life, in Spillers's terms, beyond his "being for the captor." But there is also a profound anxiety at work here in this emphasis on the inhuman (or dehumanized) figure as the necessary prosthesis of American modernity, albeit one only briefly registered in Henry's sudden intrusion with the ominous backdrop of a visible rainstorm and audible thunder: an insistence that it is in fact Henry, not the steam drill, who brings into being the "interrupted idyll" (Marx, *Machine* 374) of the humanistic garden. This contradictory impulse alerts us to the puppetoon's function in mediating anxieties surrounding the human-machine interface through recourse to the signifying power of the black body, as well as the more fundamental anxieties surrounding blackness to which the film's engagement with the machinic responds.

The disappearance and impossibility of black childhood in the film emerges in relation to the effacement of genealogical kinship and the im-possibility of black maternity, paternity, and reproduction in the dominative terms of the white supremacist heteropatriarchal order. When the thunder and lightning ceases, Henry walks, smiling, over to a bed where a woman is lying down. He is not holding anything; he is not born with a hammer in his hand. Henry introduces himself with his first- and surnames and the two shake hands, like strangers, and the woman replies, "Please to know you, son. I's your ma." This is a bizarre, deeply disconcerting interaction; on a certain narrative

register, it indeed makes no sense. Yet the presentation of mothering here is as concealing as it is revealing. First, the impossible conditions of Henry's birth recall, among others, Booker T. Washington's opening statement in his autobiography (*Up from Slavery* 1) on his own obscure(d) origins: "I am not sure of the exact place or exact date of my birth, but at any rate I suspect I must have been born somewhere and at sometime." The deferred encounter between the fully formed newborn and his mother betrays a repeated negation of "Mother Right," the cancellation of the social fiction of maternal origins in a historic order in which "the female could not, in fact, claim her child" (Spillers, "Mama's" 80). The impossible scenario in which Henry meets the woman who, he learns is his mother well after his birth incarnates what Moten, building on Spillers, refers to as "impossible substitutive motherhood" (*Break* 15), a default on origin where reproduction is the "replay and reverb of an impossible natal occasion" (14). This reverb is stilled, however, in the visible expulsions of the mother's reproductions and her labors, both the labor of gestation and of rearing and reproducing John Henry. He appears, in the present parlance, as quite simply a self-made man.

This suppression of the maternal, the feminine, and the reproductive (distinct though metonymically aligned in the historic instance) as *animating agents* in the film's narrative trajectory is the absence that allows for Henry's precarious installment as the hyper-masculine embodiment of national human potential. After the scene of miraculous natality, the film cuts to a group of black steel drivers singing in unison, wearing the same clothes, and engaged in the synchronic gesture of hitting their tiny hammers up and down, again and again. It is even perhaps the case that these characters consist of the same mass reproduced puppet. Henry's entrance from the left of the frame marks a stark

contrast with these men insofar as he is nearly twice their size and when he introduces himself he alerts the workers of his name, and the fact of his birth three weeks ago, whereas the work group remains nameless. Henry's exceptional difference comes further into focus when a voiceover alerts us of a foreboding "trouble": "the railroad bought an engine most inhuman" called the Inky-poo. A montage follows in which the men explain, one by one, the exact nature of the trouble that the steam engine forecasts; it is "Faster!," "Quicker!," "Deeper!," "Harder!" Each exclamatory is intercut with moving images of Inky-Poo pounding steel, progressively accelerating before finally culminating in an ejaculatory release of steam (see fig. 1 and 2).



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

The overt sexualization of the steam engine on the registers of both sound and image produces the machine as an icon of virile, indeed inhuman, masculinity. It should not be missed, though, that the steam engine's entrance comes after John Henry's, and that the homosocial erotics established in the spectatorial encounter with the masculinized machine follows (and is perhaps dwarfed by) Henry, who is permanently erect and standing upright. Thus, even as the folktale demands that John Henry figure the solution to the problem of the machine, the film's visual rhetorics make clear that Henry himself is a problem that must be dealt with. "You can't beat the engine, the machine," one man announces. Displacing racial fears and fantasies of emasculation onto the masses of black male workers who are inscribed diegetically as spectators of the machine and Henry alike, blackness and machinery emerge as chiasmatic locales through which white claims to normative gender, sexuality, and humanity are rehearsed and spectatorially inscribed. In other words, if the doubly pleasurable and destructive encounter with the steam engine makes evident that the phallus is always technical, always a prosthesis,⁴³ the projective machining or surplus masculinization of Henry requires that he is later expelled and introjected, castrated and then re-grafted on to the national body. "Projecting his own desires onto the Negro," Fanon writes, "the white man behaves 'as if' the Negro really had them" (*BSWM* 167) and, pages earlier, "The Negro is a toy in the white man's hands" (140). One must consider this racial structure of fetishism addressed by Fanon when we imagine the immensely phobic and philic scene of homosocial labor that took place at Pal's United Productions of America studio, where

⁴³ Derrida writes, "the phallus is itself originally a marionette" (*Beast Vol. I* 222). Fanon writes, "the Negro is eclipsed. He is turned into a penis. He is a penis" (*BSWM* 170). It is in the interarticulation of these two statements that the puppetoon's contradictory impulses are symptomatically enunciated.

the animator and his crew crafted and handled hundreds of John Henry puppets, piece by piece, part by part. To this extent, each wooden toy is invested with the libidinal power of a detachable prosthesis, a mutilated and severed penis that stands up and stands in, like a frozen monument, for national citizenship.⁴⁴

Divorced from the determinations of law and the state, criminality and criminalization return to the film in a preoccupation with the propriety of embodiment as a determinant of proper humanity. After the intrusive montage, someone in the crowd of workers asks John Henry what he is going to do, to which he responds “I’m John Henry,” suggesting that autonomy stands oppositionally to the political and ontological threat of automation, before picking up two large hammers in his hand (see fig. 3). Even as Henry is rendered machine-like in the scopic field, this assertion of self-knowing individuation allows for his approximate entrance into the conceptual field of the human. He continues, “Ain’t no machine made that can be a man. Once a man’s got a mind he can beat that machine.” The emphasis on the importance of the mind to brutal physical labor is striking, but it serves to attenuate the fetishistic fantasy of the bestial *bête-machine* just previously inscribed while inviting the other non-individuated workers to a civilizational discourse of inclusionary uplift. This is a recurring insistence throughout the seven-

⁴⁴ As Robyn Wiegman argues of the sacrificial and ritualistic spectacle of lynching: “In severing the black male’s penis from his body, either as a narrative account or a material act, the mob aggressively denies the patriarchal sign and symbol of the masculine, interrupting the privilege of the phallus and thereby *reclaiming, through the perversity of dismemberment, the black male’s (masculine) potentiality for citizenship*” (*American Anatomies* 83, emphasis mine). Ann duCille, building on the Fanon quotation cited above, treats the circuits of fetishism, identification, and sadistic violence that culminate in the severing and desired repossession/devouring of the black penis, rendered in the white supremacist optic as a fuck-machine, that proves one structuring condition of white male existence: “white men... punish black men for a desire that is finely their own: to fuck a black man, to fuck like a black man, to fuck white women with a black penis” (“Unbearable Darkness” 306).

minute short. In the closing scene, after John Henry has died, the voiceover refutes the fact of finitude: “John Henry: an American working man. John Henry didn't die that day at Big Bend Tunnel. He just showed that a man can do anything a machine can, if *a man only has a mind* to do it. No, John Henry didn't die... He started living in the hearts of men forever and today.” Such a pivot may explain some positive reviews of Pal's film in both the white and the black press, which lauded Pal for departing from the explicitly grotesque imagery of the vaudeville tradition that influenced earlier racialized cartoons. Nevertheless, Henry's intellect – his capacity *to respond* to the steam engine – comes into view against the backdrop of the black masses, whose unthinking character quite literally disallows them from knowing how to respond to the machine. Figured as near-identical replications of one another, there is an exchangeability among them, one that makes apparent the processes of their production and reproduction beyond the thematization of their labor on screen. In contrast, the seamless editing that confers upon Henry the status of individual through the dissimulation of the exchanges that allow for his production and reproduction saves him from this structure of substitution. Taken together, these divergences place the other puppets and the lives for which they stand in the position of the automaton. In her work on animation, Sianne Ngai quotes Rey Chow to describe “being ‘automatized’” as the condition of “being subjected to [a manipulation] whose origins are beyond one's individual grasp” (*Ugly Feelings* 99). In these terms autonomy and automation exist in a relation of simple opposition, and it is to the former to which Henry runs when he runs against the steam drill and to which Pal has him run when he runs Henry away not only from the others who labor at the scene of production but also from the scene of reproduction that begins before the film starts. Of course, this is a

fabrication of autonomy that masks his prior automation by the hand of the animator and the nationalist project to which Pal handed him.

We may say, then, that George Pal was one of the petty artisans of which Du Bois spoke. Trafficking Henry as the image of *autonomy* that simultaneously requires and nullifies *automation*, he remains unable to think the two dialectically, as each other's mutual conditions of differential possibility. If to be automatized is to be manipulated, to be touched or handled "beyond one's individual grasp," it is precisely the effacement of automation that subtends the murderous retrieval of Henry as the face of man.⁴⁵ What this circulation of Henry constantly disavows is the way he was grasped before he grasped; the hammer is the trace and occasion of this prior handling. Here, it is the interstitial zone opened and occupied by John Henry and his *relations*— the crossing over and crossing out of the received human-machine relation— that gestures toward an insurgent counter-practice and counter-philosophy of technics to which the nation-state responds, with force, by reasserting the onto-epistemological security of Man. In the following chapter, I ask how these crossings were managed, but never fully, by a variety of racial and technocultural formations that sought to expropriate what we might call Henry's innovations, such that the human-machine distinction was rewritten not in the mode of antagonism but as an amiable relationship, one that might govern and suppress black insurgency through racial liberalism's and racial humanism's harnessing of technomediated communication.

⁴⁵ Manipulation derives from the Latin *manus*, or hand.

CHAPTER THREE

THE CLOSED WORLD AND THE OPEN SOCIETY: CYBERNETICS AND RACIAL LIBERALISM FROM WIENTER TO WYNTER

It is assumed that, although the African possesses a self-referring structure that makes him or her close to “being human,” he or she belongs, up to a point, to a world we cannot penetrate.

—Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*

black box method: A strategy for investigating a complex object without knowledge or assumptions about its internal make-up, structure or parts.

—*International Encyclopedia of Systems & Cybernetics*

There was no communication between master and slave on any strictly human level, but only the relation one might have to a piece of property—if you twist the knob on your radio you expect it to play.

—Amiri Baraka, *Blues People*

In a series of recent meditations on the political horizon of contemporary network cultures, digital media theorist Alexander Galloway has probed the coincidence between late capitalism's demand for incessant interconnectivity and communication, on the one hand, and the prominence of refusal as a left political tactic, on the other. Historicizing the institutional and epistemological structures that subtend this twin politicization of coercive presence and fugitive absence, Galloway suggests that we must foremost understand the incitement to communication as the incitement to interest.

Governmentality, he intimates, is the science of the interested subject.⁴⁶ To bring interest into being as a productive form, we are therefore called upon to speak for ourselves, to click, to participate, to interface, to put our interests to work. Here, Galloway echoes a certain strand of marxist thought that emphasizes collective practices of self-activity and auto-valorization within the chatter of the commons, and that links these practices of communicative exchange to the emergence of new strategies of accumulation. Yet while extending and modulating this tradition— one running, we might say, at least from C.L.R. James through Tiziana Terranova— Galloway insists that in order to apprehend this mode of governance as a contemporary dominant, we must first inquire into its intellectual history and its technological substrates; we must inquire, therefore, into what he calls, following the French philosophical collective Tiqqun, *the cybernetic hypothesis*. What interests Galloway are precisely the theoretical, political, and technical conditions of such a hypothesis. Or, as he goes on to clarify his object of interest, “I would like to

⁴⁶ Galloway's argument appears to echo and extend Foucault's thesis that “government is only interested in interests” (*Birth of Biopolitics* 45). For a compelling exegesis of Foucault's account of how interests are positively shaped and produced within the field of governmentality, see Cheah, “Biopower.” For a distinct but related assessment of the bind between the production of interest and “the science of governance” to which I will return, see Harney, “Abolition and the General Intellect.” All references to Harney in this chapter are from this essay, published online with no pagination.

explore...a specific kind of blackness that has begun to permeate cybernetic societies” and, he argues further, “that this blackness is not simply an effect of cybernetic societies but is in fact a necessary precondition for them” (“Black” 239).

The form of blackness that most immediately interests Galloway finds its material, historical, and allegorical incarnation in the figure of the black box. Materially, a black box is a technical device whose internal functions remain obfuscated, consolidated as a theoretical object in the historic instance of post-war electrical engineering and anti-aircraft research that saw the birth of cybernetics. In the early writings of cyberneticians such as Norbert Wiener and W. Ross Ashby, the black box was proposed as a praxis of engaging the unknown and the opaque.⁴⁷ Whereas interior structures and functions can be apprehended within those units and systems that engineers nominate as white boxes, a black box’s inner depths remain unspecified. A black box is known, that is, only through the trace-effects of its interactions, its inputs and outputs. Allegorically, however, Galloway finds in the black box a profoundly ubiquitous set of organizational principles for contemporary life that extend well beyond any narrowly technological domain. This set of political, economic, and social principles augurs “a specific epistemological regime”— a black box epistemology— that has now become pervasive vis-à-vis a new mode of capitalist production variously label post-fordist, late, communicative, or, to use Galloway’s preferred parlance, cybernetic (“Cybernetic” 111). In his account, under this regime the subject herself is cast as a black box that must be brought in to a network of connection such that her outputs can be properly assessed and be “heard.”

⁴⁷ See Wiener, *Cybernetics* x-xi; and Ashby, *Introduction* 86-92.

If the black box regime is one predicated on the compulsion to feedback, participation, and self-representation, however, it also always carries with it a particular threat of disconnection, a flight from intelligibility and appearance instantiated through the refusal to interface. In the face of a political-economic situation motored by the labor of communication and sociality, Galloway thus tunes his critical energies to the imaginative possibilities of exit and defection embodied, above all, in the black bloc: a political tactic of self-defense developed out of the Italian *passamontagna* movement in the 1970s. Black bloc participants employ facial masking and dress in a collective style to become indistinguishable from one another. (In the contemporary United States, “Wear black! Fight back!” is the rallying cry most often heard from black bloc participants).⁴⁸ The black bloc’s tactic of anonymization and its strategy of “no demands” constitute a refusal of visibility and of the injunction to speak in one’s own name; indeed, in a more fundamental sense, Galloway proposes the black bloc simply refuses to appear. In the era of computation, of logical machines, he argues we now encounter a renewed *politics of logic*: a politicization of appearance and disappearance (“Black” 246). Disappearance, exodus, refusal, escape, non-existence: each names in Galloway’s text a withdrawal from the relentless dialectic of resistance and hegemony, insurrection and counter-insurgency—a destituent (black) power that promises to render inoperative the very mechanisms by which the power of governance is reproduced.⁴⁹ And while his inspirators

⁴⁸ On this social movement history see, for example, Lowes, “Black Bloc.”

⁴⁹ The concept of the destituent has been elaborated most influentially by Giorgio Agamben in his essay “What is Destituent Power?” In contrast to Antonio Negri (the unnamed target, I suspect, of Agamben’s polemic) who affirms as originary the constituent power (*potenza*) of the demos and calls for the exodus of constituent power from its capture by the constituted power (*potere*) of law and state, Agamben worries that any such affirmation of constituent power inevitably reinvigorates the dialectic, however non-teleological, between constituent power and law. In other words, constituent power for Agamben can destroy the law but only to the extent that it erects another law (70); it cannot

Tiqqun leverage the unambiguously grey figure of “fog” as the central motif for their “invisible revolt,”⁵⁰ for Galloway it is finally an impenetrable blackness that makes available the possibility of opaque, ungovernable zones of non-communication. The black bloc blacks out the compulsion to inclusion within individuating and participatory structures fundamentally predicated on the administration and expropriation of social life. It harbors and protects a blackness that refuses, in the final instance, to come to light. Bringing the black box and the black bloc into intimate rapport, blackness thus ultimately signals for Galloway at once the idiom of contemporary cybernetic governance and the ruptural occasion of its undoing.

To take Galloway at his word that blackness provides a necessary condition for cybernetic societies, however, requires some revisions to both his conceptual apparatus and the historical genealogy that he forwards. To make these revisions is to attend to a certain repression in Galloway’s text of the institutional and political coordination (which is emphatically not to say the equivalence) between blackness and the racial. This is not only to raise the question of a politics of citation, of what Stefano Harney has called “the pre-history of immaterial labor” in the Black Atlantic and of the virtuostic performances of “escapology” in the nineteenth-century circum-Atlantic world that Daphne Brooks, for

suspend the violence of law itself. Agamben is interested, then, not in the exorbitant and errant flight of constituent power but rather in a withdrawal from the very terms of constitution *as such*. Destituent power (*potenza destituente*) instantiates a force that “deactivates and renders works (of economy, of religion, of language, etc.) inoperative” (69). This Agambenian trace, I would argue, inheres in Galloway’s tendency toward deconstitution and, as I soon show, in his understanding of non-being as destitution.

⁵⁰ See Tiqqun’s “L’hypothèse cybernétique,” especially section XI.

example, has so expertly detailed— though it is of course that too.⁵¹ Neither is it exactly to call out, as it were, the “epistemic habits of whiteness” that saturate that most favorite anarcho-marxist political form, the black bloc.⁵² Instead, by foregrounding Galloway’s appeal to blackness and the symbolic labor he demands of this position, I mean to ask how re-directing his articulation of cybernetic blackness through the political and existential itineraries of racial blackness would transform the very terms of communication and non-communication—and, ultimately, being and non-being—that compel his conclusions. Following these pathways demands that we engage with discourses of blackness that chafe the technological metaphors that undergird prominent diagnoses of contemporary governance. It also demands an encounter with the material trace and the heuristic force of race that inheres within precisely the cybernetic archive to which Galloway rightly directs our attention.

This chapter responds to these demands by recalibrating the fact of blackness as constitutive of “cybernetic society,” that is, by recasting this configuration in terms of its peculiar racialized and racializing horizon. Specifically, I pursue how, under the rubric of cybernetics, new understandings of communication across physical, biological, and social systems came together with post-war ideals of racial redress. In the wake of the Second World War and the contemporaneous re-organization of the U.S. racial state, cybernetics provided a critical technology for the liberal governance of racial blackness

⁵¹ In *Bodies in Dissent*, Brooks establishes “escapology” as a praxis, an aesthetics, and a methodology of black diasporic disappearance and reappearance that “mak[es] that body ‘vanish’ in the midst of the panoptic culture of slavery and under the peculiar institution’s diligent and watchful eye” (121). With specific reference to Henry “Box” Brown, Brooks generalizes the vanishing act of the “escape artist” as a modality of the insurgent performance of black freedom.

⁵² The quoted phrase is drawn from sociologist A.K. Thompson’s study of white activists in contemporary anti-globalization movements, *Black Bloc, White Riot*, 82.

and for the transformation of what intellectual historian Michael Rudolph West has called “the idea of race relations.” While the critical literature and classic historiography of cybernetics have usefully situated the birth of the cybernetic science of relationships within the political culture of the Cold War period—with paranoia emerging as its exemplary affect—these studies have been less attuned to how the reparative ambitions of an “official, state-recognized antiracism” (Melamed 26) also textured this dense imbrication. Puzzling through the heterogeneous cultural logics that animated the interdisciplinary dissemination of cybernetics thus requires that we grapple more fully with “desegregation as a Cold War imperative,” to borrow Mary Dudziak’s neat formulation (“Desegregation,” *Cold War*).

Indeed, heady images of human-machine interaction and integration have understandably preoccupied theorists and historians of early cybernetics given the field’s origins in Wiener’s anti-aircraft research and its elaboration soon after vis-à-vis John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern’s game theory of war. But I shall assert that this narrow focus on the “satisfactory integrat[ion]” (Myrdal 1016) of that which had once been considered irreconcilable metaphysical entities—that is, the human and the machine—has obscured another *event of integration* that simultaneously supported first-order cybernetics, one that more thoroughly called into question the metaphysical range of human being. More forcefully, this emphasis has worked to avert our attention from the specter of race, and especially racial blackness, which haunts narratives of human-machine integration. I show, therefore, that the conceptual elaboration of cybernetics—its logistics and its variegated, sometimes incommensurate, trajectories—has proved deeply

ensnared with the founding disarticulation of blackness and the human (being) that institutes the modern world.

In what follows, I develop this argument in three parts. I begin by reading Galloway's pronouncements about the cybernetic black box through and against a Fanonian repertoire similarly concerned with the entanglements of blackness, non-transparency, and enlightenment. Charting the points of contact and divergence between these accounts, I trouble Galloway's turn to blackness as a figurative resource of cybernetic defection, and I argue further that his binary function communication/non-communication remains entrapped within the exact coordinates of a world that this tradition of black thought seeks to explode. I then turn backward to trace the outline of racial blackness in the post-war cybernetic archive that precipitates contemporary engagements with communication culture. Excavating the under-explored operations of racial reconciliation and antiblackness in early cybernetic thought, I demonstrate that Galloway is absolutely correct that blackness forms the condition of possibility for cybernetic societies, though not exactly in the way he imagines. Against the backdrop of a Cold War politics that mandated the appearance of an inclusive U.S. multi-racial democracy on the world stage, an understanding of "race relations" as communication systems consolidated among popular and academic thinkers alike. This apotheosis of communication, particularly in terms of so-called "interracial communication," functioned as a productive knowledge formation of a then-nascent multiculturalist white supremacy. Attempting to resolve the antimony of racial antagonism in an antiblack world through communicative relays, cybernetics served in its first-order incarnation as a crucial cultural location for the production and dissemination of racial liberalism,

harnessed not only through paranoid technologies of exclusion but also through reparative affective technologies of inclusion and redress.⁵³ In this regard, Norbert Wiener's understanding of negative feedback mechanisms as "the property of being able to adjust future conduct by past performance" (*Human* 33) proved deeply implicated in liberal doctrines of white counter-insurgency that sought to re-functionalize and re-program the black box of race.

Whereas the second part of this chapter uncovers the arts of racial governance that bound—and bind—communication with liberal protocols of "common sense," the final section considers how cybernetic models of communication have been also radically leveraged and détourned for the writing of other commons and of other senses. I thus ask how the arsenal of race that at once scaffolds and haunts this knowledge formation might lead us toward a reconceptualization of the otherwise resources of cybernetics found not in the black bloc but, instead, in a certain black radical tradition. Turning to Caribbean intellectual Sylvia Wynter's explorations of racial modernity as a "human-system ensemble" ("After Humanism" 22), I address the ways she enables us to rethink the imaginative possibilities of cybernetic thought beyond its pernicious liberal sojourns. Wynter, however, has not been read as a theorist of cybernetics—certainly not in media theory or in the burgeoning formation of the new materialisms, but neither in the fields of black studies and critical ethnic studies where her range is still most thoroughly

⁵³ The concept-metaphor of an "antiblack world" is drawn from the early work of philosopher Lewis Gordon. See *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*.

confronted.⁵⁴ This, though, should be surprising because Wynter's massive transdisciplinary project to overhaul the "genre" of Man and "its governing sociogenic code" ("Desêtre" 115) has been marked, in part, by an intense and long-standing exchange between Fanon's concept of sociogeny and the models of autopoiesis and self-organization offered by second-order cyberneticians Humberto Maturana, Francisco Varela, and Heinz von Foerster. Hers is a radical empiricism and an appositional cybernetics, I argue, that seeks out the im-possible description of an otherwise and incalculable future in a time after Man. I conclude this chapter, then, by reading how Wynter convenes a decolonial science fiction that poses anew the question of blackness as the effect and precondition of cybernetic societies.

3.1 BLACK SKIN, BLACK BOX

[T]he "graph of black will once again be on the upswing."
—David Bradley quoted in Sylvia Wynter, "The Ceremony
Must be Found: After Humanism"

In his influential 1963 study of political systems and organizations, *The Nerves of Government: Models of Political Communication and Control*, political scientist Karl W. Deutsch observes that, for too long, conceptions of politics have assumed a worldview inherited from the closed mechanics of the Newtonian universe. Such "theory," he tells

⁵⁴ It is essential at this point that I underline the fundamental difference between these disciplinary modes of (non)engagement with Wynter's work. Whereas in media theory and the new materialisms we encounter a situation of unambiguous neglect, in the case of black studies and critical ethnic studies I only mean to note that the point of *emphasis* in readings of Wynter has not been her critical interventions in and through cybernetics. For key texts in black studies that have engaged Wynter's writings on theoretical physics and neuroscience, respectively, see McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xxiv-xxvi; and Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 25-9. For an incisive polemic that cites Wynter's anticipation of, and proleptic interventions in, the discourse of posthumanism, see Jackson, "Animal."

us, “perhaps answered a psychological need, since it embraced a relatively comforting picture of a static world, and of largely unchanging political habits” (72). Yet despite these apparent consolations, Deutsch warns that such frameworks blind us to the dynamic capacity of individuals and social and political systems to learn, to change, and to adapt. More damningly, he suggests that these mechanistic and stagnant models neglect the *necessity* that individuals and systems “adapt[] to the environment and its changes” (129) in order to assure the proper functioning of “government.” In fact, in Deutsch’s view, theorists of national democracy have so far left the most urgent of questions unasked: “what is the capacity of this political system for self-transformation with significant preservation of its own identity and continuity?” (xiii). For Deutsch, the inability to accommodate and respond to systemic disturbances placed the very “self-preservation” (93) of democratic government in peril. Against this foreboding, Deutsch asserted—and celebrated—the fact that U.S. democracy successfully inhabited, to invoke Amiri Baraka and Deborah McDowell, the malleable structure of “the changing same.” This ability of the U.S. democratic system to maintain its essential “identity” *through* “self-transformation,” crucially, depended upon “the unbroken links” of a communication apparatus that allowed for “a full flow” of information. If this open flow were to be “interrupted, such as by oppression or secrecy,” Deutsch urges, “society becomes an automaton, a walking corpse” (129). According to the profoundly U.S. exceptionalist terms of this formula, it is precisely the bonds of communication that protect the American nation-state’s vitality from the cadaverous embrace of “oppression,” “secrecy,” and, their offspring, non-communication.

In a subsection of his introduction titled “Some Normative Aspects of the Communications Point of View” Deutsch makes especially clear the moral, even mortal, stakes of this orientation. He writes,

The concern at the heart of the philosophic approach proposed here is to preserve for any finite mind or group some open pathway to the infinite, that is, to preserve for it the possibility of communication with a potentially inexhaustible environment... From this view it follows that suicide, blind-alley pathways, extreme self-isolation, or self-paralysis is normatively rejected as *evil*. This is in one sense an existential decision. Those who opt for open pathways and for life cannot convince by any deductive logic those who deliberately choose death, self-closure, or other forms of self-destruction. (xiv, emphasis mine)

The accumulation of metonymic substitutions in this passage is striking. On the one hand, communication marks the ethical decision to “choose” life itself. On the other, the refusal to communicate signifies isolation, paralysis, and, finally, a will to death. Corresponding to this outline, communication in turn tropes as the possibility of truly infinitely inclusive relations, whereas non-communication signals the pathology of self-induced enclosure. Moreover, those who choose communication—or life, as Deutsch would have it—cannot themselves communicate with those who affirm the irreducible blockage of non-communication—coded here as existential negation. To substantiate this argument, he turns to the work of Norbert Wiener, “the intellectual father” (103) of cybernetics, which we soon discover provides the true name of Deutsch’s “philosophic approach.” In contradistinction to the openness of this approach, Deutsch posits silence, withdrawal, and absolute opacity as the incarnation of demonic evil.

As Deutsch’s assessments indicate, cybernetics (from the Greek *kybernetes* meaning “steersman” and its descendent, the French *cybernétique* meaning “the art of governing”) is the science of relationships. Emerging in the wake of the Second World

War as a theory of message transmission and control “in the imperative mood” (Wiener, *Human* 16), early cybernetic thought wrote the universe in terms of a general science of communication, focused on the dynamic processes of interaction within systems—biological, machinic, and social—by which stability and organization are maintained. This pronounced concern with self-regulatory and self-determining mechanisms in systems hinged on the concept of negative feedback as form of self-correcting “control,” understood “in the homeostatic... sense rather than the coercive sense” (Light 37). Cybernetics, as initially conceptualized, thus elevated communication to a first principle in approaching how “teleological systems” react to environmental disturbances through informational exchange between various system components in order to achieve systematic balance (Rosenbleuth et. al.). As an epistemological frame, cybernetics’ interest lies not in the ontology of units but rather in their relation, their regulation, and their organization within and between systems. The black box, as the paragon of the cybernetic epistemology, is therefore important not due to the “truth” of its inner recesses but rather the tendencies of its outward behavior. As neuropsychiatrist W. Ross Ashby clarified in his 1958 primer *An Introduction to Cybernetics*, “Cybernetics treats not things but ways of behaving. It does not ask ‘what is this thing?’ but ‘what does it do?’ and ‘what can it do?’” (1). Ashby’s pithy definition highlights the importance of patterns and properties of relation to the cybernetic worldview; the interpretative substratum of this commitment to the problematic of hetero-affection remains, then, a certain rigorous aversion to the thing itself, which enters Ashby’s locution only to the extent that it is identified with its possible interactions and productive effects within a system. Seemingly displacing a metaphysical orientation to the order of things, the thing emerges in this

cybernetic account as a performative and modular agent within a collective medium or communication milieu. It is imperative, in other words, that the thing called the black box maintains a circuit of communication.

It is this cybernetic compulsion that the black box must speak—that it have outputs—that Galloway identifies as the precursor to, and the generalized condition of, the present formation of communicative capitalism.⁵⁵ What Galloway wants his readers to grasp is that the contemporary inheritance of a black box epistemology has initiated a transformation in the very logic of the commodity that, in turn, compels a transformation in the cartography of politics as such. In his view, whereas a hermeneutic project had once oriented left politics in an effort to speak those relations of production and power secreted by the mystifications of appearance, today we find that the commodity is always and already speaking. More precisely, Galloway contends that the black box— as the exemplar of power’s contemporary composition—produces a particular challenge to the modern enterprise of critique, whose organizing vocation and aspiration, in his somewhat hasty estimation, was obliged by the cunning of the secret and its pursuit: “objects were unveiled or denaturalized to reveal their inner workings— from Descartes’s treatise on

⁵⁵ Galloway shares this concern with a substantial number of media and cultural theorists. For the most influential accounts of communicative capitalism and its cognates that have passed through media theory “proper,” see Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*; Terranova, *Network Culture*, 73-97; Hardt and Negri, *Empire*; Lazzarato, “Immaterial Labor;” and Liu, *Laws of Cool*. Despite the differences across these accounts, each posits a break in the capitalist mode of production (usually under the heading “post-fordism”), which is said increasingly to valorize the labor of affect, communications, and the entire sphere of human relations. But it is precisely because these accounts have proved so seductive, especially in the disciplinary domain of media studies, that we must heed Lisa Lowe’s note of caution about the “tend[ency] to periodize the ‘newness’ of the present” in even the most “critical social theory” (*Intimacies* 196n.54). She writes, “[I]n light of the commodification of human life within slavery, colonialism, as well as contemporary globalization, we can appreciate that what is currently theorized as the financialization of life as ‘human capital’ in neoliberalism brutally and routinely occurred and continues to occur throughout the course of modern empires” (197n.54). I pursue some of the implications of Lowe’s critical recalibration more explicitly in the following chapter in relation to the U.S. prison regime, the institutionalization of television, and media-theoretical efforts to describe a neoliberal “attention economy.”

method to both the Kantian and Marxian concepts of critique to the Freudian plumbing of the ego” (“Black” 241). He thus rehearses and re-writes Marx at the scene of the dancing table to ventriloquize the (no longer muted) speech of the black box:

If it could speak today, the black box would say: “Let us reconnect to the noisy sphere where everything takes place on the surface and in full view of everyone, for this is the plane of production, on whose threshold is already encoded a million mantras for the new economy: “Do what feels right.” “Reach out and touch someone.” (240)

Galloway’s polemical aim is to suggest that, in the present conjuncture, “the black boxing” of the self does not evince hidden kernels, such as the unconscious or labor power, to be unearthed. As “node[s] contained in a network of interaction” (243), known and knowable only through the incessant traces of their “external connectivit[ies]” (240), these boxes, by definition, *must* speak— in the sense of connect, interact, interface. Moreover, these boxes that must speak are specifically black insofar their productive value promulgates solely through their relational capacities and communicative faculties; their opaque interiors are indeed precisely and productively beside the point: “It is not so much a question of *can* [it speak] but *does* [it], not so much a politics of exclusion as a politics of subsumption” (*Interface* 128, emphasizes his).

Philosopher of science Andrew Pickering writes that “A [b]lack [b]ox is something that does something, that one does something to do, and that does something back” (*Cybernetic Brain* 20). It “assumes,” he continues, “an ontology of unknowability... and tries to address *the problematic of getting along* with systems that can surprise us” (23,

emphasis mine).⁵⁶ It is required therefore that the black box be brought *in* to a network of connection— that it “reach out and touch someone” as Galloway mimes— such that its outputs can be properly assessed, be “heard.” Making explicit the broader reach of this logic, cultural theorist Stefano Harney succinctly encapsulates the black box’s ethos: “We must hear your opinions, have your feedback, and include your point of view. And when representation becomes the obligation of all in the workplace, the university, and the community, democracy is put to work.” Importantly, this incitement to participation as a technology of (liberal) democracy bears the imprint of a strain in social and political thought that diagnoses the violence of inclusion as the violence of enclosure. Thinkers from Walter Benjamin and Mario Tronti to Fred Moten and Roberto Esposito have in different ways argued that what is threatening to the law of a system is not violence but its outside. Given that the distinction lawful/unlawful is already internal to the domain of law, what threatens law is not that there exist aberrations from the law but rather that there exists such a thing as an outside of the law. A mechanism of engulfment rather than containment, the violence of law is the internment of exteriority, the bringing in of the outside.⁵⁷ The unrelenting demand for a circumscribed notion of sociality that underwrites the cybernetic age of the black box constitutes an intensification of this

⁵⁶ For Pickering, cybernetics thus inaugurates a decisively “nonmodern performative ontology” (22) in its embrace of that which cannot be enframed by the representational drive of “modern science.” Yet it is precisely the ethical and political problematic of “getting along” with the unknowable that will be at stake in this chapter and, indeed, it will be my argument that this problematic circulates in an orbit that is in no way heterogeneous to the political field of modern ontology.

⁵⁷ Walter Benjamin makes this especially clear in his “Critique of Violence”: “violence, when not in the hands of the law, threatens it not by the ends that it may pursue but by its mere existence outside the law” (281). See also Tronti, “The Strategy of Refusal”; Moten and Harney, “Politics Surrounded”; Esposito, *Immunitas* 29-51; and Du Bois’s commentary on the general strike (*Black Reconstruction*, esp. 67). For the cybernetic account of how the “difference” between the binary designations legal/illegal is instituted by, and self-referential to, the former designation (i.e. the legal), see Luhmann, “The Self-Reproduction of Law and Its Limits.”

immunizing logic of capture through tendentious strategies of incorporation and the coercive thrall to inclusion.

In opposition to this communicatory drive toward the black box, Galloway submits that the black bloc possesses the knowledge of another fact of blackness— one that arrives by way of “a new radical syllabus” (246) for left politics, which includes, prominently, Emmanuel Levinas’s early work *On Escape* and Paul Virilio’s treatise on *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*. In these texts, Galloway discovers a radical affirmation of exactly that which Deutsch, in *The Nerves of Government*, had previously rejected as “evil.” In the black bloc, that is, there emerge new potentialities of resistance through an escape from communication: a subversive repertoire of “tactics of nonexistence” that “seeks to upend the power circuit entirely via political nonparticipation” (“Black” 247, 244-5). More provocatively, at the apex of this drift into non-communication, he asserts that the black bloc departs from a “merely” sociological intervention or even from the register of the ontic to mount an assault on the very order of ontology as such; it prompts “a new politics of being” (247). “[T]he key to this new political stance is in its subtractivism vis-à-vis the dimensions of being” (245), Galloway clarifies, and its “new mantra” is “We want to leave be, to leave *being*” (244, emphasis his). Thus, against the will to representation and participation in what was once called civil society, these tactics of disappearance appear (I choose my word carefully) to disclose a refusal of being and a willingness to enter a zone of non-being: a covert celebration, we might say, of *being blackened*.

Of course, one need not be a card-carrying Fanonian to notice the myopia of this formulation. Nevertheless, if we choose to read it beyond a simple (un)happy coincidence

of word choice, it yields some critical insight. This is because in posing the blackness of cybernetic societies in terms of a binary cartography of existence, Galloway poses— if inadvertently and unevenly— *the Fanonian question of nonexistence*. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon provides the most thoroughgoing treatment of modernity’s horizon of authorization forged in the synapse between blackness and being. Responding in part to psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni’s ahistorical solicitation of inferiority and dependency as explanatory rubrics for apprehending the psychology of colonization, Fanon argues that Mannoni’s understanding of these complexes as “antedat[ing] colonization” (85) legitimates antiblack colonial racism through a metaleptic reversal of cause and effect. But Fanon goes further than merely asserting the historicity of these psychosocial configurations; he does not, that is, stop at revealing that what Mannoni had taken to be the ostensible cause of colonialism— “the so-called dependency complex of colonized peoples”— proves instead colonialism’s productive effect. More fundamentally, Fanon contends that a quasi-Hegelian portraiture of psychic servitude and dependency, such as Mannoni’s, fails to capture the precise lineaments of the existential situation that characterizes black life lived under the foundational agencies of slavery, genocide, and colonial sovereignty.⁵⁸ “A feeling of inferiority?,” Fanon asks, “No, a feeling of nonexistence” (139).

⁵⁸ See the chapter “Character Assassination” in Emily Apter’s *Continental Drift* for a helpful treatment of the translation of the Hegelian lordship/bondsman scenario in Mannoni’s writing of the encounter between *Prospero and Caliban*. The connection Apter draws is crucial, though she seems to miss the real significance of her insight for understanding Fanon’s critique of Mannoni. Indeed, Apter notes affirmatively a resonance between the French psychoanalyst’s paradigm and the general significance of the Caliban figure within the twentieth-century Caribbean anticolonial tradition; she is cautiously sympathetic to Mannoni on exactly these grounds (79). In making this argument, however, Apter obscures Fanon’s paradigmatic movement from the topos of inferiority to the (non)place of nonexistence, itself a movement away from the order of dialectical resolution and an indictment of the inadequacy of recognition to ascertain to the lived predicament of modern blackness.

Accordingly, Fanon's investigation into the existential, affective, and corporeal registers of this exile from the parameters of being—the “feeling of nonexistence”—reveals that the force of antiblack violence takes its place on the plane of ontology, as a theft of ontology that perforates, and in so doing authorizes, the structurality of being: “Ontology—once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by the wayside—does not permit us to understand the being of the black man” (110). The ontological question of black being, Fanon asserts, is held captive by the inheritance and infinite return of a phobogenic “imago of the Negro” (170), one that “burst[s] apart” (109) the self-determined and self-determining form of sovereign being. Hers is always a being-for the white, “a *being* for the captor.”⁵⁹ In an antiblack world, blackness indexes the interruption—the opening and the limit—of being's grammar of intelligibility where being is identical to a being for itself, that is, a being for the self. Fanon's is thus not a call to de-ontologize race *per se*, but rather a disclosure of racialization as the governing supplement internal to the constitution of ontology in general. As race's “status-organizing principle” (Wynter, “No Humans Involved” 50), blackness issues the (dis)organizing mark that brands, orients, and predicates ontology and its field of movement. This violence that, in the same gesture, founds and ruptures the order of ontology aims to arrest the black body in what philosopher Nelson Maldonado-Torres, reading Fanon, specifies as “the veritable house of *non-being*” (104, emphasis his).

Like Galloway, Fanon establishes, yet in a vastly different tenor, an existential account of blackness that is intimately tethered to the spectral inscription of non-being. Returning to the political animus that inspires Galloway, however, we find an agentic

⁵⁹ Again, the formulation “being *for* the captor” is Hortense Spillers's (“Mama's Baby” 67).

will to being blackened extracted from the question of blackened being. This is a willed relinquishment of existence rather than a “structural interdiction” (Wilderson, *Cinema* 73), a tactical declaration rather than a condemnation to the “real hell” (*BSWM* 8) of existential negation that constitutes the ontological cut (or, more precisely, the cut of ontology) binding being and world through the modern architectonics of terror. For Galloway, crypto-universalist strategies such as disappearance and “no demands” function to glitch cybernetic command by defecting from the logic of inputs and outputs. But what demand remains ex-communicated from Galloway’s own tactical ex-communication?

As my invocation of Fanon already indicates, despite Galloway’s specific focus on the vexed functions of blackness in the expansion of cybernetics and its epistemological apparatus, the ideational infrangibility between (racial) blackness, non-transparency, and non-being far precedes and exceeds the particular historic juncture that spurs his argument. Indeed, a truly massive body of scholarship exists in the fields of black studies and the philosophy of race that has uncovered the brutal history that accompanies the alleged antinomy between blackness and Enlightenment as well as the alignment of this history with “a racist optics,” as Saidiya Hartman has glossed, “in which black flesh is itself identified as the source of opacity [and] the denial of black humanity” (*Scenes* 20).⁶⁰ In *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, philosopher Denise Ferreira da Silva has further exacted the contours of this putative antinomy by adumbrating the Fanonian zone of non-being as a domain that signifies both exteriority and affectability. The writing of Europe

⁶⁰ See Judy, “Kant and the Negro;” Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, esp. chapter 2, “Masters, Mistresses, Slaves, and the Antinomies of Modernity;” Wright, *Becoming Black*, esp. chapter 1, “The European and American Invention of the Black Other;” Nyong’o, *The Amalgamation Waltz*, 86-90; Bernasconi, “Who Invented the Concept of Race?;” and Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness*.

and its white liberal diaspora in the mode of the transparent self-determined “I,” da Silva argues, has depended on the writing of blackness as the global signifier of non-transparency and outer-determination and, therefore, as the radical foreclosure of being.

In da Silva’s compelling formulation, “racial subjection is an effect of the desire that writes post-Enlightenment Europe in transparency and necessarily demands the obliteration of the others of Europe” (15). In her interventionist reading, da Silva charts the emergence of an “arsenal of raciality” (34) through a *digital practice* of rupture that demarcates between the transparent subject of universal reason unsusceptible to exterior determination and those affectable others who can be obliterated “without unleashing an ethical crisis” (35). The phantasmatic transparency of the modern white subject and the valorization of his interiorized consciousness is produced through the displacement and, alternatively, the incorporation of exteriority: the threat of an outer-determination that comes to be embodied by “affectable things” (xxxviii), “the others of Europe in affectability” (133). Exteriority in da Silva’s text is not a trope of exclusion but rather the name given to that which cannot properly appear within modernity’s productive *nomos* yet nonetheless enables its very grammar and conditions of coherence.

For present purposes, there are two practical implications that I want to tease out from da Silva’s complex and far-reaching “transparency thesis” (1-17). First, the modern philosopheme of transparency is inextricable from the racializing exigencies that render self-determination and self-consciousness the telos of human being and human freedom. Whiteness provides the proper name for this devolvement of sovereignty in modernity; it is a law-making and law-preserving violence that makes contiguous the preservation of

the law and the preservation of (being-for) the self.⁶¹ Second, following from the argument that the privileging of interior transparency sutures blackness to a region of exteriority, da Silva's perhaps most significant polemical move is her repeated stress that to frame racial modernity's digital cartography of being/non-being in terms of a "sociohistorical logic of exclusion" (xxvii) is merely to "redeploy the transparency thesis" (267). Da Silva makes this pivot to argue against both the aspiration to retrieve an originary continuity prior the racial's discrete divisions *and* the "rendering of the racial as a sociohistorical category" that births excluded particulars (xxxvi).⁶² Contending that the modern project of representation is coterminous with the racial allocation of transparency, any project aiming to make transparent the affectable racialized other "ignore[s] the conditions of production of modern subjects" (9), that is to say, the strategies that form the possibility and the force of racial knowledge. By representation, da Silva refers to a metaphysics predicated on the subject-object distinction, and she clarifies that this entire system of metaphysics finds its locus in the structure of

⁶¹ This thesis has also been informed by Lewis Gordon's argument that "Europe sought to become ontological; it sought to become... 'Absolute Being'" ("Through the Zone of Nonbeing" 1), as well as Fred Moten's ongoing insistence that the critique of property is inseparable from "a general critique of the proper" ("The Case of Blackness" 177). On the racial formation of property as the political condition of human self-possession that underwrites this genealogy of "Absolute Being" in transatlantic modernity, see, among others, Harris, "Whiteness as Property"; Barrett, *Racial Blackness and the Discontinuity of Western Modernity*, esp. 51-7; Mills, *Racial Contract* 31-2; and Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract*.

⁶² Among others, da Silva takes issue with the Hegelian trace that inheres in even the resolutely nonidentitarian dialectics of universality/particularity in the texts of Paul Gilroy, Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, and Cornel West. While I am deeply guided by da Silva's critique of attempts to "resuscitate the socio-historical logic of exclusion" (xxx), I would also note my general agreement with Alexander Weheliye's assessment that da Silva perhaps "dismisses too easily perspectives from black and ethnic studies as being invested only in the pinpointing of 'social logics of exclusion'" (*Habeus Viscus* 154n.30).

antiblackness.⁶³ The racial arsenal that positions blackness exterior to the domain of transparent being cannot be de-sedimented under the aegis of representation, which is itself “the founding modern ontological statement” by which the black body is made to appear as the affectable object against which the subject takes his standing (xi). Da Silva thus refers to the historicist effort to represent blackness-qua-exteriority as a “strategy of engulfment,” a scene where “exteriority becomes a moment of the trajectory of the transcendental...subject” (70) and where the unassimilable threat of exteriority can only be resolved through obliteration. Against this violence of subject predication that constitutively requires the capture and sublation of blackness, da Silva demands the ethical refusal of representation and formulates a political imagination that *refuses to refuse the refusal of transparency*.⁶⁴

⁶³ In “Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World,” da Silva clarifies that she is “ultimately threading the terrain carved by the Subject-Object distinction, that is, modern representation” (86-7). In this regard, she recalls and revises Heidegger’s argument that representation provides the “metaphysical basis of the modern age” (*Thinking* 83) because it predicates a subject-object distinction. Although da Silva does not explicitly draw on Heidegger when she makes this point, I cite this crucial resonance to clarify my reading of da Silva’s theory of representation, and I think I am justified in doing so precisely because both thinkers outline a critique of representation that is initiated with the Cartesian *res cogitans*. In line with the structure of his argument about modern technics, Heidegger finds in Descartes an articulation of man as the subject of representation that ineluctably orders him as the object of representation: “I am a being whose mode to be consists in representing in such a way that representing co-presents the one who is representing into representedness” (*Nihilism* 115). Likewise, da Silva’s “critique of modern representation” too begins with “Descartes’s inaugural statement [that] united being and truth when ontology and epistemology are resolved in a purely interior (formal) act, namely, thinking” (*Toward* xiv, 42). However, for da Silva, the cogito’s subjection-objection contains a decisive moment of onto-epistemological (i.e. racial) distinction that Heidegger’s critique of the metaphysics of representation leaves unthought.

⁶⁴ In “To Be Announced: Radical Praxis or Knowing (at) the Limits of Justice,” da Silva writes explicitly about the political necessity of “a refusal of representation” and “the refusal to signify in letter and phoneme” given that “even in works that refuse the liberal version of racial domination (the logic of exclusion) and describe the scene of violence, the black body is given to representation, already the body of violence, the body of the slave” (54). At a 2014 roundtable on “From Subjection to Subjection” held in the U.K., da Silva has further described being “no-body against the state” rather than “somebody to the state” as an ethical position.

The resonances between da Silva's transparency thesis and Galloway's cybernetic hypothesis are unmistakable, though important differences exist as well. What I wish to highlight is how the transparency thesis anticipates and predicates the cybernetic hypothesis; how the opacity and affectability of the black box cites the modern inscription of racial blackness; and how Galloway responds to the tenacity of cybernetic incorporation through a retreat from being vis-à-vis a generalized rapprochement with the condition of blackness. My intention, however, is not to rebuke Galloway for his somewhat casual appeal to this category. Rather, I want to accent his genealogical elaboration with da Silva's onto-epistemological account in order to recalibrate more carefully the ties that bind both race and blackness to cybernetics and its next of kin, communication culture. While da Silva and Galloway agree that blackness figures something that is otherwise than absolute being, Galloway's transvaluative reading renders an equivalence between non-being and absence and, in particular, the absence of enlightenment. He worries that to be put into communication is always-already to be subjected to the coercions of the commons. And so, rather than risk the taint of such coercion, he marshals an imperceptible blackness that promulgates an anti-baroque and arguably hermetic will to privation. This articulation of blackness as a resource of subtraction— of being, of existence, of communication— proceeds by way of a conflation between black and lack.

Yet if Galloway writes blackness as a kind of crypt or secret that recedes from the grasp of communicative capitalism's expropriation of sociality, there is an imperative to silence in this crypt— the secret is never shared— and this silence risks the silencing of

other frequencies of sociality.⁶⁵ In a very basic sense, this is what Galloway leaves hidden when he abdicates the passionate arrangements of planning and stealth organization that support and sustain the furtive social composition of the black bloc. But I would go further and say that there is a difference in kind between a social arrangement that is secret or hidden *to* the world and a social arrangement that is unthinkable and im-possible *within* the world. When Galloway champions non-communication as the antinomy of communication, he remains ensnared within the binary function interior/exterior and exteriority can only be approached as privation rather than as plentitude. That is, to deploy da Silva's careful phrasing, he remains entrapped in the limits of the World.

In contrast to Galloway, then, da Silva figures blackness as the index of an ethical politics that is *exterior* to the very interiority/exteriority distinction. This politics is necessarily ethical because it announces an insistence that would exceed every effort to re-possess the subject in the enclosure of sovereign being. Whereas for Galloway "to leave being" is to morph into a mute and passive object which refuses the call to become the subject of communication, my fabulated exchange between these thinkers suggests that such a refusal is still predicated on the ruling grammar of the subject-object relationship. As Fanon stresses in "The Negro and Hegel," because no dialectical movement exists between subject and object in the "universe" of antiblack racism (an argument to which we shall return), the black "must be extricated" not only from the

⁶⁵ I must note that another possible reading becomes available in the final sentence of the essay, where Galloway does suggest enigmatically—perhaps in the spirit of the crypt or mystery that grounds his politics—that the blackness of which he speaks is not "just a kind of nihilism" but instead "the purest form of love" (249). At the same time, he concludes here full stop, and offers no account (neither performative, epistemological, nor ontological) of the structure of this love or the configurations that might sustain it. For a skeptical appraisal of the politics that might (never) arrive with critical affirmations of "mystery" and "enigma," see Lubiano, "Foreword."

(white) subject but also from himself and the consignment to objecthood (*BSWM* 2). Da Silva thus follows this movement of extrication from the subject-object relation to a figure of justice she nominates as The Thing. She explains,

[From the vantage of modern representation,] The Thing enables the subject, the “I,” mediating formations of the object, the other, and the commodity. Knowing the limits of justice then requires critique and something else... Knowing at the limits of justice, as an ethico-political praxis, requires ontoepistemological accounts that begin and end with relationality (affectability)... *a horizon of radical exteriority*, where knowing demands affection, intention, and attention. (“To Be Announced” 44, emphasis mine)

Here, da Silva re-writes the moment of racial violence at the scene of modern representation, that is, where The Thing is engulfed—transformed into an object or other that must stand before (and be for) the subject as its enabling condition. In this passage, the stated opposition between a “mediating formation of the object” and what da Silva later dubs “the gifts of The Thing” (47) is instructive. While the formation of the object renders it captive to the prerogatives of the subject, the exorbitant force and promise of The Thing is given in excess of the cut of objection/subjection. It is not that The Thing conceals the social relations of its production but rather a specific social relation called the subject-object distinction that conceals The Thing and the other modalities of relation it houses. Da Silva’s call to “know[] at the limits of justice” seeks to extricate The Thing from the violence that inaugurates this mediating “relationship”: to release it from “the horizon of death” (*Toward* 28) into a “horizon of radical exteriority.” Thus, far from naming a relative or constitutive outside, what appears under the heading of a refusal of interiority in da Silva is not a claim to its inverse but instead the total affirmation of *an-*

other exteriority that is of a fundamentally different order.⁶⁶ The inhabitation of this irreducible exteriority marks not the refusal of relationality but rather a refusal of relation as it is given in the (given) World. Its movement constitutes a reaching outward and outside beyond the constitutive violence that subtends the World and its structure of relation: “the real leap [that] consists in introducing invention into existence,” as Fanon tells us (*BSWM* 179), an invention “which, might, just might,” da Silva writes, “land at the End of the World” (“Black Feminist Poethics” 95).

I have so far been suggesting that the figuration of the non-transparent black box finds itself implicated in a broader discursive architecture of blackness, and I have contended that grappling with the racial conditions of this architecture permits us to confront the contemporary situation of (non)communication in ways that “unsettle[] the discretely bounded objects, methods, and temporal frameworks,” to borrow from Lisa Lowe (*Intimacies* 6), which have circumscribed critical approaches to cybernetics. Furthermore, I have argued that the appeal to “blackness” as a willed form of ontological absenteeism and as a crypto-universalist “way out” of cybernetic governance preemptively forecloses other formations and practices of relationality that have sustained formations of black invention (a point that will later lead us directly to Wynter’s oeuvre). Da Silva’s pivot to a radical exteriority activated by *The Thing* carves a political-ethical route that refuses *the form of relation* mandated by cybernetic societies without refusing relationality tout court. And indeed, her claim on the insurgency of *The Thing* returns us

⁶⁶ Da Silva’s radical exteriority shares a family resemblance with Jacques Derrida’s gloss of “another exteriority,” an exteriority beyond exteriority that would be irreducible to the constitutive outside of interiority. Derrida contrasts this other exteriority with his own *relative* exteriority as a Jew to the canon of European philosophy: “beyond this exteriority there is perhaps something else, the feeling of *another* exteriority” (“There Is No ‘One’ Narcissism [Autobiographies]” 206, emphasis his). I deploy the phrase in a resonant, if not exactly faithful, sense.

precisely to the primal negation that inaugurated W. Ross Ashby's 1958 statement on the problematic of cybernetics: "It does not ask 'what is this thing?' but 'what does it do?' and 'what can it do?'" (*Introduction* 1). Ashby's interdiction of the (ontological) question disciplines The Thing's wayward movements and the fundamental antagonism it compels. In this disavowal, Ashby *captures* the gift of The Thing's incalculable opacity, steering it back toward a structure of relation and feedback that might guarantee systemic equilibrium. Given this twin elision and engulfment of The Thing, it should then come as no surprise that the cybernetic project was mobilized in the post-war period to manage liberal anxieties surrounding what were called "race relations" and to interpellate heterogeneous movements for black freedom into a narrowly defined discourse of inclusion and black-white integration.

3.2 THE COLOR LINE AS MEDIUM

*[H]as colonization really placed civilizations in contact?
Or, if you prefer, of all the ways of establishing contact,
was it the best? I answer no.
—Aimé Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism*

"Most of us in the United States prefer to live in a moderately loose social community, in which the blocks to communication among individuals and classes are not too great," Norbert Wiener professed in his 1950 bestseller *The Human Use of Human Beings*. After making this declaration about the general nature of the U.S. American creed, however, Wiener immediately departed from the optimism that pervaded Deutsch's *Nerves of Government*, where the U.S. nation-state had been heralded as the ideal free-flowing and adaptive communications system. In fact, Wiener continued, "I

will not say that this ideal of communication is attained in the United States. Until white supremacy ceases to belong to the creed of a large part of the country it will be an ideal from which we fall short” (50). In this telling admission, Wiener articulates white supremacy foremost as a problem of communication. The structure of Jim Crow apartheid is described, in the first instance, as an impediment in the national communications infrastructure and, it follows, that formal desegregation would break down these “blocks” by opening up pathways for cross-racial contact. Yet Wiener’s turn to the problematic of “creed” concedes that not only legalistic mechanisms but individual beliefs and collective affects too were crucial subcomponents of this communications system. While Wiener thus diverged from his colleague Deutsch in his assessment of the United States’ absolute difference from European fascist regimes (conflated with the names Hitler and Stalin), both thinkers ultimately rationalized the nation-state and liberal civil society as their normative communication channel. Moreover, both Wiener and Deutsch chastised policymakers and populations alike whose static belief systems refused to engage in reflexive self-transformation. As Wiener underscored, the organism, “whether it is mechanical, biological, or social... is not like the clockwork monad of Leibnitz with its pre-established harmony with the universe, but actually seeks a new equilibrium with the universe and its future contingencies” (48).

Without the pre-programmed guarantee of Leibniz’s self-perpetuating automata (or of Newton’s mechanical clock-like universe for that matter), cybernetic machines—all equilibrium-seeking systems—must be able to adjust future behavior in response to their complex interactions with the environment. In the writings of Wiener and his peers, such mechanisms of control and auto-correction were designated, across physical scales

and substrates, negative feedback loops: a structure of circular causality in which a system modifies its inputs (decisions) based upon prior outputs in order to secure homeostasis.⁶⁷ Negative feedback mechanisms are ultimately recursive, self-referential functions that exist in the service of teleological (goal-oriented) systems. Lacking such feedback functions, Wiener argued that systems functionally regress to the windowless status of the Leibnizian monad, where there is “no trace of communication with the outer world” (22).⁶⁸ This valorization of the (techno-bio-social) organism’s openness to the surprise of the cosmos—in fact, a valorization of openness as such—begins to cue us to the role of cybernetics in producing and legitimizing U.S. knowledge about the management of white supremacy and the mutation of its logics. Specifically, Wiener’s call to tolerate “an uncertain future” against its foreclosure by “the American social picture” signaled the imperative to “a new equilibrium” (50) that would—and must—

⁶⁷ This structure is spelled out most succinctly in an early article published in the journal *Philosophy of Science*, co-authored with neurophysiologist Arturo Rosenblueth and engineer Julian Bigelow. In this paper, Wiener, Rosenblueth, and Bigelow assert that feedback is one of two classes of voluntary action found across biological, technological, and social systems. The other class of voluntary action is labeled non-feedback. Non-feedback actions do not necessitate (or allow) a modification to a system’s decisions based upon changes in information gathered from the environment. For example, “a snake may strike at a frog, or a frog at a fly, with no visual or other report from the prey after the movement has started.” In this instance, the snake or frog does not correct its behavior (the direction of its strike) in order to meet its goal: “the movement [of the prey] is in these cases is so fast that is not likely that the nerve impulses would have time...to modify the [predator's] movement effectively” (222). In contrast, decisions based upon a negative feedback mechanism involve self-correcting transformations in behavior based upon comparisons between a system’s goal and its current output.

⁶⁸ In *Cybernetics, or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*, Wiener more explicitly elaborates his problems with Leibniz’s monadology and further links these problems to his own critique of the understanding of the universe inherited from classical physics. As Wiener polemicizes, “Leibniz considers a world of automata which... he constructs after the model of clockwork...They are actually as self-contained as, or rather more self-contained than, the passively dancing figures on to a music-box. They have no real influence on the outside world, nor are they effectively influenced by it...The monad is a Newtonian solar system writ small” (41). For my purposes, what’s important is that Wiener challenges a theological conception of the perfectly ordered universe (i.e. clockwork) on the grounds that such a model posits a monad that is absolutely self-enclosed, eliding the forces of mutual “influence” between “the outside world” and automata (as well as other systems).

incorporate “the element of chance in the texture of the universe itself” (11). As I have been suggesting, this suture of chance and fluctuation to preservation underwrote the cybernetic worldview. And importantly, as this section will elucidate, this feedback loop steered the cybernetic approach to racial governance *in response* to insurgent and variegated efforts to abolish the system of white supremacy from the black popular front.

In the concept of negative feedback, cybernetics initiated a general theory of learning across humans, animals, and machines that broke with the strategies of decision-making proffered by the game theory associated with mathematician John von Neumann and economist Oskar Morgenstern. According to Wiener, game theory presupposed in its scene of communication and contestation an enemy who possessed a “positive malicious evil” (11), an inscrutable “Manichean devil” who always makes a “perfectly wise” decision (*Cybernetics* 171) and plays the perfect game. While game theory ostensibly postulated an absolutely non-transparent opponent, Wiener reasoned, in another sense it already assumed too much familiarity. Because this enemy was an abstract ideal-type, it was also by definition a non-existent one; this opaque enemy was therefore actually quite transparent. In contrast to such a Manichean enemy, cybernetics instead located its relatum in and as a black box. Occupying “a far less rigid game personality,” Wiener contended that one could learn about an opponent’s next potential move based upon its past actions (“Some Moral” 1356). And, furthermore, a system could incorporate this prior knowledge in order to modify its own future behaviors and decisions. Wiener thus borrowed from game theory as well as Leibniz the axiom of the other’s opacity but brought to this thesis a critical revision. Through its articulation of an antiphonic communicative dynamic—the informational loop between call and response— first-order

cybernetics described and prescribed a protocol by which one could engage the black box without requiring knowledge of its internal organization. Like a computer (analog or digital), humans supposedly too could transfer past data into the present in order to calculate immediate decisions.

Despite Wiener's marked emphasis on this capacity for learning and adaptation, media historian Paul Edwards has argued that early cybernetics was spoken by a "closed world discourse" that mimicked U.S. diplomat George Kennan's program of containment. According to Edwards, Cold War foreign policy and its attendant political culture that sought to *contain* Soviet expansion was embedded in the very language of systems. Edwards's focus on military and, to a lesser degree, ideological antagonism between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. thus leads him to conclude that the world picture imagined by cybernetics was a "radically bounded" one, "without frontiers or escape" (12). As the diacritical other of this closed world heuristic, Edwards poses the narrative form literary theorist Northrop Frye dubbed the green world, which "thematizes the restoration of community and cosmic order" and "in which characters struggle to integrate (rather than overcome) the world's complexity and multiplicity" (13). Yet while Edwards's assessment of the closed world surely captures game theory's neorealist "economy of Manichean allegory" (to wrest Abdul JanMohamed's well-known formulation into a *seemingly* distinct context), it nonetheless appears firmly at odds with Wiener's own political aspirations for cooperation and openness.⁶⁹ Edwards, however, is

⁶⁹ Indeed, we might read Wiener and, more obviously, Deutsch as early participants in the transition from neorealism to neoliberalism in the specific sense given to these terms by the discipline of political science. As Lisa Lowe ("The Gender of Sovereignty") has elucidated, whereas neorealists follow Hobbes in viewing the relationship among states as necessarily a perpetual state of war, neoliberals follow Locke in advocating the suppression of war through collaboration in (global) civil society. On "The Economy of Manichean Allegory," see JanMohamed's article of the same title.

not alone in diagnosing early cybernetics as a philosophy predicated on containment, closure, and control. Influentially, N. Katherine Hayles has argued in *How We Became Posthuman* that at the very moment cybernetics would seem to muddle the boundaries between the human and his others (machine and animal), it resurrected such boundaries in terms of “the hysterical denunciations and national delirium precipitated by a cold war culture... anxious about communist penetrations into the body politic” (114, 113). In each of these postures, cybernetics fundamentally follows Kennan’s geopolitical logic: containment is pitted against contamination and the paranoiac operation of boundary-maintenance against the catholic transgression of boundaries.

While Hayles’s critical historiography remains definitive, I suspect that the rhetorical force of her treatment— and of the thesis of containment, more generally— pivots upon a repressive hypothesis in which the structure of cybernetic command works to police the inside/outside relationship— that is, to contain the threat of the outside. The normative substratum of such a hypothesis is the supposition that openness, exposure, and the transgression of boundaries are themselves political goods.⁷⁰ Intriguingly, this guiding assumption that undergirds the critique of “the closed world” extends to more recent scholarship that has attempted to reclaim cybernetics from its critical associations with a Cold War calculus of containment. Most prominently, Andrew Pickering and Elizabeth Wilson have both re-read the early cybernetic archive to discover models of contingency, interactivity, and mystery that resist the will to knowledge proffered by rationalist discourses. As Pickering announces, cybernetics “adumbrates an ontology of

⁷⁰ For the critique of the repressive hypothesis, see, of course, Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*. On the fantasy of subversive transgression and its role in (re-)instituting social boundaries, see Sexton, “There is No (Interracial) Sexual Relationship.”

becoming in which nothing present in advance determines what entities will turn out to be in the future” (107). Similarly, against the indictment of cybernetics as determined by “abstract calculation” (6), Wilson has drawn on the work of psychologist Silvan Tomkins (himself deeply engaged with Wiener’s writings) to document the importance of embodiment, affective connectivity, and what she calls “intersubjectivity” in cybernetic models of information processing.

To the extent that I foreground cybernetics as a truly *social* science that curves toward the anticipation of “an uncertain future,” I march in step with Pickering and Wilson. The intervention offered here, however, departs from both theorists in the suture they confidently stitch between affect, openness, and a liberatory politics. Indeed, in their mission to recast cybernetics beyond its determination by a Cold War Manichean allegory, they lose sight of how the dissimulation of precisely such an allegory was itself central to the contemporaneous governmentality of “race relations” as the constitutive contradiction of U.S. democracy. More broadly, I assert that the consolidation of Cold War geopolitics as the hegemonic frame from which to study the political itineraries of cybernetic thought has tended to obscure the essential entanglement between this geopolitical war and the concurrent operations of “domestic” race war. This tactical conjugation was pronounced most neatly in Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal’s magnum opus of post-war racial liberalism, where declared that “America, for its international prestige, power, and future security, needs to demonstrate to the world that American Negroes can be satisfactorily integrated into its democracy” (1016).

Attending to this discursive power of integration and engulfment within such state narratives, historians of U.S. liberalism and black radicalism including Nikhil Pal Singh,

Mary Dudziak, Jodi Melamed, and Penny Von Eschen have significantly charted how a restructuring of racial common sense was predicated on a geopolitical situation that mandated the appearance of an inclusive U.S. interracial democracy on the world stage.⁷¹ In the wake of the Second World War, the U.S. racial state re-organized in response to anti-colonial insurgency abroad that was linked prominently to a range of black internationalisms “at home.” In consequence, the interpellation of a narrowly defined civil rights agenda into the discourse of U.S. exceptionalism signaled a strategic suture between the codification of racial “equality” within a framework of rights and the realigning imperial ambitions of American statecraft. Moreover, the U.S. state’s simulated abrogation of its foundational relationship to the compulsory reproduction of white life necessitated the simultaneous legitimation of certain oppositional strategies and the annexation of these oppositional social imaginaries to the domain of progressive nationalism. By inserting this arrangement of racial liberalism into the critical matrix of cybernetics, I therefore seek here to modulate Edwards’s closed world prognosis with what in 1967 Harold Cruse, founder of the Harlem Black Arts Theater, termed “the open society” (always placed boldly and unambiguously between scare quotes).

Written on the other side of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Cruse’s massive volume, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, articulated a theory of black nationalism that took as its unwavering target “the folklore of integrationism” (70). Tracing a direct line of influence from this folklore to the failures of civil rights to achieve full political,

⁷¹ See, generally, Singh, *Black is a Country*; Dudziak, “Desegregation as Cold War Imperative” and *Cold War Civil Rights*; Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*; and Von Eschen, *Race against Empire*. I crib the concept “state narratives” from Wahneema Lubiano, who delivers with this phrase a tremendously useful framework to apprehend the “state sponsorship” of social imaginaries, including those imaginaries that appear antagonistic to the machinery of the racial state. See “Like Being Mugged by a Metaphor,” esp. 72.

economic, and cultural autonomy, Cruse argued that integrationism was an ideology of “the Great American ideal of individualism” (8). For Cruse, furthermore, this ideology was shared among New Deal and Great Society liberals, white (and specifically Jewish) leftists, and black elites, in particular “the ‘new’ Negro intellectual class that...emerged as of the late 1950’s and 1960’s” (10). While the specificities of Cruse’s broad political appraisals are beyond the scope of this chapter (such as his striking conflation between SNCC and the CPUSA, for example), for our purposes it is crucial that Cruse linked the increasingly persuasive “premise for racial integrationism” to “the pursuit of an illusion, the ‘open society’” (9). Cruse’s idiom of the open society had already been widely disseminated and popularized among mid-century U.S. intellectuals by way of Karl Popper’s 1945 treatise, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, written on a behalf of a social diagram that would “reject[] the absolute authority of the merely established and the merely traditional” in favor of a world where “tolerance was still tolerated” (xxxvi-xxxvii, 368). For bourgeois intellectuals, Popper’s outline of the open society seemed less prescriptive than positively descriptive, for it appeared to confirm Tocqueville’s suggestion, some one-hundred years earlier, that the world-historical founding of the American republic had uniquely instituted a breach with the aristocratic “ancient prejudices of Europe” (*Democracy* 328). In Cruse’s hands, however, the open society was exposed as the lie at the heart of the U.S. social formation. As he concluded in his essay “Revolutionary Nationalism and the Afro-American,” the open society and its fetish of transgression are fundamentally premised on a structure of racial disavowal; in the case of the African American “his ‘national boundaries’ are the color of his skin” (78).

Cruse's scathing critique of "the open society" and its attendant intergrationist ruse provides a critical platform to re-assess the opened/closed relation at play in the political field of cybernetics, as well as in its discourse of human-machine integration. Crucially, Wiener's own diagnosis of white supremacy as a problem of communication inscribed in the national "creed" would seem to reference, knowingly or not, Gunnar Myrdal's tremendously influential 1944 statement of the "Negro problem" as a challenge to, and an opportunity for, the "American Creed." Financed by the Carnegie Foundation, Myrdal's *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* set the terms for state- and private-sector collaborations aimed at ameliorating "the race problem" in the second-half of the twentieth-century.⁷² Although numerous critics of *An American Dilemma* have highlighted the text's ethos of individualism that occludes the political-economic machinery of U.S. white supremacy, my reading of Myrdal's debt to systems theory *avant la lettre* reveals how a particular rendering of "race prejudice" as a multi-scaled communications system was itself instrumental to the intellectual foundations of twentieth-century U.S. racial liberalism. Indeed, in his methodological précis, Myrdal established his understanding of "the Negro problem" in terms of a mechanism of dynamic causation "called the 'vicious circle,'" a structure cyberneticians would later brand the positive feedback loop. For Myrdal, the vicious circle was sustained by a "principle of cumulation" that refused a single explanatory rubric for apprehending the state of U.S. race relations. Instead, the vicious circle designated a

⁷² Myrdal's support from the Carnegie Foundation points to the ubiquitous interest among the post-war white liberal establishment in the prospect of racial reconciliation through technologies of public pedagogy and cross-racial information transmission. On the resonant work of the Ford Foundation and the Julius Rosenwald Fund, respectively, see Ferguson, *Top Down*; and Melamed, *Represent and Destroy* 63-71. My effort here represents, in part, an attempt to insert into this genealogical grid the less overtly racial projects supported by the Macy Foundation.

circuit of amplification and intensification whose locus of expression was “a general interdependence between all factors and the Negro problem.” He continued, “White prejudice and discrimination keep the Negro low in standards of living, health, education, manners and morals. This, in turn, gives support to white prejudice. White prejudice and Negro standards thus mutually ‘cause’ each other” (75).

Unlike Wiener’s model of the homeostat, then, the vicious circle appeared to contain no innate mechanism for recursive, auto-adjustment. Rather, the “Negro problem” yielded the “central vantage point” (77) from which to view the cumulative interactions and mutual affectations between institutions, ideologies, beliefs, and laws within the U.S. racial system. Myrdal’s faith in the mutual causality between “white prejudice” and “Negro standards” thus hinged upon a culturalist elaboration of black inferiority that emerged etiologically from black people’s exclusion from the American creed, itself always-already coded as white. Myrdal’s diagnosis, however, was not ultimately bleak, for he asserted the possibility of the “task of social engineering” (77) to intervene in the self-perpetuating entropic spiral of racism. Myrdal wrote, “If, for example, we assume that for some reason white prejudice could be decreased and discrimination mitigated this is likely to cause a rise in Negro standards, which may decrease white prejudice still a little more, which would allow Negro standards to rise, and so on through mutual interaction” (76). Although Myrdal did not appeal to his contemporaries Wiener, Bigelow and Rosenbleuth, he nonetheless offered a resonant model of the negative feedback loop to redress “the moral conflict in the heart of white Americans” (215). Myrdal’s apparent intervention in the terrain of vicious circularity was punctuated by a projection of white benevolence. Most simply, a transformation in black

life-chances through assimilation to the norms of the American creed would ineluctably compel the diminishment of white “race prejudice,” a proposition that of course found (finds) itself at fundamental odds with the historical record of state-sanctioned white racial terror and antiblack violence. On this point, Ralph Ellison’s retort to Myrdal, originally written in 1944 but not printed until the publication of *Shadow and Act* (1964), took aim at precisely the capacity of this systems theory to dissimulate “the question of power” in its invocation of dynamic causation.⁷³ In short, Myrdal’s social diagram ignored “the question of who manipulates... power” (314) and, as becomes apparent, also foreclosed a consideration of the question of black power *sui generis*.

Negative feedback indexes in *An American Dilemma* the unnamed apparatus of self-transformation that would allow for healthy communication across various differentiated but not entirely differentiable social sub-systems, from “common discrimination” and “employment opportunities” to “ideals and ideologies” (77). In fact, it was exactly the sheer enormity of the so-called Negro problem— for which “*a rational policy will never work by changing only one factor*” (77, emphasis his) — that required, as a new approach, the heuristic of feedback relations in complex systems. While “mutual interaction” therefore provided the conception scaffold of Myrdal’s methodological orientation to the vast network of actions that congeal as “the Negro problem,” it also textured the specific content of his prognoses and proposed remedies for engineering connection in the territory of black-white relations. For all Myrdal’s obsession with the

⁷³ Ellison, writing just months after he left the Communist Party, indeed suggested that Myrdal’s theory of dynamic causation was itself symptomatic of the sociologist’s “running battle with Marxism.” Ellison cited Myrdal’s description of *American Dilemma*’s methodological orientation, “In an interdependent system of dynamic causation there is no ‘primary cause’ but everything is to cause to everything,” to which Ellison responded pithily “Only if you throw out the class struggle” (314; Myrdal 78, emphasis his).

problem of the Negro, then, it was ultimately the renovation of whiteness and white decision-making in the perimeter of U.S. citizenship that proved the crucible of his manifesto: “*the American Negro problem is a problem of the heart of the American. It is there that the interracial tension has its focus. It is there the decisive struggle goes on*” (lxxi, emphasis his). By delineating the white American heart as the ultimate locus of “interracial tension” *and* the authorized horizon for its staunchest resolution, Myrdal—as Tocqueville’s heir—enunciated racial egalitarianism as the redemptive destiny of the United States even as he secured whiteness as the unquestioned agency and referent of the nation-form.⁷⁴ In so doing, he denounced white “race prejudice” foremost as an exemplary “opportunistic escape reaction” (45), a crisis of white indecision exacerbated by the failure to open pathways for interracial interaction.

On the one hand, Myrdal confessed that “there is no doubt in the writer’s opinion, that a great majority of white people in America would be prepared to give the Negro a substantially better deal if they knew the facts” (656). Accordingly, he instructed that black publicity in civil society must serve as a primary means of information transmission to whites, itself paramount to the implantation of liberal anti-racist pedagogy.⁷⁵ Black people, he admonished, must announce their stakes—their interest—in

⁷⁴ Ellison conjures this analogy between the two European students of U.S. democracy, Myrdal and Tocqueville, in his biting quip that “reviewers have made much of Dr. Myrdal’s being a foreigner, imported to do the study as one who had no emotion stake in the American Dilemma” (313).

⁷⁵ Examples of this stance are simply too numerous to list. In addition to an entire chapter dedicated to the role of the black press, Myrdal also instructs “*To get publicity is of highest strategic importance to the Negro people*” (48, emphasis his). Elsewhere, Myrdal mourns the fact that “Negro political and social thinking does not have much *connection* with American and world problems. To an American Negro, there is little point in having definite opinions about the world” (781, emphasis mine). Myrdal’s objective, it should be clear, provides a concrete example of the strategy of engulfment; his desire to repair disconnection by bringing “the American Negro” *into* “the world” instantiates the negation of da Silva’s desire to emancipate blackness *from* the World.

the system, such for that their interests could be identified *by* and identified *with* the system. On the other hand, *An American Dilemma* also forecasted a dangerous declension from the ideals of integration and communication across black communities: “Racial pride and voluntary isolation is increasingly becoming the pattern for the whole Negro people” (647). Myrdal’s collapse of white “race prejudice” with black “racial pride” garners a semblance of narrative coherence through the activation of the conjoined figures *isolation* and *disconnection*, each of which is deemed to possess an identical structure regardless on which side of the color line it is found.

I will return in a moment to the endurance of this rhetorical collapse. For now, I wish to highlight what I take to be Ellison’s incisive response to this conflation: Myrdal’s systems theory negated the force—indeed, the possibility— of black decision, including the decision to refuse the system that had been refused to Ellison. In other words, Myrdal’s denigration of black social life as a pathological *reaction* to state-sponsored isolation from the “traits held in esteem by the dominant white Americans,” Ellison illustrated, required a constitutive forgetting: what is considered “merely reflective [for Myrdal] might also embody a *rejection* of what he consider[ed] ‘higher values’” (*Shadow* 316, emphasis his). Against Myrdal, Ellison asserted that the totality of black life could not be apprehended simply in terms of its labor of the “negative” (317). In so doing, he maintained the “great value and richness, which because it has been secreted by living and has made their [black] lives more meaningful, Negroes will not willingly disregard” (*ibid*). In this double pivot, Ellison affirmed those social forms released (“secreted”) through the unfinished longings and collective practices of black living and, in the process, he mounted a political theory in which the preservation of these forms figured

inseparable from a certain mode of collective concealment: a “secreting” that, when read through Myrdal’s narrative machinery of inclusion/exclusion, could only appear as pathology and privation. Working in the interstice between these twin registers of the “secreted,” Ellison consciously marked the limits of Myrdal’s social systems theory and its signature of intelligible transmission.

An American Dilemma’s effort to re-frame the problematic of race under the heading of “mutual interaction” weaved together an individualizing impulse (“our national conversation”) with a systems analysis sensitive to communicative dynamics across multiple, interfacing sub-systems and within entity-environment relationships. This attempt to reconfigure the U.S. communications control system —tethered to the nominally anti-racist imperative of feedback— precipitates the partnering of cybernetics and Cold War discourse, though from the perspective of a theatre to which media and communications theorists have seldom turned. The postwar historical setting was indeed effuse with competing theoretical endeavors to delineate the parameters and the potentialities of communication. In his 1948 address to the American Sociological Society, “Consensus and Mass Communication,” Louis Wirth, the patriarch of what would become known as Chicago School of communication theory, endorsed a program for partnership between the two terms named in his title. With the alleged rise of a mass society marked by “heterogeneous members” and “no common customs or traditions” (3), Wirth advised that the dominant predicament faced by modern democracy was the maintenance of effective two-way communication between social actors. From this process abetted by mass media technologies, Wirth suggested “a central nervous system,” equivalent to that of the individual organism, might take shape in the form of “the social

organism” (4). He nominated this nervous system *consensus*, stipulated as “the established habit of intercommunication, of discussion, debate, negotiation and compromise, and the toleration of heresies” (9).

While Wirth’s composite of society as a mass organism bound through the synapses of interactivity and communication recalls the philosophical aspirations of cybernetics (as in Deutsch’s *Nerves*), the specific meanings allocated to the master trope *communication* severely differed across these variant theoretical accounts. Whereas communication for Wirth and his heirs installed a habit of democracy wedded to the terrain of rational discourse, persuasion, and, notably, “common understanding” (5), cybernetics sought to strike a blow at (some of) these humanist pieties. Communication, Wiener stressed, was not the sole provenance of human consciousness, or even of organic life. On the one hand, Wiener effectively erected an analogue between sensory-processing in the (animal) nervous system and information-processing within machine computing. Both entities *themselves* are systems that contain a self-referential structure that allows for adaptive decision-making based upon changes within their internal organization and their external environment. On the other hand, establishing *the message* as a kind of general equivalent, Wiener also maintained the possibility for communication across the human/non-human interface. In its most democratizing posture, then, cybernetics subtracted from the scope of communication all those requisite exclusions so familiar to us from critiques of deliberative democracy and the rational-critical public sphere (of which Wirth’s version of the mass-mediated public sphere is exemplary). Communication now demanded neither the possession of literacy nor “natural” language nor intentionality. Rather, Wiener exacted communication as the most

basic faculty of connectability and response-ability—the capacity to send, receive, and process a message across a physical medium (whether a neuronal synapse, a digital switching device, or a technical instrument such as television or the telephone). The message, at its core, was a form of organization that, in turn, made other scales of systemic organization possible. Where Wirth’s representation of consensus within the hegemonic ethical state was chiefly concerned with alleviating interferences on the register of understanding (what Wiener would join information theorist Warren Weaver in calling “semantic noise”),⁷⁶ cybernetics took as its aim the production of an integrated circuit through the material construction of open transmissions lines within and across equilibrium-seeking systems. Nonetheless, while Wiener’s cybernetics *revised* the liberal humanist thrall to communication as an apparatus of consensus-building, it *revived* in its career the primordial rapport between communication and community, as a *con-sensus communis* so to speak. In effect, the boundaries of a community were essentially demarcated by cybernetics in an informatic mode: “The community extends only so far as there extends an effectual transmission of information” (*Cybernetics* 158).

Two points must be emphasized here. First, Wiener’s effort to imagine the universe in communicative terms required that he redefine the organism (again, not axiomatically biological) as a reserve of order and organization. In so doing, he pitted the control of communicative feedback and the ability of systems to transform while maintaining integrity against an enemy incarnated by the second law of thermodynamics:

⁷⁶ Shannon and Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* 7-8; Wiener, *Human Use* 79. While Wirth’s reasons for divergence with Wiener are apparent, it is notable even Marshall McLuhan (no foe of technological approaches to culture) critiqued cybernetics for disregarding the rhetorical aspects of communication. For McLuhan, both Wiener’s communication science and Shannon-Weaver’s model of information offered an ahistorical methodology that paid little attention to the formal differences between various media and communications systems. See Bonnett, *Emergence and Empire* 329n.29.

a system's tendency toward entropy. "Organism is opposed to chaos," he wrote, "to disintegration, to death, as message is to noise" (*Human Use* 95). Life, for Wiener as for Deutsch, was at once the imperative and the aleatory expression of organization and communication. More forcefully, life is that which gives form to matter and energy; it is a measure of *information* against which entropy augurs the attrition of form, disorganization, and, ultimately, the terror of "de-differentiation": an indifference to difference where the distinctions of (in)form(ation) recede into the terrible, indecipherable abyss of "sameness" (12). Second, even as Wiener activated a quasi-vitalist grammar of life, he nonetheless underlined that his organism was by no means necessarily organic. By liberalizing the sphere of the organism to include machines and human-machine collaborations, the scope of the cybernetic community reached beyond the perimeter of anthropological exceptionalisms. Taken together, the admonition of chaos-cum-dedifferentiation and the exaltation of the inorganic-cum-organic community demonstrate the amalgamated desires for difference and sameness that cybernetics brought with it, especially in its sojourn to the color line.

In cybernetic terms, the global anti-colonial uprisings of the mid-twentieth-century and the upheavals of the black freedom struggle in particular signified monumental systematic disturbances. Of all the participants at the Macy Foundation conferences, mathematical biologist Nicholas Rashevsky registered these disturbances most acutely. In a series of articles printed in the early 1960s in *The Bulletin of Mathematical Biophysics* and *Progress in Biocybernetics* (edited by Wiener), Rashevsky elaborated the terms for a productive exchange between cybernetics and the science of race relations. In these articles, Rashevsky linked the reduction of the "neurobiophysical mechanisms" of "anti-

negro sentiment” in whites to the implementation of new patterns of interracial communication. Rashevsky describes, from a cybernetic perspective, a circuit of positive feedback between segregation and “the biological mechanism of development and maintenance of prejudice,” which he variously dubs an “arational thing,” “an act against our democratic institutions,” and, finally, “an evil” (188, 195). Rashevsky’s stress on the white body’s proprioceptive response to the exposure to blackness foregrounds a transitive relationship between racial sense and racial sensation. He argued, in other words, that structural blockages (legal or de facto) within a communications ecology directly induce the effect of white Negrophobia at both the levels of affect and belief, which may in turn be habituated differently through the establishment of new communication patterns. In this traffic between the biophysical body and the social body politic, Rashevsky aimed to demonstrate a negative correlation between racial integration and the persistence of “anti-negro feeling.”⁷⁷ Rather than assuming that integration would linearly cause the waning of antiblackness—he is clear that “[l]egislation or Supreme Court rulings cannot instantly change the anti-negro prejudices” (192)—Rashevsky enunciated the law as a nonlinear stimulus, constituted by and constitutive of a range of other functional sub-systems, from mass communications media and local associations to what Myrdal proffered as “the American heart.” While Rashevsky was adamant that such juridical or cultural alterations would not “spontaneously” (188) lead to the attrition of antiblack racism, he nevertheless maintained that by modulating social arrangements—namely through integration— a rewiring of white behavior, and then of feelings, would

⁷⁷ Although the attenuation of such affective responses is *the* primary motivation of these articles, it should be apparent that “pro-black” constitutes the impossible position in Rashevsky’s discursive arsenal.

follow.

Critically, this central focus on white sentiment and its affectability positioned the white body in the epistemological location historically assumed by blackness. It did so, however, to script white affectivity as the inevitable harbinger of adaptability and openness. In this cybernetic vision, we find that whiteness morphs into the ur-subject of plasticity such that it occupies the territory of black box. By narrating whiteness as signal in this font of modularity, Rashevsky functionally re-invested in whiteness as the proper name of the (sovereign) decision: the existential decision for open pathways that, in my discussion of *The Nerves of Government*, I described as the cultivation of the identity of the changing same. This alignment between whiteness and self-malleability was underscored, moreover, by Rashevsky's repeated appeals to the education and the habituation of the white child as the primary motor of racial reconciliation and redemption. Although his account gestured towards a mimetic interval between interracial contact and the transmission of white tolerance across generations, his pronounced concentration on the embodied white child served to render this developmental subject *in potentia* the exemplary figuration of whiteness as such.⁷⁸ Notably, the inverse of this non-rigid communicative (white) subject makes only a single appearance in Rashevsky's text, in a passing quip that "anti-white feeling...may, however, occur naturally in the negro population" (188). The precise demarcations of the

⁷⁸ While I concentrate on Rashevsky for the purpose of brevity, it must be noted that he was in no way unique in his activation of the trope of white child within the field of social cybernetics. Gregory Bateson, for example, presented a very similar scene in a discussion of non-verbal communication and the dynamics of imitation: "The American white child who at home had been implicitly taught that everybody is equal and alike is scared when we meets a Negro child for the first time, primarily because his parent is ill at ease. The premise of equality is upset, and therefore a number of precautions have to be taken to rationalize the difference; prejudice and discrimination are the end result" (*Communication: The Social Matrix* 106).

“natural” in this passage are not entirely clear. Yet, in light of Rashevsky’s extended treatment of the processual feedback between the *bios* and the *socius*, it is striking that his invocation of “the negro population” remains irreducibly stagnant— with no trace of movement or relation, or at least no relation that is not first predicated on the transformative effects of white action.⁷⁹ Race relation thus emerges in this text as the property and the ameliorative agency of white people, where the affirmation of being-in-communication with blackness phantasmatically resolves the crisis of sovereignty faced by Euro-American man⁸⁰; this circuit of relation ultimately addresses itself to an intramural call sent and received internal to the house of whiteness. In the narrative emplotment of Rashevsky’s “Cybernetics of Segregation,” this form of communicative relation engines the (re)production of liberal whiteness, a new equilibrium whose teleological ends we might specify— to echo and modify Wiener’s formulation— as the compulsory preservation of the order of *white life*.

Michael Rudolph West, in his far-reaching intellectual history of “the idea of race relations,” has argued that the seeds of this analytic rubric were already planted after emancipation through the theoretical and institutional career of Booker T. Washington. Tracing the historical apprenticeship of “race relations” from its invention in the nineteenth-century to its contortions in the present tense, West shows that this category, which appears at first-glance as a merely descriptive statement, functions performatively to produce the analytic object it seeks to address and redress. Strikingly, it is a structure

⁷⁹ Kwame Ture (Stokley Carmichael) and Charles V. Hamilton, in their classic rhetorical analysis of “The Myths of Coalition,” argue that this immobilization of black people by liberal discourse is the inevitable effect of the “assump[tion] that political coalitions are or can be sustained on a moral, friendly, sentimental basis; by appeals to conscience” (*Black Power* 60).

⁸⁰ See Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*.

of circular causality that West pinpoints in his typology of this circuit of (race) relation and its ideological underpinnings: “[the idea of race relations seeks to assess] how African Americans and white persons relate to one another purporting to be both cause and cure to black backwardness and white hostility; race relations as an analysis generating race relations as a cure for the complex of difficulties Americans...group as ‘the Negro problem’” (14). West’s genealogy of race relations thus stresses its telos in the “seductive” (8) thesis of racial reconciliation, which itself serves to reconcile democratic narratives of progress with the persistent administration of what Martin King theorized as an “obnoxious negative peace” (“Letter” 91). According to the internal logic of race relations, “the game’s endpoint” exists in the tense of the future perfect when “black America and white America will be made one.” However, West avers, such a promise and threat proves, finally, “but the means...of evasion” (10, 11).

In the contract West drafts between the telepathic fantasy of racial *communion* (two-become-one) and the social inscription of white supremacist *means*, I read the trace of racial liberalism as a theory of communication— with the color line emerging as its privileged medium. The idea(l) of race relations moves asymptotically on a pathway toward absolute communion with the other, a scene of continuity and resolution staged in and as the higher unity of the nation-form. In this scene, the liberal racial state can recognize only that which exists within its officially recognized channel, locating in itself the occasion for the cancellation of the violence that it produces, secures, and compels. There is, though, an important chasm—a gap— between communication and communion. As its condition of possibility, communication necessitates the institution of distance or spacing; the *line* of communication that would bind together the nation’s two

zones is, inevitably, one that is contingent upon an *a priori* division, a “dividing line” (Fanon, *Wretched* 68).⁸¹ It is logically always the priority of disconnection that makes any connection possible. Communication, in this incarnation, speaks incessantly of the problem of the line but the contours of this problem are circumscribed by its reduction to an instrumentalist paradigm of means-and-ends. As mere means, it is assumed that, under optimal conditions, there inheres the possibility of noise-free transmission between two positive entities across a medium. At its end, the line promises to contain its own means of effacement: the perpetually deferred horizon of a communion-to-come. In this construction of the medium as a means-ends machine, the onto-epistemological question of the line itself (as da Silva might put it) remains forever unasked. The violence that cuts and preserves the line is necessarily left unaccounted and unaccountable.

If earlier, in Deutsch, we found that the evil being who might defect from the line of communication garnered the appellation “fascism,” in Wiener’s text this being assumes a distinct yet related avatar— that of slavery. Counterposed against the open society promised by cybernetics, slavery signified the antithesis of a two-way communication ecology. Yet the possibility of a declension into the “evil” of non-reciprocity, Wiener insisted, was embedded in— and potentially enabled by— the “second industrial revolution” that cybernetics had ignited:

I have said that this new development has unbounded possibilities for good and for evil. For one thing, it makes the metaphorical dominance of the machines, as imagined by Samuel Butler, a most immediate and *non-metaphorical problem*. It gives the human race a new and most effective collection of mechanical slaves to perform its labor. Such mechanical

⁸¹ Reading West’s dramaturgy of division and repletion—discrete codes (either/or) that condition the possibility of a continuous flow of the additive (and another and another and another)— I further speculate that the phantasmatic structure of this medium contains both digital and analog layers. For a provocative set of conversations on the philosophical and political registers of the digital/analog relation in the context of systems theory, see Wilden, “Analog and Digital Communication.”

labor has most of the economic properties of slave labor, although, unlike slave labor, it does not involve the direct demoralizing effects of human cruelty. However, any labor that accepts the conditions of competition with slave labor accepts the conditions of slave labor, and is essentially slave labor. (*Cybernetics* 27, emphasis mine)

In this passage, Wiener distills that the dangers of machine supremacy prophesized by Butler in his nineteenth-century fiction had now been *brought to life* by contemporaneous technological innovations. Wiener's concerns are thus twofold. First, in the instance of miscommunication between man and machine over the "common purpose" of a collaborative endeavor, the human's agentic capacity wanes and a system's output might very well lead elsewhere than intended.⁸² Second, while Wiener seeks to differentiate the proliferation of "mechanical slaves" from the actualization of slave labor among "the human race," he admits a structural identity between the two. This is less a quandary about the human's proper ethical relation to the machine than an anxiety about the form of relation that slavery and its mechanical double bring forth into the discursive arena of communication. In Chapter 2, I examined how Marx delineates the enslaved as a form of fixed capital comparable to the monstrous "living, (active) machinery" described in his "Fragment on Machines." In Marx's nightmare, we also saw the (industrial) body of living labor subsumed by the demands and the calculations of "machinery itself." Wiener's ethical dilemma poses for cybernetics a similar burden: by granting the machine the capacity for learning and for sentience, humans themselves might be made subject

⁸² In "Some Moral and Technical Consequences of Automation," Wiener further argues, "Disastrous results are to be expected not merely in the world of fairy tales but in the real world wherever two agencies essentially foreign to each other are coupled in the attempt to achieve a *common purpose* if the communication between these two agencies as to the nature of this purpose is incomplete" (1358, emphasis mine). As we've seen, the elastic capacity of the heading "incomplete communication" to signify both white supremacy *and* black radicalism underscores the coercive imperatives that enable this dominant articulation of a "common purpose."

to—made slaves by— machines that “can and do transcend some of the limitations of their designers” (“Some Moral” 1355). On this reading, Wiener joins other mid-century critics of technology including Jacques Ellul and Marshall McLuhan in his anxious articulation of automation to the metaphor of slavery. This recursive reference to the problem of the human/machine relationship inaugurated by slavery signals the racial tint that haunts the presence of the machine’s wayward power in Wiener’s text.

Contemporary theorists, notably Alexander Weheliye, have brilliantly shown how current discourses of posthumanism (of which Wiener is one progenitor) metaphorize slavery in ways that fail to grapple with its foundational racialization in the chattel idiom of the New World.⁸³ That the ineluctable reappearance of slavery prompts Wiener at once to reassert the definite parameters of “the human race” against the mechanical other *and* to sever this reappearance from the establishment of white supremacy would seem to confirm Weheliye’s keen evaluation. The point I want to emphasize, though, is not that Wiener renders slavery a metaphor but, more precisely, that here he enunciates (mechanical) slavery as the moment in which *the circulation of metaphor terminates*; it is a “non-metaphorical problem” that raises the non-metaphorical as a problem. If, as Wendy Hui Kyong Chun reminds us, metaphor etymologically draws together the Greek *meta* (change) and *phor* (carrying), then not only does slavery instantiate for Wiener the end of the transmission of metaphor but in fact *the end of transmission itself* (“Did Somebody” 7; *Programmed* 56). While “the transportation of information” (*Human Use* 97) provides the very *raison d’être* of cybernetics, the spectral return of slavery encodes in Wiener’s *Cybernetics* the repressed limits of this transportation and therefore, too, of

⁸³ See Weheliye, “Feenin;” and *Habeus Viscus*, esp. “Introduction: Now.”

relation, of exchange, and of communication. In one sense, the textual inscription of slavery in the present tense symptomatically discloses the structural abyss of the incommunicable that unbraids the liberal tapestry of race relations. At the same time, however, this disclosure resubmits the slave as the surrogate of non-communication in a gesture that mimics Myrdal and Rashevsky's rigorous unimagining of the collective self-activity of blackness and/as black social relation. If Wiener concedes that slavery institutes a regime of violence *without analog*, the counter-insurgent cybernetic programs that I have examined in this section sought to unthink the unruly specter of movements that threatened the *longue durée* of its unfolding. This structure of engulfment, I suggest, is finally redoubled in the prohibition on metaphor and on transmission that subtends Wiener's outline of slavery, for what this formulation necessarily disavows is the constitutive function of racial slavery within western modernity and specifically in its culture of communication. That is to say, the identification of slavery as the exemplary scene of non-communication elides the historicity, the modernity, and the sociality of transport and, more emphatically, the modernity and the message of *the transported*.⁸⁴

I began this chapter by adumbrating how media and social theorists have located in the instance of cybernetic communication a general rubric through which to apprehend the composition of governance and economy in the contemporary social factory. By considering the coercive function of racial incorporation in the historic instance of cybernetic thought's rise to prominence and its articulation to a project of white

⁸⁴ I return to this point in detail below.

reconstruction,⁸⁵ I have sought to expand and refract these theoretical diagrams. If cybernetics indeed marks a critical pivot in the history and organization of “our” present, as media theory has decisively concluded, then an occlusion of the movement of race and racial blackness in accounts of this choreography of a common communication system perniciously risks, as Stefano Harney has usefully put it, “staging history all over again.”

In her monograph *The Witch’s Flight*, film theorist Kara Keeling delineates a conception of *common sense* that generatively captures the contours and the limits of racial liberalism’s enfolding of communication. In an inspired reading that braids together Gramsci, Hall, Lubiano, and Bergson, among others, Keeling treats common sense as the collective repertoire of “knowledges,” “intellectual activity,” and “habituated sensory-motor movements” that define— and manufacture consent to— an image of the World (19, 20). From this vantage, racial liberalism’s insertion of (interracial) communication into the image of a common World indexes the twin reconstruction and preservation of the World. In particular, Rashevsky’s focus on the transitive properties of white (common) sense and sensation sought to reconcile legitimate force-relations by steering white affectivity toward the horizon of the (changing) same.

For Keeling, however, common sense is importantly not one. “There is not just one common sense, but various common senses,” she writes. These otherwise configurations are comprised of “conceptions of the world and the modes of sensory-motor habituation through they are supported...[that] harbor viable alternatives to white bourgeoisie North American common sense” (21). The significance of such alternatives

⁸⁵ Dylan Rodríguez has offered the framework of “White Reconstruction” to apprehend “how struggles to abolish racist *social structures* do not necessarily lead to the dismantling of racist *social logics*, and may in fact produce multiple sociopolitical points of departure for revived, rearticulated forms of white supremacist power” (“Goldwater’s Left Hand” 48n.3).

modalities of common sense resides in the interface between collective memory processes and the imminent production of a radical new reality. As Keeling suggests, “if the Black conserves the originary violence of colonialism and redeploys it, it might function simultaneously (as Fanon explains about ‘the native’ in *The Wretched of the Earth*) as ‘the corrosive element’ within colonial and neocolonial reality” (35). Here, Keeling’s rendering of the accumulation and redeployment of violence through collective memory processes is strikingly resonant with the explosive potentiality secreted by the concept of feedback: the capacity to transfer past (sensory) data into the present in order to harness to an exponentially different future. While the cybernetic programs explored thus far served to conserve and recirculate the violence of dominant common sense, Keeling alerts us to the ways in which the preservation and inheritance of other common senses and sensations may embed and galvanize “the present(ly) (im)possible” conditions necessary to bring about “The end of the world” (6). Elsewhere, Keeling dubs this praxis of creative destruction the “impossible possibility within our shared reality” (“Looking” 566). This formulation of upheaval—lodged between the present perfect continuous and the future anterior—draws us nicely toward the work of Sylvia Wynter and specifically her evocative arrival at a conception of a “common reality” (“Sociogenic” 48). Wynter’s call to a *common* reality is one that she sends forth through the writing of an-other cybernetic program that seeks out the demonic undoing of the system of racial modernity and its codes of informational and affective transfer. It is therefore to Wynter’s demonic ground that I now turn.

3.3 CYBERNETICS BEYOND THE CODE OF MAN

It remains, that by its formal structure alone, “between” is nothing in itself. It remains that by the style of its enunciation, “between” is the dissimulated simulation of a scene of dissimulation. Such is the very stage or frame (of what shall we name us?) as a problem.

—Nahum Dimitri Chandler, *X*

Wynter’s signature, as I have mentioned, is absent from the body of scholarship that has reckoned with the afterlife of cybernetics, as well as from the diverse critical, theoretical, and philosophical trajectories that it has since birthed. This elision, I suspect, is due to Wynter’s abiding concern with the fundamental urgency of the question of the human, and the growing consensus in some quarters that the most positive and long-standing contribution of cybernetics is that it helped put this problematic to rest once and for all. The frenzy that has accompanied the contemporary announcement that “we” have at last moved beyond the problem of Man to greener pastures that *include* all kinds of (non-human) systems is surely also part of the “Eurocentric tendency,” as Zakiyyah Jackson has presciently noted, “to erase the parallel genealogies of thought that have anticipated, constituted, and disrupted these fields’ categories of analysis” (“Animal” 670).⁸⁶ This occlusion of Wynter’s cybernetics can perhaps then also be explained by the fact that her work inhabits this knowledge formation in the mode of the within and against. In cybernetics, Wynter finds a generative resource to invent a *mythos* and *scientia* adequate to diagnosing and disrupting racial modernity’s recursive constitution of what it *to be* and *to be like* human. From cybernetics, she takes and preserves a *diagnostic* emphasis on how systems teleologically reproduce themselves in the face of disorder. From this diagram, she too foregrounds the mutual feedback between social systems and

⁸⁶ On the racial authorization of the “beyond” in the “beyond of the human,” see also Jackson’s “Outer Worlds.”

the human nervous system, though she does so to radically different ends. To cybernetics Wynter enjoins a Fanonian arsenal through which she centralizes the problematics of race and blackness in her account of these systems. This unlikely partnership incarnates the corrosive element (following Keeling's Fanon) within cybernetics, both the historical articulation I have charted and its current revivification. I am not particularly interested, then, in assessing Wynter's fidelity to more canonical cybernetic thinkers. Nor do I seek to adjudicate whether her articulation of cybernetics to Fanon is authorized, finally, by the letter of his text. Instead, my intent is to gesture towards how Wynter leverages cybernetics against itself in order to invent a new portrait of the place of communication systems in *our* modernity.

The difficulty of entering Wynter's body of work emerges, in part, due to the legion of discourses, seemingly competing, upon which she draws. Katherine McKittrick underscores that her range of sources— from medieval theology and Caribbean poetics to neurobiology— exhibits a practice of “exceptional interdisciplinarity” (122). Jonathan Goldberg adds that Wynter's prose is expressed “in vocabularies that shift from clause to clause as they enact the desire to go beyond the regime of ‘Man’” (68). This mass intellectual gathering on the registers of content and form enacts a mode of study that bears witness to the racial conditions of all knowledge production as it chafes against the limits of intelligible transmission. Wynter's methodological and stylistic accent on accumulation and recombination also thematically orients her intervention in the logics of cybernetics. In her essay “The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism,” Wynter turns to the insidious projects of liberal inclusion that gained increased momentum in the wake of Myrdal, Wiener, and Rashevsky:

Blacks would be allowed on the campus as a group, admitted to have even a culture, as long as this 'culture' and its related enclave Studies could be made to function as...the mode of Chaos imperative to [the normatively Euroamerican's] new self-ordering...Indeed once this marginalization had been effected, the order of value recycled in different terms, with the category homeostasis returning to its "built in normalcy," the abuse and the bombs threats ceased. Order and Chaos were once more in their relational interdefining places, stably expressing the bio-ontological principle of Sameness and Difference of the present order... Yet the beginning of hope also lay here. The recognition of the regularities pointed outside the "functional rhetoric" of the Liberal creed to the existence of objective limits and, therefore, of laws of functioning which...determined the limits to the order's normative incorporation of those whose lives in a 'free' country had to be made to serve as the 'graphed function' of the boundary maintaining system, as its markers of Chaos. (41)

In this passage, Wynter observes how the mass gatherings that occasioned the insurrection of Black Studies were *gathered* by the epistemic machinery of the university. She does so in explicitly systems-theoretical terms. Specifically addressing the rise of the "New Studies" that grew out of the uprisings of the 1960s and that bear the names of those historically marginalized within and excluded from the university, Wynter argues that these insurgent forms of knowledge soon became "the mode of Chaos imperative" to the university's "new self-ordering." This principle that higher levels of order can arise from Chaos constitutes a significant revision to the first-order cybernetic quest to control noise through the clearing of a communication channel. For Wiener, order figured the antithesis of disorder, signal the antithesis of noise, and life the antithesis of death. Wynter contends, however, that the introjection of the negative symbolic reservoirs of chaos, noise, and death into the system of the university proved vital to its maintenance of equilibrium. Physicist Heinz von Foerster, who is often credited with initiating cybernetics' turn toward its "second-order" phase, maintained that rather than seeking to

eliminate noise, biological and technological systems in fact exploit the enabling functions of disorder. By adapting to disturbances that threaten to disarm homeostasis, systems are able to reflexively produce more complex forms of organization.⁸⁷

As Henri Atlan clarifies, “It is not bad to have noise in the system. If a system freezes in a specific state...[i]t will not be able to adapt to anything that would be an inadequate situation” (*International* 410). The “inadequate situation” inaugurated by the rise of Black Studies, as Wynter sees it, was a challenge to the very enterprise of the human sciences and its proper onto-epistemological object, the order of Man. This order, however, worked to make productive— re-order— the tendency toward disorder through a sort of immunization. Wynter’s appropriation of this insight leads her to read the university’s incorporation of both black people and Black Studies—the signifiers of Chaos— as a pacifying mechanism in the institutional machine. She also suggests that the reconfiguration of “Black Studies” as “African American Studies” reconsolidated the proper subject and object of Man through the attempt to nationalize and particularize the disfiguring force of the black (human) sciences.⁸⁸ Like Myrdal’s interpellation of “the Negro” as the motor of national democracy, Wynter keys in on the vicious capacity of systems to extract information out of noise. Yet “the beginning of hope,” Wynter asserts, “also lay here.” What does she mean? This is foremost the question of how noise and chaos might be unleashed to organize otherwise and elsewhere outside their re-accumulation with a given system. This is a question Wynter poses not only through the content of her prose but also formally through her baroque style, an exorbitant

⁸⁷ See von Foerster, “On Self-Organizing Systems and Their Environments.” I have also benefited from Clarke, “Heinz von Foerster’s Demons” and Mattelart & Matterlart, *Theories of Communication* 45.

⁸⁸ See Wynter, “Desêtre.”

methodology of excess that positions itself against the orderly chaos of the “interdisciplinary” university. To address how Wynter’s responds to this question, I first need to schematize briefly some of the enduring concerns that underwrite her entire oeuvre and her turn through Fanon, before returning to how outlines this hope in and through cybernetics most vividly.

Wynter’s effort to ascertain the self-reproducing mechanisms that propel our present world system starts with the thesis that “the word ‘race’ itself” constitutes the political onto-theology of modernity (“Toward ” 36). Beginning with the moment of secularization in Renaissance Europe, Wynter argues that with the “de-godding” of the supernatural, there emerged for the first time the possibility of imagining Man as an autonomous being regulated not by the laws of God but rather by the laws of Nature (“1492” 8). The conception of Man that emerged with this *biocentric* revision to a previously theocentric conception of the world nonetheless resurrected the Spirit/Flesh distinction of the Judeo-Christian universe. The reincarnation of this binary program was foremost written into the imperative of race and the planetary processes of genocide, conquest, and captivity that it would institute and be instituted by. As Wynter underscores, it was immanent to the epistemic rupture of modernity that race came to embody the “non-supernatural but no less extrahuman ground (in the recoccupied place of the traditional ancestors/gods, God, ground) of the answer that the secularizing West would now give to the Heideggerian question as to the who, and what we are” (“Unsettling” 265). To engage the question of race is thus always to rec(onc)eive *this* question of ontology, *the* question of human being. The scripting of the “we”—the *proper nos*—highlighted by Wynter remains the injunction of western racial humanism,

which posits European Man in the matrixial slot once occupied by Spirit. Through this transposition of eternal life and symbolic being into the dominant referent Man, this mutated digital eugenic code refigures the fall of the damned—the wretched—in the form of *degraded flesh*, the Black who must stand as the invariant absolute within the binary architecture of Man and his “Untrue Other” (318).⁸⁹ Wynter forcefully posits that the Untrue Others have provided the unthought yet structuring *ground* upon which the human qua Man has been invented and reproduced. It is this conception of the human as Man that is at stake, in the last instance, in all intellectual-cum-political struggles over protocols of cognition, the maldistribution of value and resources, and the adjudication of (human) being. As she urges, foreshadowing Galloway’s “new politics of being,” “The Argument here redefines Marx’s class struggle in the terms of a ‘politics of being’: that is, one waged over what is to be the descriptive statement of the human” (“Black” 247; “Unsettling” 319). The descriptive statement, a phrase borrowed from Bateson, forms the terrain of battle against the regime of Man instituted through self-replicating codes of selection and “dysselectedness/dysgenicity” (316). The descriptive statement is the

⁸⁹ As should be clear, a persistent concern with the legacies of structuralism also colors Wynter’s project, including her engagements with cybernetics. When presenting earlier versions of this research, an audience member cautioned that my approach risks an “Americanization” of cybernetic thought (even if, as one commentator offered, this “Americanization” is ultimately hemispheric in its scope). By this I believe they referred to the scant attention I pay to contemporaneous popular and political engagements with cybernetics in Europe (such as Jacques Ellul’s *The Technological Society* [1954], Pierre de Latil’s *La cybernétique* [1954], and Georg Klaus’s *Cybernetics from a Philosophical Perspective* [1961]), as well as to the important cross-currents between cybernetics and European structuralism, specifically in the figure of Roman Jakobson. My belated response is twofold. First, the historical relay between cybernetics and structuralism has already been amply investigated by other critics (see Liu, “The Cybernetic Unconscious”) so my partial reading does not emphasize this theoretical intersection. Second, there is a dangerous assumptive logic that undergirds this word of caution—one that functionally binds the work of Wynter and the general problematic of race to an entire tropology of region, particularity, and the local. This indeed is Wynter’s essential point in her critique of the disciplining of Chaos into the “enclaves” of particularistic studies; she thus proleptically unravels the very terms of the question. Alexander Weheliye has also written about this enclosure in terms of the ways black studies and ethnic studies are regarded as offering a “particular exception” rather than a “general theory” (3). On the unspoken racist and sexist commitments that govern the institution and nomination of “theory,” see also McDowell, esp. 94.

conception and the *matter* of being, and, as Wynter insists, “[t]he conception is *the* imperative” (“Re-Enchantment” 160, emphasis hers). It is the goal-seeking orientation of an equilibrium-seeking system.

It is precisely this binary code of Man that I previously noted in Fanon through his discussion of the theft of black being, and it also that which propels his multitudinous efforts to disarm racial modernity’s communications infrastructure, including its metaphysical support. In “Concerning Violence,” the opening chapter of his anti-colonial treatise *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon poses a resounding counter to an idealist philosophy of communication that would insist on the possibility of interracial communion within the present totality of an antiblack, colonial world. The colonial order is, fundamentally, “a world [*un monde*] cut in two” (38), “[o]bedient to the rules of pure Aristotelian logic...of reciprocal exclusivity” (38-9). Fanon does not speak of two separate worlds but rather *a* world that is a divided internally—a cut that provides the world’s enabling condition and upon which its orbit depends. In so doing, he uncovers the conditions of the cut that sustains the medium of the color line despite the (liberal) desire to disavow the conditions that this medium signals. The twoness of this world is not preceded by a higher undivided unity. Nor might these two meet as one “after” the in(de)terminable event of abolition that I called earlier, following da Silva and Keeling, the End of the World. Rather, it is exactly the originary violence of this inaugural breach that charts and (re)founds the world—that is to say, the New World. What is crucial to stress is Fanon’s insistence that there can be no dialectical resolution between the inhabitants of the world’s two zones: “The white man is sealed in his whiteness. [Caesura] The black man in his blackness” (*BSMW* 9). This constitutive opposition that

defines the world— the “reciprocal exclusivity” that Fanon impresses— is neither the Hegelian relation of “absolute reciprocity” (217) nor is it a complementarity. This is because the white man’s and the black man’s sealings are structurally distinct; they belong, he emphasizes, to “two distinct species” (*Wretched* 40).

Fanon addresses the consequences of this “species” distinction in *Black Skin, White Masks* through an appraisal of the inadequacy of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic for understanding the position of the black— grounded, as this dialectic is, in movement and two-way exchange. Briefly, for Hegel, Fanon explains, the being of self-consciousness is immediately conditioned by the existence and recognition of an other; rather than entirely dominating the slave, the master is in fact dependent on the slave for his identity, and the slave, in turn, fights for recognition with his actional pursuit the basis of his own freedom. The Hegelian scenario is thus characterized by a dialectic between openness and closure: the closure of the self-reflexive “I” is made possible by its openness to the other upon which the formation of self-consciousness depends. “If I close the circuit,” Fanon writes,

if I prevent the accomplishment of movement in two directions, I keep the other within himself. Ultimately, I deprive him even of this being-for-itself. The only means of breaking this *vicious circle* that throws me back on myself is to restore to the other, through mediation and recognition, his human reality. (217, emphasis mine)

According to Fanon’s reading of Hegel, becoming fully “human” is predicated on the mutual desire for mutual recognition. The discordance between the Hegelian system and the racial-colonial system lies precisely in the latter’s evacuation of the possibility of “being-for-itself,” an autonomy that requires, paradoxically, that each party engage the

other in absolute reciprocity. The genealogical record of racial slavery and the present time of its unfolding short-circuit this emancipatory proposal.

To make this point, Fanon fabulates the following allegory: “One day a good white master who had influence said to his friends, ‘Let’s be nice to the niggers...’ The other masters argued, for after all it was not an easy thing, but they then decided to promote the machine-animal-men to the supreme rank of *men*” (220, emphasis his). Reciprocity across the color line is impossible “after” the world historic event of racial slavery; the white man does not seek out recognition from that which was rendered equal parts human, animal, and machine long before Wiener’s proto-posthumanist pursuits. Fanon’s allegorical disfiguration of emancipation suggests that the very pretense of— and the desire for— mutual recognition constitute an insidious and pathogenic reconsolidation of the racial order of things. In contrast to the struggle that animates Hegelian slavery, Fanon narrates the putative demise of racial slavery as a gift of freedom granted under the guise of white benevolence. By naming freedom as something that the white master “gives,” Fanon’s point is not to cancel out the historically variegated political agencies, mass exoduses, and general strikes of the enslaved and the formerly enslaved.⁹⁰ Rather, in

⁹⁰ Indeed, the erasure of black agency appears as a central concern throughout Fanon’s text, notably in his decisive critique of western marxist humanism on the grounds that it manufactures the sublation of blackness. In “Black Orpheus,” Sartre famously submits Négritude to a negative moment in a dialectic whose resolution would be found in the “realization of the human being in a raceless society” (49). In so doing, he renders blackness and its affirmation equivalent to a position of absolute, though necessary, reactivity in the drive toward the emancipation of humanity as such. (This is a move not unlike Myrdal’s definition black culture as reactive that we saw Ellison critique.) Fanon confirms in his response to Sartre, “my effort was only a term in the dialectic” (*BSWM* 132). Whereas the Hegelian thus misrecognizes the racial-colonial order’s frozen dialectic as an interaction that might lead to a higher unity, Sartre instrumentalizes blackness as a negative term in the teleological motor of historical progression: “Sartre’s mistake was not only to see the source of the source but also in a certain sense to block that source” (134). Both Hegel’s inflation of the slave’s agency and Sartre’s subsumption of black agency under the heading of a postracial future both constitute, Fanon alerts us, aversions to the lived experience of the black.

his deployment of allegory, Fanon punctuates that so long as the protocols of human emancipation and the power to bestow humanity—the control of the means of human being—remain in place, the ontological violence of racial slavery is ineluctably extended into the present.⁹¹ Thus, the nominal transubstantiation of the “machine-animal-men” into “men” changes nothing. The structure of *this* world is such that the black cannot be included within what Fanon calls “the circuit,” and the appearance of her or his inclusion within this circuit proves ultimately a technology of treacherous deception. Openness and closure here are but two sides of the same coin.

Although this sketch of the Hegelian circuit of recognition may seem to have taken us far afield from the cybernetic circuit of communication, they are linked insofar as both require the establishment of contact and dependence between two parties, sender and receiver, master and slave. For cybernetics, the struggle between signal and noise is predicated on a prior compact between sender and receiver. “The two extremities of the channel,” media theorist Tiziana Terranova helpfully clarifies, “are on the same side, tied together by a mutual interest” (15): the common sense that each party has an *interest* in the survival of a common communication milieu. For Hegel, the battle between master and slave is similarly predicated on the establishment of a prior mutual interest in recognition. Each must agree not to kill the other because their respective achievements of self-consciousness are irrevocably entwined, dependent on the survival of both within a circuit of conflict and desire. For Fanon, however, the Manichean delirium that survives

⁹¹ Wynter exacts this point: “the goal of our mode of production is... to provide for the material conditions of existence for the production and reproduction for our present conception of being human” (“Re-Enchantment” 160).

(as) racial slavery is predicated on a fundamental misapprehension of recognition as a possibility or emancipatory ideal. And so he declares:

To break up the colonial world does not mean that after the frontiers have been abolished *lines of communication* will be set up between the two zones. The destruction of the colonial world is no more and no less than the abolition of one zone, its burial in the depths of the earth.” (*Wretched* 41, emphasis mine)

The topographical exigencies that propel Fanon’s deconstruction of communication are decisive: opening channels of communication has nothing to do with decolonization.

Indeed, the medium of the vanishing (color) *line* that would bind together the world’s two zones is, principally, one that is contingent upon the primacy of division, the “dividing line” (68). The liberal dream of communication sustains, despite itself, the Manichean logic of the line. The abolition of the colonial world cannot therefore be confused with the establishment of connection between that which was once disconnected.

Decolonization, instead, comprises the absolute destruction of one side of the line, which amounts to nothing less than the destruction of the transmission system itself.⁹²

In Wynter’s reading, Fanon’s destruction of the World is given the title “After Man,” an apocalypse occasioned by the ongoing invention given in and as the paleonymic heading *the human*. The inauguration of this heading, for Wynter, takes place through the articulation of the Fanonian cut to a cybernetic theory of decision-making. Drawing on the Chilean biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, she

⁹² In the introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon makes this point again, activating once more the colonial motif of the frontier. “There is a psychological phenomenon which consists in the belief that the world will open to the degree that frontiers are broken down,” he writes (8). As in the case of his discourse of decolonization, Fanon maintains the irreducibility of the abolition of the World to the transgression of borders— indeed he asserts an antimony between the two. When we read this insistence together with the aforementioned from passage from *Wretched*, we find that the psychic misrecognition Fanon exacts in the allegory of emancipation holds the same ideological structure of belief that subtends the attempt to liberalize the line of communication: (racial) openness figures the antipode of (racist) closure.

proposes to study the present conception of what it is to be human through the rubric of autopoiesis. Autopoiesis refers to the ways in which systems self-regulate but also self-institute themselves. To explain briefly by way of an example, in their experiments on the structure of vision and cognition in frogs, Maturana and Varela troubled the positivist assumption that an organism merely perceives a pre-existing natural environment from which it obtains information (*Autopoiesis* xvi). As Wynter writes, “Maturana and Varela said they wanted to find a way to say that the living system that is the frog specifies what is to be known of the environment” (“Unparalleled Catastrophe” 28, emphasis hers). Stated differently, what is observed by the system recursively refers to back to the finite limits of a system’s own auto-instituted structure of cognition and perception, its frame of reference. For Wynter, the tremendous significance of this insight resides in the fact that the realization of the living, to use Maturana and Varela’s phrase, occurs through an entity’s own self-referential institution of the distinction between itself and its environment. This is not to say that autopoietic systems are fully sovereign entities undetermined by their constitutive outside, but it does mean that the very distinction between environment and system is achieved through an operation of closure that ensures the insulation of the system. An environment, in other words, does not exist “out there,” but rather is the *invention* of a system through an autotelic filtering function of selection/de-selection. Autopoiesis intervenes in the first-order of cybernetics by articulating communication not as a relay between two positive entities but rather as a system’s mechanism of instituting *cuts* that, in turn, (re)institutes the system itself.

Like her contemporary Niklas Luhmann, for Wynter autopoiesis ceases to function solely as a modality of understanding and describing biotic systems.⁹³ She transports Maturana and Varela's second-order cybernetic formulation of the organism as an autopoietic system to emplot the "life" of social systems as itself autopoietic. In so doing, she reads racial modernity as a self-replicating system based upon a fundamental distinction between being and non-being that, as I stated earlier, she gathers under the heading of the biocentric code. To deploy a clichéd turn of phrase, Wynter seeks to "denaturalize" this auto-hominization of Man to argue that the human cannot be approached in strictly biological terms. This "denaturalization," however, is an extremely complex one that activates the imagination of critique not as a simple "unveiling," as the accusation goes, but rather as itself a productive power that re-enchants the world. Thus, against a certain contemporary tendency to refuse critique in the name of the ethical preservation of mystery (a tendency notably associated with neo-cybernetics in its new materialist guise), Wynter centrally affirms the twinning of creation and destruction unleashed by a critical project.

In Fanon's recognition of the *constitutive cuts* that provide the regularities of racial modernity's telos, Wynter locates "a sociodiagnostic" of the human organism's own biosocial structure of auto-institution that resonates with the perceptual structures of

⁹³ A comparison between Wynter and Luhmann's differing accounts of autopoiesis and modernity would be of great interest, but it is unfortunately beyond the more modest scope of this chapter. I will only note that, for Luhmann, the onset of modernity is positively correlated with the decline of stratification: "the transition from traditional societies to modern society can be conceived of as the transition from a primarily stratified form of differentiation of the society system to one which is primarily function" (qtd. in Cornell 78). I would speculate this understanding of stratification's waning in modernity may be one reason for Wynter's lack of engagement with Luhmann's corpus, despite their shared citational threads. In this vein, Drucilla Cornell ("The Philosophy of the Limit") has argued for an understanding of gender as a system in Luhmann's specific sense, while suggesting that Luhmann's treatment of stratification marks a potential limit to the feminist appropriation of second-order cybernetics. I share Cornell's hesitations.

Maturana and Varela's frogs ("Toward" 54). In her idiosyncratic reading of Fanon, she contends that his statement "beside phylogeny and ontogeny stands sociogeny" anticipates and modifies second-order systems theory by locating a quasi-transcendental binary code of selection/deselection through which the human institutes itself. This she dubs the sociogenic principle. The directive of these governing codes, apparently discovered by Fanon, are "laws beyond natural laws... that nevertheless function in tandem with natural laws so as to bring into being the hybrid nature-culture modes of being or forms-of-life specific to human being" (55). Wynter's attempt to re-enchant the human beyond the deathly grips of biocentrism thus does not seek to efface the human's inscription in the biological but rather to trace the feedback and mutual affectations between bios and the socius, flesh and code, at the interface between the laws of Nature and the laws of "the invented *tekhne* or cultural technology" that encode and invent human itself (54). While resonating with Stiegler's treatment of the co-invention of technics and the human outlined in Chapter 1, one critical difference seems to be that here the originary contamination of *tekhne* that invents the human does so through an intractable partition in the field of the human itself. Indeed, it is this transcultural, quasi-transcendental regularity of boundary-making that Wynter foregrounds as the mode auto-institution specific to the human species as a form-of-life. Crucially, however, in Fanon's recognition of the constitutively social inscription of this mode of auto-institution, Wynter argues that it became newly possible to make (in the general sense of *poiesis*) a new *mythos* of the human that could cut this form otherwise. Put differently, by unearthing the autopoietic cognitive and affective closures that make possible the repertoire of Man, Wynter's Fanon enables those who have been cut by the biocentric

order to produce their own cuts so as to re-orient the topography of the human as we know it.

In the idiom of second-order cybernetics, Fanon figures the observing observer, that is, the position that observes the mechanisms through which a system makes observations (i.e., distinctions).⁹⁴ We must, however, distinguish Wynter's observing observer from theories of positionality and standpoint epistemology, for, as McKittrick rightly underlines, Wynter's rejection of these heuristics marks her critical difference "from antiracist and/or feminist theories of 'inclusivity' and 'special vantage points'" (135). In Wynter's hands, the observing observer takes form through the concept-metaphor *demonic ground*. Demonic ground revises a term from physics and cybernetics that describes a system whose proper functioning hinges on an imaginary entity that works behind the scenes to reduce a system's tendencies towards entropy and heat-death.⁹⁵ The demonic thus conjures again the many supernatural beings that populated the early canon of cybernetics. We will recall not only Deutsch's evil of non-communication but also Wiener's search for a form of relation beyond the Manichean Devil offered by game theory; each variously posed the demonic figure as the pivot between homeostasis and chaos.

⁹⁴ "At the level of second-order observing, everything becomes contingent, including the second-order observing itself." See Luhmann, "Deconstruction as Second-Order Observing System" 769. Again, I can only gesture here toward the yet-unexamined relationship between Wynter's and Luhmann's cybernetics. It seems to me, though, that for both Wynter and Luhmann the second-order observer may call into question the "reality" of a system by situating the contingent conditions of her own observation. For Wynter, however, the demonic ground occupied by this observer appears to tarry with (blackness as) a transcendental opening to the totality of a system in a manner that Luhmann's account would not allow. On the relationship between second-order cybernetics and standpoint epistemology, see Clough, "Affective Turn."

⁹⁵ On Maxwell's Demon, see Wiener, *Human* 28-9.

My argument is that Wynter resurrects these cybernetic demons to put them to a different kind of work. Indeed, for Wynter, the demonic is but one pseudonym of blackness: the crucible both that frames the totality of our modernity as its limit and that which indexes the trace of an exorbitant force whose social being inaugurates the future of upheaval. If the power of the cybernetic demon is to clandestinely make a system work, Wynter's contention is that the demonic may very well *refuse to work*, unworking the system by leading wayward from both inside and out. In Wynter's invocation of the demonic she therefore shares Myrdal's emphasis on "the Negro problem" as "the central vantage point" from which to understand the fundamental operations of a system. Myrdal, however, could of course not think the immensity of this problem as the general problematic of (human) being, and so he located the *grounds* of this problem in the nation-state and sought to make the problem work for the system.⁹⁶ Wynter, too, takes the vantage of blackness as the object of her inquiry, but finds that the ground enabled by this object is necessarily groundless. She instructs, "We shall need to move beyond this founding definition [of the human] not merely to another alternative one... but rather to a frame of reference which parallels the 'demonic models' posited by physicists who seek to conceive a vantage point outside the space-time orientation of the humunucular observer" ("Demonic" 479-80). The demonic model, in other words, indexes a radical difference from the protocols of integration and recognition that would seek to include the others of Man— the machine-animal-men but also the machine— within the folds of human (consciousness) in its dominant mode of being. The vantage point enlisted by Wynter is importantly outside the spatial and temporal frame of the human as it has been

⁹⁶ I riff here on the subtitle to Chandler's *X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought*.

presently defined and over-represented; it is an observation from the groundless ground of the degraded Thing that is simultaneously imprisoned by and banished from the world. This “outside” vantage is thus not a pluralistic additivity but might be better conceived in terms of what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney dub “the standpoint of no standpoint” (*Undercommons* 93). If blackness has no standing or grounding in the antiblack World, then Wynter’s demonic looks beyond this World, threatening to unravel its operative fictions and rewriting the codes that cut the human differently.

In one regard, it would seem that Wynter suggests that Fanon and the demonic movements he inspired have cracked the code, as it were, of the human. I contend, however, that Wynter’s rewriting of the sociogenic principle seeks not the calculability of the human but rather to glimpse the possibility of the incalculable foreclosed by a biocentric regime. Against this regime’s injunction to Man’s transparency, the sociogenic principle is understood as the quasi-transcendental phenomenon, inscribed in culturally-specific modes, that gives form to human being. Most scandalous about Wynter’s project is this insistence on the universal imperative of such a common law-like code by which variegated conceptions of the human are produced and preserved. That is to say, her human does not appear to me as a catachrestic function but instead one that very much stands in the (degraded) flesh. This flesh, though, like all flesh, is not equivalent to the bare fact of “life itself” but instead marks the absolute refusal of the copula given by the biocentric elevation of Man and/as Spirit. It is the pro-gramme of sociogeny—both originary and artificial, *written in the flesh*—that thus places the sovereignty of bios under erasure by foregrounding its constitutive contamination by “the nature-culture processes inscripting our modes of socio-genetic being” (“Towards” 47). In other words,

organic life is always-already disrupted and inscribed by the social. The difficulty and importance of this argument, centrally, resides not in an exposure of how the ruling fiction of Man is disfigured through the introduction of his Others, that is, through the scandal of difference. (This indeed would be the logic of sociohistorical exclusion about which da Silva warned.) Rather, the scandal lies elsewhere, in Wynter's deployment of the common determiner *our*. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the fabulation of the *our* (as in "our humanity") has proved the enduring target of antihumanist and posthumanist critical energies for decades. With these critics, Wynter too writes against Man. But she also writes *for* the human.

Notably, Wynter's account of the "human-system ensemble" ("After" 22) in autopoietic terms persists in her more recent writings, even as there has been a general waning of interest in the concept within other corners of the theoretical humanities.⁹⁷ For these other thinkers, autopoiesis is charged with instituting phantasmatic boundaries and exclusions. To risk flattening a diverse range of critiques, the substantive point across these accounts is that autopoiesis functions as a descriptive apparatus that belies a normative prescription. Each posits boundary-maintenance as a contingent (and sometimes muscular) epistemological *fiction*, one that disavows a more primordial ontological plentitude— *an open world*— that pre-exists the discrete parsing of (human) organism or system. One need not pledge full allegiance to second-order cybernetics (and I do not) to notice that it is the boundary as a figure of closure that again emerges as the

⁹⁷ For Wynter's more recent writings about autopoiesis, see, for example, "Human Being as Noun?" and "On the Laws/Modes of Auto-Institution." For some notable critiques of autopoiesis in media and social theory, see Clough, "Affective Turn," and Protevi, "Beyond Autopoiesis." For defenses of autopoiesis that respond to these critiques within the formation of posthumanist thought, see Wolfe, *Posthumanism*, esp. xxv; and Clarke and Hansen, "Neocybernetic Emergence."

evil object in these critiques. But if an autopoietic (human) system is a self-instituting fiction, as these theorists insist, then what is most compelling about Wynter is how absolutely seriously she takes such fictions to be. Following Wynter, I would propose that the boundaries and cuts that *form* the realization of autopoiesis are themselves vital to thinking and feeling an-other conception of the human, one that neither repeats the partitions of Man nor recedes into a (in)form(ation)less ooze. Wynter neither celebrates “life itself” as the order that protects against the terrible abyss of sameness (Wiener) nor does she deride the organism as the fictional impediment that incarcerates “life itself” in the house of organization. Rather, Wynter’s stress on the human as a *specific* form-of-life is precisely that which allows her to in-form this rubric differently— not to do away with fiction but to invent radically new fictions that do not conform to the program of Man. Wynter’s formation of the *our* therefore does make not replete—repair—the ontologized gap between Man and the Black, but rather is itself the invention and the object of social *poiesis* that Wynter signs as Black Studies and, alternatively, as the human project. As both subject and object of the sociogenic program, it is finally the inheritance and transformation of the *gramme* of the human that most interests Wynter, and that lead her to summon Césaire in calling for “a new science of the word” (“Toward” 60). This new science would attend to the complex circuits of feedback between cognition, sense, and sensation that erect and perforate the descriptive statement of the human. It would render the vicious circle of Man transparent to open the human to the unanticipated futures imagined by and enacted through collective struggles to regenerate the human anew.

From this re-enchantment of the human beyond its biocentric determination by Man, Wynter mounts an alternative cybernetic practice of accumulation that gathers and

recombines vast formations of study in order to engender a new pedagogy of the human. Inspired by Wynter's project, this chapter has endeavored to unsettle the boundaries that have circumscribed the problematic of cybernetics in media and social theory. I have asked what are the conditions that brought and bring blackness to the fold of cybernetics, and I have attempted to decipher the conditions that have since obscured these connections from *view*. These questions of pedagogy, boundaries, connection, and, finally, the transparency of view return us precisely to where this chapter began.

The cybernetic thrall to race relations, as we saw, was foremost an apparatus of public pedagogy; the capacity of the U.S. racial system to learn and to adapt constituted its primary governing imperative. Furthermore, the cognitive and affective re-education of the white citizen-subject both mimicked and mirrored the U.S. state's imperial interest in putatively modeling and instructing the globe in the habits of liberal democracy. These strategies of engulfment sought to open boundaries in order redraw them the same, to gather and accumulate democracy to *make it work* for governance. Wynter's incisive rendering of the university's accumulation of blackness and its engulfment of the disordering violence black studies might unleash on the science of Man critically anticipates Galloway's concerns with that other power of blackness, the black box. Galloway's cybernetic hypothesis indeed similarly pivots upon the ways in which governmentality demands and requires that populations constantly speak their interests in a system. The accumulation and expropriation of democracy, criticality, and participation function in the name of openness, a trick whose cunning logic may very well have been perfected on the black box of race. Galloway's response, again, is a subtractivist silence, a blackness that *stops accumulating to stop accumulation*. In his diagram of a quiet

antagonism between the black box and the black bloc, all interests are coded identically in the same non-semantic terms. I have argued that this occlusion of the inscription of racial blackness in the cybernetic archive disavows the suture between a reconstructed figuration of white affectability and the endurance of the white sovereign decision.

Wynter's rejoinder, then, would be that Galloway's immanentist imagination can only think interest and antagonism as it has been given and over-represented by the World and, in so doing, he thus forecloses those aneconomic strategies of accumulation through which blackness steers the human elsewhere.

In his essay "Abolition and the General Intellect," Stefano Harney argues that the compositional form of contemporary governance is at once undergirded and threatened by its inheritance of blackness. By this, Harney means that the institution of racial slavery inaugurated a regime of production that centrally depended upon the communicative, affective, and cognitive capacities— the mass intellectuality— of the enslaved. Harney's essay indicates that this mass repertoire of communal faculties is "self-referential," which is to say it is "about itself" and also for itself. The significance of Harney's reading lies in his insight that the global terror that aimed at the total subsumption of black life required virtuosic arrangements of collective organization that this regime could neither see, anticipate, nor capture. The unthinkable production of abolition that these insurgent communicative arrangements birthed divulges the corrosive racial trace that continues to inhere within cybernetic governance. If governance operates through the "auto-generation of interests"— by instructing that one must make clear her stakes in the system— Harney avers that "freedom today means at least in part to be without interests." Though Harney appears here to echo Galloway and his fellow travelers who theorize the contemporary

social factory, I read his critical difference in the impossible “debt at a distance” he locates in a black radical tradition that inaugurates the actualization of what he calls “the class without interests,” or what I would prefer to call the class of an interest that is both against and beyond interest— the interest that is im-possible, and persistently unimagined by, the World. Wynter’s appositional cybernetics seeks out exactly the freedom of this self-referential class in and as the paleonymic rewriting of the human. The self-referential autopoietic system that Wynter discovers in the sociogenic principle leads her, and us, to a new study of the human and its codes of transmission and replication— a study that she not only establishes in Fanon’s observing observer but also in a common praxis that might (yet still) overturn the genre of Man and his twin fictions of the closed world and the open society.

CHAPTER FOUR

FUGITIVE SIGNALS: PENALITY AND THE MEDIA OF LIFE AND DEATH

Don't mistake this as a message from George to Fay, it's a message from the hunted running blacks to those people who profess to want to change the conditions that destroy life.

—George Jackson, *Soledad Brother*

Any kind of response— and there will be a response if a message is delivered— will require another payment, another stamp, a reinvestment in the process.

—Richard Dienst, *Still Life in Real Time*

And how do we reconcile the necessities of both return and detour? No.

—Fred Moten, *In the Break*

Television makes its first appearance in *Soledad Brother*, George Jackson's collected letters authored while held captive by the political infrastructure and financial logic he theorized as "neo-slavery" (236), in a letter written to his attorney Fay Stendler. Called on by Stendler to address why it is that antiblack racism exists specifically in the prison with such "particular prominence," Jackson refuses the terms of his lawyer's query— her attempt to exceptionalize the prison, to name it other than both symptom and centrifuge of the entire U.S. social formation. "The question was too large," Jackson responds, for "It's tied into the larger question of why racism exists in this whole society with 'particular prominence'... After one concedes... that criminals and crime arise from material, economic, sociopolitical causes, we can then burn all of the criminology and penology libraries and direct our attention where it will do some good" (17, 18). Notably, however, in this April 1970 letter— written four months prior to his state-sponsored assassination— Jackson's devastating call to divert our attention from the sociologies of crime is doubled by the appearance of another apparatus of attention, one that surfaces at the margins of his epistolary. Recalling Frederick Douglass's well-known dictum that "To make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one" (*Narrative* 349), Jackson writes that in "the general population facility there are no chains and cuffs. TVs...serve to keep [the inmate's] mind off his real problems... *without thinking* about [his] real problems" (20-1, emphasis his). Elsewhere in this letter, Jackson describes the techniques of immobilization and violence of humiliation bolstered by the presence of television, particularly the presence of a single console among the incarcerated: "You can't begin to measure the bad feeling caused by the existence of one TV set shared by 140 men. Think! One TV, 140 men. If there is more than one channel, what's going to

occur? In Soledad's TV rooms there has been murder, mayhem, and destruction of many TV sets" (23). From these excursions on television's temporal rhythms and spatial architectures that mark the ordinary conditions of disposable existence in Soledad and San Quentin, Jackson then concludes his letter with the exhortation "Seize the Time!": the imperative to seize— in the acquisitional sense of steal back— the time that has been stolen and also to seize— in the mechanistic sense of seize up, jam, unwork— the operations of violence that sustain the repetitions of prison time, the flow of the interminable present. This collective call to "seize the time!" is one that bears the imprint of fellow Black Panther Bobby Seale's 1970 monograph of the same title but that also, I argue, bears critical witness to that preeminent time-based medium of the twentieth century: TV.

Television, of course, is but one of several carceral techniques and technologies referenced in Jackson's text: "concrete and steel, barbed wire, rifles, pistols, clubs, [and] tear gas" (19) but also surveillance monitors; "the mass news media and other thought-control facilities" (170); and "the pig" who, in an uncompromising reversal of the Aristotelian/McLuhanite thematic outlined in Chapter 1, is established as "merely the gun, the tool, a mentally inanimate utensil" of the "Amerikan fascist state" (253). But television is nonetheless a technology and cultural form that Jackson repeatedly returns to in his letters, naming it as a primary tool of incapacitation, as an apparatus that makes times, takes time, and wastes time, that aims to waste him. Importantly, Jackson's commentary proleptically registers the proliferation of televisual media within prisons that would accompany the massive expansion of the U.S. carceral regime in the post-Keynesian era. While television entered U.S. prisons as early as 1954 and was available

in many state and federal facilities within “common” spaces during nights and weekends throughout the 1960s, it was in 1972 that imprisoned populations were first permitted to purchase in-cell TV sets in institutions such as San Quentin.⁹⁸ The following year, television sets were installed in all cells within even the administrative segregation unit.⁹⁹ Crucially, this inauguration of TV into prisons coincided with an increased abandonment of literacy initiatives and, in particular, the disciplinary technique known as “bibliotherapy” administered by prison officials, librarians, and corrections departments. Such reading-centered endeavors waned in dialectical response to mass prison rebellions between 1969 and 1973 and the attendant fomenting of radical prison movements aided by the printing and circulation of prisoner publications such as the New York-based *Midnight Special* (1971-5) and the New Afrikan Prisoner Organization’s magazine *The Fuse*, monographs like Jackson’s *Soledad Brother* (1970), and periodicals such as *The Black Panther* (1967-73), which, as Nate Harrington, an inmate at the Deule Vocational Institute, remarked in 1973, scandalously mobilized and collectively addressed the wretched— “the lumpen,” in his words— as a class for itself (qtd. in Cummins 112).¹⁰⁰ Yet while in both popular and academic idioms television has long signaled a privileged figure to register the programming of social life, the manufacture of the life/labor/leisure

⁹⁸ On the post-war entrance of TV into U.S. jails and prisons, see Pelch, “Television as an Educational Medium for Correctional Institution.” On the introduction of in-cell television, see Cummins, *Rise and Fall of California’s Radical Prison Movement* 83.

⁹⁹ See Hallinan, *Going Up the River* 81.

¹⁰⁰ For more on “black prison print culture,” see the historian Dan Berger’s *Captive Nation: Black Prison Organizing in the Civil Rights Era*. Berger emphasizes, with specific reference to *Midnight Special*, the centrality of prisoner print media to the crafting of political analyses and mobilizations across multiple locations and struggles: “In *Midnight Special*, prisoners wrote not only about their own prisons but also about their comrades in other prisons and about the metaphoric prisons that held captive the United States and the larger black world” (242).

distinctions, as well as the very parameters of “the live” itself, George Jackson’s television fundamentally scrambles these signals. Emerging less as a conduit of dominant meaning-making than as the synecdoche for a general structure that gathers and kills time, Jackson’s television is announced as a platform that mediates and secures his juridico-economic status as “chattel” (251), his consignment to a condition of “protracted death” (240). It is this protracted temporality— one without interruption, segmentation, or closure—that characterizes Jackson’s phenomenology of captivity and that marks its critical articulation to and rebellion against the particular institutional, technological, and politico-economic configuration of carceral TV.

In this chapter, I draw on Jackson’s analysis of the racializing medium of the prison and its onto-theology of capture to situate television within an abbreviated media archaeology of the prison. In particular, I follow Jackson’s account of captivity and its implications for our understanding of the inscription and conscription of personhood and its familiars (natality, finitude, freedom), arguing that his meditations on print, television, and “the conditions that destroy life” (328) crystallize a genealogy that unearths the peculiar interanimation of racialized punishment and the mediatic agencies of the prison. This is a genealogy that foremost discloses the captive body as the mass media through which the civil exigencies of U.S. racial modernity are inscribed, transmitted, and cohered. It is a genealogy, moreover, that exacts the prison as a racialized and racializing medium that seeks to govern the interface between the living and the dead. In so doing, I bring together an analysis of two media systems—writing technologies and TV— to suggest that the prison itself must be understood as a multi-media apparatus, where

shifting discourse networks of captivity and mediatic captivation index transformations in the political economy and the racial metaphysics of punishment.

The first half of this chapter examines the disciplinary technique of curative reading and writing known as bibliotherapy. As I elaborate, bibliotherapy, since its emergence with the U.S. American republic in the late eighteenth century, was embroiled in a narrative arc of mortification and rebirth, where the resurrection of those condemned to the legal condition of civil death was abetted by a technology of literacy that promised to breathe life into both the dead letter of writing and the deadened soul of the prisoner. Following Wynter's insight into the racialization of soul/spirit that institutes the theodic-cum-biodic matrix of western modernity,¹⁰¹ this discussion emphasizes that the cultural technique of bibliotherapy served to mediate the relationship between citizen and slave through social protocols that conjoined the discursive inscription of civic personhood with the material inscription of the letter. Engaging the dense interplay between distinct yet related conceptions of "medium"—as spiritual contact point between the living and the dead; as intervening substance of inscription, marking, or branding; and as passageway between two extremes¹⁰²—I interrogate the *mediatic form of the prison* by asking how the (media) theory of the republican penitentiary was inaugurated through the founding containment of blackness, that is, the compulsory non-arrival of the slave at the salvic destination of civic reanimation.

¹⁰¹ As I remarked in the previous chapter, according to Wynter, "theodicy metamorphosizes into biodicy" in the secularizing idiom of western modernity ("Désêtre" 142). Wynter notes an epistemological shift between the "degodded" biodic account of evil and the previously theodic one, while also underscoring the grammatical trace of the latter within the former.

¹⁰² These definitions are paraphrased from the *OED*.

I then turn toward a more recent transformation in the media ecology of the U.S. prison. The second part of this chapter tracks the transition from bibliotherapy to television as a commanding machinery of prison socialization that would accompany the truly massive proliferation of U.S. carceral power in the age often abbreviated as that of post-Fordism. Noting the historical coincidence between the divestment from even state rhetorics of rehabilitation and the aforementioned transformation in the media of penalty, I contend that television, in contrast to the disciplinary protocols of bibliotherapy, emerges in this moment as a privileged durational form for the mass caging and warehousing of racialized surplus populations, the idled “disposable industrial reserve army” described by Marx in his chapter on “The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation” (693) and who, Ruth Wilson Gilmore clarifies, “must wait...or languish until— if ever— new opportunities to sell their labor power emerge” (*Gulag* 71).¹⁰³

¹⁰³ In her important essay “Globalisation and U.S. Prison Growth: From Military Keynesianism to Post-Keynesian Militarism,” Ruth Wilson Gilmore provides a complex account of what she calls “the prison fix.” Gilmore links the historical fomenting of a law-and-order ideology (as the Stuart Hall of *Policing the Crisis* might put it) to the crises of capitalist reproduction of the mid-1970s— including the 1973-7 global recession and production of massive structural un- and under-employment; the “Nixon fix” that cancelled the gold standard; massive deindustrialization and the flight of capital from urban and rural communities; assaults on organized labor and the Fordist “consensus” of the family wage; and the relocation of millions of jobs to what would become so-called free-trade export-processing zones. As Gilmore emphasizes, “Crisis and surplus are two sides of the same coin” (178); the expansion of the prison regime emerged, in part, as a putative “fix” to the “mess of surpluses” (*Gulag* 56) left by the crises of capitalist expansion and the subsequent 1) withdrawal of agricultural and manufacturing establishments from rural *land*; 2) overaccumulation of speculative *finance capital* in need of new outlets for investment; 3) waning legitimacy of New Deal-style welfare provisions and the remaining surplus of *state capacity*; and 4) redundancy of *labor power* of those populations surplus by job elimination and the uneven globalization of production beyond the directives of the U.S. Keynesian “welfare-warfare state.”

For some treatments of this political economic (as opposed to simply economic) matrix, see also Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, esp. chapter 2, “The California Political Economy”; Davis, “Hell Factory in the Field”; Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, esp. chapter 5 “The Prison Industrial Complex”; and Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor*. I leave for others this critique of the political economy and political geography of caging, confinement, and domestic terror, with the acknowledgement that such urgent work is currently being untaken with critical acumen and precision that is far beyond the scope of my training. More modestly, I will only ask, later, how the final of the four surpluses identified by Gilmore and to which the neoliberal racial state’s drive toward mass incarceration responds—labor— might be addressed more adequately within the parameters of my own field of media studies.

Here, I read imprisoned intellectual Mumia Abu-Jamal's theorization of "slow death" with and against accounts of temporality and labor from within the field of television studies, staging a confrontation between television's mediatization of black dispossession and the exuberant accounts of a post-Fordist economy of everyday social life as free labor—where the work of watching has been hailed as a hegemonic mode of value extraction today. To attend more fully to the haunting endurance of racial slavery in the present mediatic conjuncture, I argue, is to ask about the persistent valorization not only of life but also of death, not only of capacity but also of incapacitation, oriented in complex conjunction with the operations of television. Building on work that has reopened the question "What is the time of slavery?," as Stephen Michael Best and Saidiya Hartman pose it ("Fugitive Justice" 4), the wager is that thinking beyond this brutal horizon requires a reconceptualization of social possibility outside a metaphysics of (living) labor that proceeds by ghosting the antiblack violence of racial punishment that provides the secreted conditions of the vitalist dreams and communicative desires of an endlessly capacitated post-Fordist media worker.

Throughout this chapter, my comparative impulse in moving between early carceral practices of print and television is not aimed at an ontologizing endeavor to locate something like an original (and hence timeless) essence in either medium, and it is certainly not meant to champion the social or political value "inherent" in one to the detriment to the other. Nor is my intention to resolve the multifarious continuities and ruptures in their deployments through a comprehensive and linear story of causal progression. Rather, like in Chapter 2, where I read the animating functions of the trope such as apostrophe and anthropomorphism alongside George Pal's animated film *John*

Henry and the Inky-Poo to explore national fantasies of blackness and mechanicity, my efforts are directed toward examining the cultural logistics through which media, first, are variously imbued with social meanings that are co-constitutive of multiple genres of the human; and, second, provide a discursive infrastructure through which these genres are contradictorily organized and inhabited. In other words, I situate print and television as complex elements in the carceral's "discourse networks," a framework Friedrich Kittler deploys capaciously to "link physical, technological, discursive, and social systems in order to provide epistemic snapshots of a culture's administration of power and knowledge" (*GFT* xxxiii-xxiv). But rather than assume clean epochal breaks in mediological systems (as in Kittler's titular *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*) and posit these breaks as the decisive material basis of transformations in the mode of production or the human's mode(s) of auto-institution, it is more useful to consider how these systems and the forms of (non)humanity they seek to establish overlap, accumulate, and co-articulate, and how nonsynchronous forms of radical praxis have stalled and disfigured these systems' governing terms of mediation. In short, I take as axiomatic that any medium not only mediates but also is itself subject to multiple processes of mediation.

I therefore close by turning briefly to Jackson's prison letter's remediation on and as television. Specifically, I look at the televisual production of the 1971 Attica Prison uprising as a "live" media event, contending that the valorization of the medium's veracity and immediacy— its "liveness"— in a moment of crisis coverage was parasitic on the stolen lives of those massacred at Attica upon the order of New York State Governor Nelson Rockefeller. At the same time, however, in the interval before Attica

was recaptured for the state, the rebels seized upon television's rhetoric of liveness to interrupt, if momentarily, the slow and ongoing death of prison time in ways that survived and exceeded the medium's temporal impression and regulation of the parameters of the live, the present, and the now. This *stolen liveness*, to borrow and extend Fred Moten's formulation of "stolen life" (*Break* 305n.24; "Case" 179), formed a multimodal relay that was propelled and galvanized, in part, by Jackson's errant epistolary: the call sent and delivered on behalf of those Jackson designates by way of a shared appellation of activity, "hunted running blacks" (*SB* 328). Both mark a collective dehiscence within the transmission protocols of carceral print and television, a fugitive sending whose condition of response necessitates and produces a gathering that is elsewhere than at the destination of civil society and the racial state. As a whole, this chapter thus traces how as concrete apparatuses, cultural resources, and fields of social struggle, media technics have been variously activated both in service of and in corrosive retreat from the logic of penalty and its sedimentation of a racial metaphysics of life and death.

4.1 REPUBLICAN MACHINES AND OTHER CIVIL MEDIA

The introduction of "the bio[-]graphical" is important in the history of penalty.
 –Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*

In what is perhaps the most oft cited passage from *Soledad Brother*, Jackson gives name to the terroristic ensemble of forces that rigorously organize the mass destruction of life in neoslave societies: "Capture, imprisonment, is the closest to being dead that one is likely to experience in this life" (14). With this assertion, Jackson furnishes a decisive statement on the lived conditions and political exigencies of captivity, one that

exemplifies what critical prison studies scholar Dylan Rodríguez has identified as a “*theoretical vernacular of death*” that emerges across the intellectual repertoire of imprisoned radical thinkers in the United States (“Forced Passages” 35, emphasis his). But while it is clear that Jackson’s statement is written under the sign of death’s intrusion, there is nevertheless an ambiguity in the scope and structure of this death that arises from the syntax of Jackson’s sentence. Is imprisonment offered as a synonym or a consequence of capture? And, if the latter, *where* and *when* is the imprisonment of which and from which Jackson writes? Jackson’s answers to these questions are clarified in several moments when he returns to the temporality of black captivity and its unanchoring of conventional orderings of life, death, and the passage of time. Of being caged and held at El Paso de Robles Youth Correctional Facility when he was fifteen, Jackson writes, “The very first time, it was like dying” (13). Here, the event of captivity is indexed as a kind of primal scene that initiates Jackson into the space of death for “the very first time.”¹⁰⁴ But this relation of substitution between the experience of death and the experience of captivity, significantly, is one that is established throughout *Soledad Brother* (“I’m still between the life-death cycle” [70]; “If you could live my life one week and see the things I see...and die a little bit each day as I do...” [87]; “It has destroyed me as a person, a human being that is, but it was sudden, it was a sudden death” [281]), and so what is registered in the initial passage as the primacy of *this* death— *death for very the first*

¹⁰⁴ By deploying the rubric of the “primal scene,” I cite Saidiya Hartman’s reading of Frederick Douglass’s witnessing of the brutal beating of his maternal aunt Hester by Captain Anthony— “the bloody transaction” (*Narrative* 285) that, according to Hartman, is “the original generative act” that opens Douglass to the position of the slave and that also opens Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection* (4). Jackson’s invocation of the “first time” at once echoes, signifies on, and displaces (via its repetition and multiplication) Douglass’s account of an originary violence that institutes the position of the enslaved.

time— already predicates, and is inscribed within, a terrorizing structure of repetition that stalks Jackson: a racial regime premised on the imperative of black (re)capture and thus a knowledge of the threat of dying’s recurrence and seemingly ineluctable return. It is this recursive force and the racialized difference *within the structure* of death it implies (in addition to the racialized maldistribution of proximity to premature death it observes) that might be said to best characterize Jackson’s “theoretical vernacular of death.”¹⁰⁵

Rewriting captivity as a primary form of necro-work operative in the organization of (neo)slave societies, Jackson suggests that the captive is refused the very singularity and irreducibility that is ostensibly evinced by the demonstrative *this*: after this death, and before it, there will have been another death such that this apriority forecloses the spectacular eventfulness of death as rupture, resolution, or telos.¹⁰⁶

Recourse to a certain understanding of biography corroborates this reading of the violent mechanisms of iterability, dispersion, and multiplication that constitute the psychic and juridical bleed between racial captivity and the operations of death-dealing: the original moment’s, the “first time’s,” endless replication and return. In 1960, Jackson was captured again for stealing \$70 from a gas station and was “tossed...into the penitentiary” with an indeterminate sentence of one-year to life (SB 21); in 1969 he was

¹⁰⁵ See Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s highly influential definition of racism as “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (*Gulag* 28).

¹⁰⁶ This would be another way of saying that, in the onto-theology of racial modernity, blacks are refused the absolute unrepeatable and non-substitutability of death that allegedly grounds the authenticity of Dasein. Contrast Jackson’s multiplication of death with Derrida’s Heideggerian appeal: “[O]ne has to take into account the uniqueness and irreplaceable singularity of the self as the means by which— and this is the approach to death— existence excludes every possible substitution” (*The Gift of Death* 42).

shipped from the maximum security prison at San Quentin to Soledad; in 1971, at the age of twenty-nine, Jackson was murdered by guards in the San Quentin prison yard “because,” as Walter Rodney wrote in the journal *Maji Maji*, “he discovered that blackness need not be a badge of servility but rather could be a banner for uncompromising revolutionary struggle... [and] because he was doing too much to pass this attitude on to fellow prisoners” (“George Jackson” 1); and, in late September of that same year, he was put to death again as telejournalist Harry Reasoner of *ABC Evening News* read the pathologist’s autopsy reports and confirmed the California state prison officials’ assessment that Jackson had been shot through the skull by a tower guard, thereby discounting other dissident eyewitness accounts.¹⁰⁷

While this biographical sketch is not incorrect, it nevertheless occults a more fundamental problem of, and for, biography addressed by Jackson and his insight into the racial metaphysics of captivity. As a political and aesthetic form, (auto)biography has been associated with the premises of progress, moral and civic self-cultivation, and individual expression characteristic of liberalism’s founding fictions.¹⁰⁸ Autobiography solicits and condenses the authorial inscription of a life, the writing of the life (bios) of the self (autos), such that this writing and this self are not only presumed to be coterminous but, more essentially, each term provides the condition and the occasion for the other. Writing merely gives confirmation and expression to a prior interiority, the ideality of self-conscious thought that interiorizes the letter. What is repressed in this

¹⁰⁷ See ABC, “Headline: George Jackson Autopsy.”

¹⁰⁸ See Barrett, *Racial Blackness and the (Dis)Continuity of Western Modernity*, esp. chapter 2, “Making the Flesh Word”; Judy, *(Dis)Forming the American Canon*; Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, esp. 83-4; and Lowe, *Intimacies of Four Continents*, esp. chapter 2, “Autobiography Out of Empire.”

scenario is writing's exteriority to and difference from (a) life: the possibility that writing may occasion life's internal differentiation not as an exteriority that extends (from) the autos but as a "radical extension" that comes from elsewhere, from others, to others, is other. This heteronomy of the outside cuts the autos with the trace and future of an exteriority that breaches the zone of "the enclosed" that this inscription might otherwise be thought to authorize and obey (Moten, "Nothingness" 776).¹⁰⁹

Through the autodiegetic I's active conscription to the service of the self-determining subject and its subordination of (radical) exteriority to the ideal of the ideal, however, the normative conventions of autobiography, as procedure and proof of self-cultivation, at once look backward and forward to emplot on a narrative line the events, movements, and trajectories that cohere as "a life" under the unity of the proper name. Autobiography thus always "begins" twice. In the first instance, it commences with the instant of natality, the birth of the autos that/who endures through, and is identical with, the extensivity of what it is called "a life"; *graphy* follows and follows from— comes after— this primordial conception of life and/as self. But autobiography only begins, properly, again, upon the reflexive (living) writing of one's own living; the beginning of life (as birth, event, instant) follows— comes after— its retroactive incorporation into an ongoing plot of living (as process, duration, extensivity). Autobiography gives birth to the recursive circle of the autos (autonomy, auto-affection) when writing is conceived as the self-reflexive gesture par excellence, as life's technê of realization, as a sense-making

¹⁰⁹ On the general exteriority of the graphic mark and the absolute exteriority of writing in particular, see Derrida, *Grammatology* 13-15. On exteriority as the simultaneous possibility of interiority's constitution and deconstitution, see Moten, *Break* 38.

and self-making activity that is the condition and effect of the enlightened subject who is given—who gives himself—in thinking thought.

This “[n]arrative temporality,” Lisa Lowe presciently stresses, “is itself a powerful vehicle of liberal progress” (*Intimacies* 60). In the United States, Lowe contends, the incorporation of the ideology of *Bildung* through the autobiographical form has often served as a hinge between narratives of individual self-development and emancipation, on the one hand, and narratives of national egalitarianism, progress, and inclusionary promise, on the other (51). By making the individual a proxy for the collective (whether substantialized as the nation-form or otherwise), the norms of autobiography enunciate freedom of and as self-ownership in atomistic terms while demarcating a clear temporal “distinction between the past and the present” (Hartman, “The Time of Slavery” 758; qtd. in *Intimacies* 61). Jackson’s challenge to these conventions, I would argue, evinces a conscious naming of their unraveling under the material conditions of black captivity. This challenge is registered most obviously through the brute continuum of state-sanctioned violence, dispossession, and incarceration that belies the language of progress—“a conversion from chattel to liberal subject” (*Intimacies* 48)—but, perhaps more significantly, through a withdrawal from the vocabulary of loss or subtraction that marks his text’s temporal orientation to passage through the prison gate.

He writes:

Blackmen born in the U.S. and fortunate enough to live past the age of eighteen are conditioned to accept the inevitability of prison. For most of us, it simply looms as the next phase in a sequence of humiliations. Being born a slave in a captive society and never experiencing any objective basis for expectation had the effect of preparing me for the progressively

traumatic misfortunes that lead so many blackmen to the prison gate. I was prepared for prison. (SB 4)

Jackson's idiom is one that bridges repetition and anticipation. Entrance through the prison gate is enunciated as neither the origin nor the ends of captivity (for Jackson, a surrogate of death) but rather one episode in a highly coordinated "sequence" of negation that marks of the conditions of existence for the black (male) subject in the United States. Two points must be therefore be emphasized. First, the more capacious and more terrible conceptual rubric of *capture* that Jackson offers cannot be understood as reducible to incarceration in a narrow sense or to what Rodríguez rightly calls "the theoretically conservative notion of 'the Prison' as a formal state institution" (37). Dispensing with a narrative logic of spatiotemporal movement that would reify "the Prison" as an absolutely distinct place to which one is shipped, capture instead functions as an analytic category that intervenes in the "mystification[s]" of "white supremacy, fascism, and capitalism" by naming the determinations of an internally differentiated but nevertheless unified social totality (SB 232). To speak of capture is not to designate a monolithic invariant but to apprehend the organizing imperative of this totality, the authorizing code of "a machine with the senseless and calloused ability to inflict these wounds programmed into its every cycle" (247). One consequence of this shift to an analysis that pivots on the repetition machine of capture is that the fatal commands of control, containment, and obliteration distilled by this machine (and those captors who motor it) overspill the cellblock as a delimited space and time of captivity such that the redemptive promise of freedom "through" or "outside" the prison gate is a fundamental impossibility in any present world in which the prison and its metrics of sense and valuation would exist. As Jackson indicates, invoking while the resisting the enumeration of (discrete) fields of violence

(i.e., the logic of liberal institutionality), this is precisely because “the inevitability of prison” looms as one articulation of the differential and (dis)continuous process of annihilation of the black body that orients the United States and its founding imperative of capture; it is the materialization of one “phase in a sequence of humiliations.”

But, more than this, the very language of sequenciation seems to founder in the wake of Jackson’s following sentence and its declaration that, “[b]eing born a slave,” captivity is a birthmark, a mark that precedes and determines his passage through the prison gate. Jackson is not expelled from the zone of citizenship to the belly of the prison, and it is thus significant that in this passage Jackson refuses to narrate his passageway into the social position of “the criminal” or to enumerate even the degradations and “humiliations” unique to the prisoner. In this emplotment that looks backward only to inscribe the ineluctability of future repetition, the reader is refused the sentimental pathos of identification that would accompany a narrative that showcases the shock of violation or violation as shock: “I was prepared for prison. It required only minor psychic adjustments” (4). I am not refuting that Jackson documents the brutalities of bodily and psychic debilitation that found the core premise of global white supremacy but rather suggesting that to read his text primarily in the mode of testimony misses something important about what his analytic of capture and its specific durational economy helps us to understand. In other words, what the reader is refused (and in this letter, the first reader, the addressee, was to have been Gregory Armstrong, Jackson’s publisher at Bantam Books) is a study in the transfiguration of free man into (prison) captive. This is because the forward movement or fall— and thus the possibility of resurrection— implied by such a narrative is a consolation that Jackson says has “no objective basis”

from the analytic standpoint of the black male captive; he is born in and through the terror of slavery.

In this regard, it useful here to recall the crucial distinction Frank B. Wilderson III draws between contingent and gratuitous violence. Whereas contingent violence responds to particular acts of transgression against symbolic laws and rules, gratuitous violence responds not to actions or practices but instead constitutes in the first and last instance the ontology of slavery as the world's response to black existence (*Cinema* 81). Or, as Bryan Wagner has written, "Police relates to blackness not as practice but simply as power" (*Disturbing the Peace* 8). For an individual to *become* a captive or criminal in this life, there requires the contingency of transgression, an interruption or narrative movement unthinkable in terms of the general transgression or criminality that blackness registers as birthmark; this originary inscription of the flesh makes ambiguous or untenable, in the terms offered by Jackson, the distinctions between black, captive, and prisoner in the United States.¹¹⁰ In one sense, then, it might be said that Jackson figures biography as already a kind of thanatography, or that he reveals the racialized dispensations of a plural death that haunt every and any enunciation of "the live" as it has been presently administered and defined. Neither a biograph nor the punctuation mark of finitude but a massive delaying parenthesis, the inertia of this captured motion— what Hortense

¹¹⁰ Fanon, of course, calls this overdetermined inscription of the flesh *epidermalization*, which importantly takes places in the blur between inside and outside: "If there is an inferiority complex, it is the outcome of... the internalization—or, better, the epidermalization—of this inferiority" (*BS* 11).

Spillers refers to, paradoxically, as the repetitious movement of a “powerful stillness” (66)— does the work of arresting both extremes.¹¹¹

The proximity Jackson locates between black captivity and a (threat of) death that precedes life confounds the narratological temporality and normative aspirations of (auto)biography. In so doing, it raises questions about the possibility, the determinations, and the end(s) of life-writing, understood broadly as the condition and effect of self-actualization qua modern (racial) subjectivity. Here, I use “life-writing” not to refer to a particular literary genre but, much more expansively, to describe the privileged gesture of

¹¹¹ “[T]he ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that *it is as if neither time nor history, not historiography and its topics, shows movement*, as the human subject is ‘murdered’ *over and over again* by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise (“Mama’s Baby” 68, emphases mine). In the wake of Spillers’s path-finding work, a significant body of scholarship has attended to the paradox of stillness’s repetition as a way to calibrate the spatio-temporal (in)stabilities of antiblack white supremacist violence. Frank B. Wilderson III argues that, in contrast to the (white) human(ist) and reparative longings for unalienated social existence, “for Blackness there is no narrative moment prior to slavery.” Or, he implies, there is simply no narrative. Wilderson argues the term “slave narrative” is “oxymoron[ic]” because, on his account, narrative, at its most elemental level, implies “the restoration or reorganization of equilibrium” (think of Todorov), or at the very least the imposition of “disequilibrium” that initiates narrative action. No such initial equilibrium to be re-established exists for the Slave, which would seem to be why he argues the thought of (anti)blackness demands a “paradigmatic analysis” rather than a syntagmatic (i.e., diachronic) one (*Cinema* 27, 7). On a distinct but related register, the historian Stephanie Smallwood, in her study of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century transatlantic chattel slavery, highlights less a lack of movement than the abyssal terror of nondirectional movement, noting that the slave “ship produced in [captive African peoples] an experience of motion without discernible direction or destination” (*Saltwater* 122). Dylan Rodríguez echoes this formation of race, space-time, and terror in his study of the U.S. prison regime and argues for the necessity of attending to “the logic of the *passages themselves* rather than on the putative ‘origin’ and ‘destination’ points of those coerced movements,” contending that the structural logics of these “forced passages” (his book title) link the theft of African-descended peoples “from continent to plantation...civil society to imprisonment” (224). Katherine McKittrick develops the analytic of “plantation geographies” to address “the ways the plantation uncovers a logic that emerges in the present and folds over to repeat itself anew through black lives” while also, contra Wilderson, providing “a theoretical schema” to approach the contiguity of “racial violences that demanded innovative resistances” (“Plantation Futures” 4, 5). Kimberly Juanita Brown’s recent book-length study of *The Repeating Body* has shown how it is “repetition [that] brings the figuration of slavery into being with the force of modernity” and “it is within the realm of repetition, *its looping and determined return*, that black Atlantic subjectivities are able...to be seen” (14, emphasis mine). Despite their crucial differences, I all too schematically survey this work because each provides a critical framework to think the movement of repetition and return, and each bears significantly on my analysis.

auto-inscription that delimits the conceptual grounding of the self-authoring and self-authorizing subject—the *mark* of a (human) life as it has been deciphered and defined within the protocols of western modernity. I make these remarks to underscore the autogenic and redemptive powers afforded to the figures of writing and literacy in the modern U.S. idiom, and to ask how these powers consolidate through the binds of racialization, criminality, and (the limits of) rehabilitation under the force of black captivity. To unpack this consolidation, I thus turn to the sociotechnical institution of bibliotherapy as a mediatic backdrop against which to read the political destinations and interlocking workings of life, death, writing, and personhood obtained under the carceral's sign.

As Jackson's remarks on capture indeed suggest, the prison, from its inception in the United States, has been treated as a medium, as a channel or passageway that conjures the relation between the living and the dead. Although the most canonical genealogies of the modern prison have linked its emergence to the rise of the bourgeois revolution and the decline of the morbid spectacles of execution and dismemberment, in the U.S. the institution of death-dealing has at once survived and sustained the carceral regime's *longue durée*—not only in the brutal anti-black, racial, gender, and sexual violence materialized at the littoral, the coffle, the auction bloc, the public lynching, and in the ongoing codification of police terror but also through the killing technology of juridical mortification known as a civil death.¹¹² Civil death refers to a status conferred to those

¹¹² See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*. The two most incisive excoriations of this assessment are found in Angela Y. Davis's "Racialized Punishment and Prison Abolition" and Joy James's "Erasing the Spectacle of Racialized State Violence." Davis and James both highlight the repressed racial and colonial genealogies that compel Foucault's pronouncements about life and its avatar "soul" in the prison, arguably foreshadowing more recent scholarship in black, ethnic, postcolonial, and queer studies that has sought to trouble the vexed function of death in Foucault's later work on the rise of biopower and the power "to make live." I return to Davis in particular below. Against Foucault's

who, in breaching the social contract, are dispossessed of those properties, rights, and possessions characteristic of life in civil society. In the common law tradition, as legal theorist Colin Dayan has meticulously detailed, citizens are granted liberty and protection—“civil life”—through the simultaneous substitution and accretion of “natural life,” the life that is said to exist in the state of the nature. Through the armor of the civil, the state and its technologies of law preserve natural life by artificial means in the alchemical form of the citizen. But just as law can make a person, it can also unmake a person. Dayan finds one instance of this unmaking in the “legal sorcery” of *civilliter mortuus*, in which a felon who is alive in body is rendered dead in spirit, “dead in law” (*White Dog* 130, 63). This status of civil or living death marks not the total evacuation of personhood because the civilly dead do not stand outside the law but instead obtain through the infliction of law a status of “negative personhood” (42), a kind of negative inclusion in the civil order that is required to render culpability and exert punishment.

In *The Prison and the American Imagination*, literary historian Caleb Smith takes up this history and metaphysics of law in order to specify in dialectical rather than purely oppositional terms the narrative relation between death and life facilitated by the prison. He writes, “the prison condemns offenders to a kind of living death as a precondition for their resurrection into a community of the living; the cell is both a tomb of abjection and birthplace of a new humanity” (ix). Smith frames his argument about the co-constitution of mortification *and* natality, abjection *and* reincorporation, as a move to reconcile two

diagnosis that modern power initiates “a slackening of *the hold* of the body” (*DP* 10; qtd. in Browne 38, emphasis mine), Simone Browne’s work on surveillance has also powerfully demonstrated that “when the body is black, the grip hardly loosened,” re-reading the Benthamite pantopticon’s apparent loosening hold from the perspective of its haunting double, that is, from the hold of the Brooks slave ship. See *Dark Matters*, esp. 41-9.

competing approaches to the prison. Smith abbreviates these approaches in terms of the seemingly opposed constructions of the prisoner they propose: “a reflecting, self-governing soul and a cadaverous, dehumanized body” (6). On the first side, Smith locates the now familiar account provided by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, in which Foucault narrates the decline of public torture in the eighteenth century with the emergence of a new economy of power that sought to govern the prisoner through a highly-regimented internalization of disciplinary norms. The primary blueprint Foucault provides to designate this emergent power that takes as its aim “individualizing correction,” as is well known, is drawn from Jeremy Bentham’s design of the panopticon. In this design, “the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at [by the watchman] at any one moment” and this unverifiability is said to induce “the automatic functioning of power” through “non-corporal” means by producing a terrible alertness in the inmate who must govern his own behaviors and actions (*DP* 127, 201, 203). What is notable about the Foucauldian optic is that it takes the soul (Foucault offers multiple cognates: “psyche, subjectivity, personality, consciousness” [29]) as both the object and effect of disciplinary power. By exposing the lie of the “enlightened” penitentiary as simply a more diffuse and insidious locale of self-subjection— Smith calls this “the prison as a subject-making institution” (4)— Foucault, however, wants to illustrate that this configuration of power extends across the social matrix, providing the template, as he concludes his study, for “the power of normalization and the formation of knowledge in modern society” (308). Indeed, as Angela Y. Davis exacts, “Although its [*Discipline and Punish*’s] subtitle is *The Birth of the Prison System*, Foucault was not so much interested in the prison *per se* as in the disciplinary technologies perfected in this institution”

(“Racialized Punishment” 96). That is to say, like Jackson, Foucault resists exceptionalizing the prison as a completely insular or singular institution. However, unlike Jackson, Foucault’s conclusion that a carceral rationality subtends the entirety of the social field leads him, famously, to figure the prison as the paradigmatic apparatus—the nomos— of a wide array of disciplinary institutions, locating in the prison’s physical and logistical architecture a model of power that occasions and typifies the workings of modernity writ large.¹¹³ In short, the prison ultimately exemplifies the protocols of subject-formation *within* the institutions of civil society rather than, as I suggest it functions within Jackson’s analytic of capture, the negative trace that conditions the materialization of this society and its fabrication of the civil subject.

In contrast to the Foucauldian composite where the prison instantiates an object lesson in the exercise of the liberal power over life, Smith locates a second strand of criticism that is decisively more moribund. Smith concisely summarizes this position as follows:

For them [these critics], the prisoner is not the counterpart of the citizen-subject but a figure of dehumanization or ‘bare life’ akin to the other most famous captive of Jacksonian America, the plantation slave...[T]he prison is really a different world, excluded from or buried beneath the modern society of citizen-subjects. (5)

If for the Foucauldians the soul is the instrument and the productive effect of punitive power, the second position holds the carceral as a site of bodily terror and object-making that forms the negative image of the civil order. Smith’s major intervention is to cut the

¹¹³ For example, Foucault writes that the “meticulousness of the regulations, the fussiness of the inspections, the supervision of the smallest fragment of *life* and of the body will soon provide in the context of the school, the barracks, the hospital or the workshop, a laicized content” (DP 140, emphasis mine).

difference between these two accounts by arguing that in the U.S. imagination the latter is the condition of the former. In other words, for prison reformers particularly in the early republic the brutal deprivation of civil life was not the antithesis of the prisoner's rehabilitation but rather its very possibility, that which would make civic re-animation possible. Subjection to death, on this score, begets life's messianic return.

I take the time to rehearse the architecture of Smith's argument and its rearticulation of the dialectic between life and death, soul and body, because it helps frame two points I wish to underscore in my discussion of bibliotherapy. On the one hand, I build on Smith to assert that if the prison cell was to be a medium of death and rebirth, this medium itself required a particular mediatic infrastructure, one that bound the restoration of civil life to the emancipatory powers of literacy. On the other hand, though, I suggest that bibliotherapy and its accompanying trajectory of resurrection found its negative ground and decisive limits in the structure of racial slavery. This is, of course, in part because since as early as 1740 black people were the only population for whom literacy and writing as such were illegal and punishable offences. The policing of black writing under the threat of death legitimated the national foundations of the civil subject, for whom, as R.A. Judy has argued, "reflection and the grapheme," "writing and Being" were epistemologically sutured in the Enlightenment topos of Reason (*[Dis]Forming the American Canon* 63). Accordingly, I submit that we can only understand the extension of protocols of civic literacy to the (white) convict in relation to the racialized regulation of privileged cultural techniques of inscription and in relation to the consolidation of (racial) Being and its avatar "soul" to which these techniques were intractably addressed. As Joy James has compellingly written of the constitutive occlusion of perpetual black and

Indigenous genocide within Foucault's formulation of penal modernity, "one should consider that in national racist mythology Africans and Native Americans were either presumed to have no soul or one that was debased" ("Erasing" 34). The practice of rehabilitation obtained under (liberal) freedom's sign was thus in no way universal. As Hartman also makes so clear in *Scenes of Subjection*, the progressive blackening of the prison that occurred in the wake of formal emancipation and the rise of the debt-peonage and convict leasing systems secured (black) freedom not as the inverse of criminality but as its foundational sign. This transformation in the demographic composition of the prison coincided with a general consensus among prison officials in the 1850s that reformist efforts to rehabilitate the convict had failed.¹¹⁴ Yet the irreparable and "unrehabilitable" character of blackness to which postbellum transformations in the form of the prison system responded was already foreshadowed by the fact that prior to emancipation it was primarily white working-class men who were subject to the techniques of civil resurrection, for, quite simply, to be dispossessed of citizenship one must first hold this lion's skin in possession. Moreover, to incarcerate the slave—the commodity that speaks— would be to confiscate private property.¹¹⁵ Here, then, is where I depart from Smith's previously cited conflation of prisoner and slave under the Agambenian sign of "bare life" because what this collapse occludes is precisely their

¹¹⁴ See Banks, *Punishment in America* 51.

¹¹⁵ Lion's skin is Marx's ("Jewish Question" 221) metaphor for the protections afforded by citizenship and obtained through merely "political," rather than fully "human," emancipation. On the state's obligation to reimburse slave-owners for "losses" in those instances when enslaved people were sentenced to death by courts, see Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*. On "the commodity that speaks," see Moten (*Break* 9-13), who introduces this figure to describe the enslaved as the dangerous supplement who are occluded by Marx's conditional "If commodities could speak..."

constitutive relation of difference in the antebellum period.¹¹⁶ I want to argue, therefore, that bibliotherapy, as a set of protocols for reading and literacy, served as a critical technology that sought to inscribe the prisoner's soul but did so to inscribe the (white) prisoner as the vanishing mediator between chattel slavery and civil society.

While the term was first formalized by Minister Samuel Crothers in 1916,¹¹⁷ as a practice of reform and rehabilitation pivoting upon technologies of the letter, bibliotherapy arose in concert with the U.S. American penitentiary. For the eighteenth-century physician, reformer, and republican politician Dr. Benjamin Rush, the problematic possibility of the spectator's sympathetic identification with the tortured body of the condemned demanded the end of public punishment and the construction of the penitentiary, a "more private... abode of discipline and misery" ("Public Punishments" 143). Following closely the Lockean empiricist precept that saw the mind and body as media impressed by external stimuli—*tabula rasa* overwritten by experience—Rush viewed this problem of sympathy foremost in terms of the regulation of sensation and sensibility, of which he described two kinds, one passive and the other active: "The sensibility of the human body is said to be *active* and *passive*. The first is connected with motion and sensation; the second only sensation. The first is increased, the second is diminished, by the repetition of impressions. The same phenomena take place in the human mind... Passive sensibility is lessened, while that which is active is

¹¹⁶ It must be noted that elsewhere Smith is much more careful to attend to these differences. Drawing on Orlando Patterson's distinction between "extrusive" and "intrusive" social death, he notes the fundamental discrepancy between the specific transgression of the convict and the general or ontologized transgression of criminal existence qua black being. "The convict in prison," Smith writes, "does not begin life as an outcast or a slave; he begins as a rights-bearing subject" (44).

¹¹⁷ See Beatty, "A Historical Review of Bibliotherapy"; and Crothers, "A Literary Clinic."

increased, by habit” (148, emphasizes his). In this highly gendered and racialized schema, the passive merely receives impressions inertly as a malleable and penetrated substance, whereas active sensibilities and sympathies hold the agency to act and to move. In habituation, the power of the active accumulates because sensory organs are no longer subject to the onslaught of passive perception but can instead engage reflectively or contemplatively based upon the memory of past experiences. What followed, for Rush, was that, “far from preventing crimes,” the repetitious display of public punishment was “directly calculated to produce them” by “excit[ing] in the minds of spectators” their active sensibilities (143). As he emphasized, “[a]ctive sympathy can be fully excited only through the avenues of the eyes and ears” (148). But although the spectacle might awaken the powers of the active in the form of civil unrest, Rush reasoned away this possibility through the unspoken force of state repression. Because the spectator only watches but can *do* nothing to mitigate “*distress* in criminals” (143, emphasis his), Rush assuages his reader, public punishment ultimately breeds a society not of activity but of passivity, a society devoid of that most highly esteemed virtue of civic republicanism: active participation.¹¹⁸

According to Rush, the construction of the penitentiary responded to this problem on two fronts. First, by taking punishment out of visual circulation, the citizenry would be raised out of “ignominy,” no longer viewing punishment as an arbitrary and despotic

¹¹⁸ On the political philosophy of republicanism, see J.G.A. Pocock’s canonical *The Machiavellian Moment*. Michael Warner highlights the difference between republicanism and liberal nationalism in terms of their different visions of the citizenry, arguing that in the early U.S. republic the “active participation of citizens...counted for everything” (*Letters* 173). Elizabeth Maddock Dillon (*The Gender of Freedom* 278n.39) alternatively highlights the affinities between liberalism and classic republicanism, arguing that both share a fundamental emphasis on property and proprietorship whether as a good in itself (liberalism) or as the precondition of civic action (republicanism).

exertion of force but as a rational and economical response to infractions committed by those “whose persons we detest, [yet who] possess souls and bodies composed of the same materials as those of our friends and relations” (145). Given that the legislative process of gradual manumission began in Rush’s state of Pennsylvania only in 1780, that this “emancipation” was tethered to the imposition of debt and continued servitude upon the manumitted, and that Pennsylvanian commercial and cultural life was intractably bound to the slave economy, one might further speculate that this rationalization of the penitentiary as a means to shore up active sympathy for the “soul” of a shared humanity also served to entrench the convict’s humanity in opposition to the indiscriminate and wanton brutalization of the enslaved body.¹¹⁹

Second, Rush advocated near-monastic isolation to harmonize the convict’s habits and to revitalize his (or “perhaps the women[’s]” [ibid]) active sensibilities for judgment and proper action. Rush stated that upon release from the penitentiary: “His [the prisoner’s] friends and family bathe his cheeks with tears of joy; and the universal shout of the neighborhood is, ‘This our brother was lost, and is found—*was dead and is alive*’” (150, emphasis mine; see also Smith 47). Hence, despite his announcement of the prison as a site of death and isolation, Rush simultaneously articulated this scene of civil abandonment to a program of radical transformation administered, crucially, through the mnemonic powers of reading and writing. Activating the trope of “the apothecary shop”, Rush suggested that the aural and oral sensation of repeating biblical verse would impress civic and moral virtue upon the prisoner’s soul (*Medical Inquiries* 122). This

¹¹⁹ On gradual manumission in the antebellum North, see Lott, “Slavery and Social Debt.”

infrastructure did not do away with the active “avenues of the eyes and the ears” but fused them anew to the mouth and to the letter in an integrated circuit.

In an influential passage concerning the use of bibliotherapy in asylums but containing a logic that was equally deployed in the penitentiary, Rush asserts that madness and criminality evidenced a disruption of both social and mental equilibrium, a chaos that could be re-ordered through the iterative tasks of reading and transcription. In a double gesture of destruction and natality, this repetition aspired to kill the criminal and to birth the citizen anew:

The return of regularity and order in the operations of the mind, will be much aided, by obliging people to read with an audible voice, to copy manuscripts, and to commit interesting passages from books to memory.
(210)

Here, at the scene of reading, the prisoners, as human media, received commands from the book to be scanned, processed, recorded, and stored. These copying machines were first to speak the signifier aloud and to listen to their own voice speak, again and again and again. In this circuit of autoaffection— of hearing oneself speak— bibliotherapy established the prisoner-machine not as dead repetition but as a self-possessed unity, now resurrected in the mode of citizen-subject.

Memorization was an especially crucial component of this process. Memorization did not represent rote learning (as it might today) but, per his positive correlation of repetition with active sensibility, was conceived as a technique to awaken the interpretive faculties of judgment and understanding. Thus, while he recommended reading, reciting, and copying the Bible by hand for “languor and depression of mind” he also suggested novels, histories, and travel books (122). Rush did acknowledge the existence of illiteracy and, in these cases, he asserted that others, particularly women, should oralize the text for

the prisoners as they followed the voice at once with their ears and with their eyes, uniting the sound with its associated typographic mark on the page. In this way, the enterprise of bibliotherapy sought to rechristen its female readers as the surrogate mothers of the penitentiary and the asylum, extending white women's republican obligation, as Rush stated elsewhere, "to concur in instructing their sons in the principles of liberty and government" (qtd. in Kerber, *Women of the Republic* 229).¹²⁰

While Rush was a devout Presbyterian, he was also a student of the Scottish Enlightenment and thus pronounced a deep commitment to education, like religion itself, as an essentially republican vocation. Bibliotherapy was therefore not enunciated as a means to access the voice of divine revelation but as part and parcel of an effort to restore

¹²⁰ My reading of Rush's emphasis on the unification of the grapheme (signifier) and meaning (signified) through the medium of the feminine voice is deeply inflected by Kittler's *Discourse Networks*. According to Kittler, in pedagogical protocols circa 1800 the Mother's vocalization of the phoneme was foundational to the hallucination of sovereign (male) writing within a Romantic discourse network predicated on interiority and authorial will. (Romanticism for Kittler is a period or episteme that he defines quite broadly rather than a style or a movement.) If the discourse network of 1800 could repress the excessive materiality of the signifier through recourse to the Mother as the audible voice of the signified, these consolations of (maternal) meaning and sense were displaced by emergent inscription and storage media such as the gramophone that could register and archive, at a physical level, meaninglessness and nonsense—that is, "the noise that precedes every discourse" (218). For Kittler, the proprietary dispossession inaugurated by new technical media thwarts the Romantic hallucination of self-possessed "so-called Man" and the maternal function of primary orality on which this hallucination depends: "Machines do away with polar sexual difference and its symbols" (351).

In a future incarnation of this project, it would be very useful to re-read Kittler's argument about post-Romantic machinic ungending in relation to the pedagogical vocation of white republican womanhood asserted by Rush *and* against the im-possible form of motherhood enforced through partus sequitur ventrem and its afterlife. What, that is, is the difference between Eternal Motherhood and im-possible motherhood, and how does this difference sustain and perforate the discursive production of (male) sovereign writing? How does the material *inscription and transmission* of the mother's mark gifted under partus sequitur ventrem (which, as discussed in Chapter 2, Spillers argues, black men, in contrast to all other American males, cannot sublate through the patronym ["Mama's" 80]), anticipate and disturb the very distinctions between noise and sense/discourse, the material/the machinic and the maternal, that Kittler understands to be, in the determining instance, distinctions between media-technical epochs? This would be to reframe the question of the (impossible) structure of maternal origins in relation to the constitutively racial technics of writing qua sexual difference. Due to restraints, however, a careful engagement with these questions—and the urgent encounter between media theory and African American feminist literary theory they imply—must be deferred to the future.

homeostasis in the reading subject. This subject was repossessed in the artificial unity of speech-reading-writing, rather than dispossessed by the ecstatic voice of the other (the voice of God) or held in absolute possession by this voice's sovereign grasp. Michel de Certeau has discussed this disenchantment of the word as a hallmark of modernity's "scriptural economy" where "the religious cosmos—a creature signifying the Creator—already appears to be replaced by the text" (*History* 216). No longer conceiving the "sacred text [a]s a voice," de Certeau describes this new economy as a "Cartesian move...that initiates the mastery (and isolation) of a subject confronted by an object" ("Scriptural" 134). In reading, the text now stands before the subject as object and, in this standing, stands not only the object but the subject who is born as he finds himself confronting the object in the act of contemplation. This de-godding of the text, to borrow Wynter's term, was accomplished in part through technologies of mechanical reproduction such as movable type, the printing press, and new waves of mass literacy, which in the early U.S. republic was articulated as the signature break from the aristocratic/theocratic control of letters and as evidence of a democratic (white male) public sphere.¹²¹ But it would be wrong to think in this facilitation of the Cartesian reader modernity exorcised its mystical foundations once and for all. For what bibliotherapy sought in its civic idiom was nothing less than to make the dead *come back* to life. The penitentiary was, in other words, the transmission channel through which one was *sent* to make way for a spectral *return*.

¹²¹ See Warner, *Letters of the Republic*, on the importance of print to the practice of civic-action that grounds republican ideology, particularly as it emerges in relation to early articulations of U.S. exceptionalism.

If Rush's diagram of civil life based on feedback and processes of self-regulation appears to resonate with Norbert Wiener's cybernetic vision of life as an unbroken, recursive circle of order and organization as outlined in Chapter Three, the frequency of this reverberation increases when we consider that Rush's most notable articulation of the civil order was exacted in the terms of machine learning. Indeed, Rush's preoccupation with the therapeutic procedures of reading and recitation should be understood as amplifying his assertion that the smooth functioning of government and industry required the coordination of the national citizenry as "republican machines." In his 1786 "Thoughts Upon the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic," Rush proffered that through instruction "it is possible to convert men into republican machines," that is, self-governing systems that functioned in tandem with— and in service of— "the great machine of the government of the state" (67). Rush's polemic on the form and function of the U.S. education system is notable for bringing into alignment nationalist, Christian, and technical rhetoric in its presentation of civic personhood as both substitute for and elemental part of the whole machinery of the U.S. state. While Rush was at pains to differentiate the social basis of U.S. democratic sovereignty from a monarchical model of "divine right," Rush nonetheless emphasized that "a Christian cannot fail of being useful to the republic, for his religion teacheth him, that no man 'liveth to himself.'" The republican prescription that Rush found already embedded in the providentialist doctrine of Christian scripture was an understanding of the relational character of human, and thus civic, existence. Republican ideology exalts virtuous activity in the polis as the signature of political liberty, locating civic engagement in the public sphere as both ground and telos, means and ends of legitimate political society. For Rush, the republican nation-state

uniquely substantialized the moral principles of universal liberty and “natural equality” because it was “directly opposed to the pride of monarchy and the pageantry of a court” (64). As Donald J. D’Elia observes, “The perfect republic of men in this life, Rush analogized, would lead directly to the perfect republic of souls in the hereafter” (201). It is striking, then, that the compact Rush locates between religion and republican liberty (“like certain liquors, they should only be used in a state of mixture” [“Thoughts” 70]) settles, finally, in the cocktail of a republic of machines— indeed, a machine built of machines. Or again: if “natural equality” forms the automatic (natural?) basis of Rush’s republican theology, to what deficit does the machinic supplement, as at once metaphor for citizen and civil government and the hinge between the two, respond? According to Rush, civil government resolves the differentiated wills of the people in a greater unity through the mechanism of education, a task whose urgency Rush announces in terms of a problem of national origin and cultural difference given that “our citizens are composed of the natives of so many different kingdoms in Europe” (64). For Rush, education was central to the ideological production of an autochthonous U.S. white settler colonial identity; it held special value for U.S. republican governmentality because only through the uniformity and regulation of its deployment could citizen-machines learn voluntarily to “perform their parts properly” (67) on behalf of the machinic republic on which each part simultaneously depends. Education was both the engine of the republic and the oil that greased its near-seamless connectivities.

Importantly, as in his prescription for bibliotherapy, Rush’s poetics of machinery submitted the citizen to the regularities and determinations of mechanism. In this submission, the indivisibility ascribed to the citizen and his divinely-endowed,

inalienable personhood would seem to stand at odds with the decomposable and recomposable figure of the machine that orients Rush's republican theology. However, as the American studies scholar John Kasson notes in his canonical *Civilizing the Machine*, it was precisely the industrial machine that came to symbolize at this moment U.S. independence and progress, not only economic but also political and cultural. It must thus be emphasized in this regard that Rush's republican machine was a very particular kind of machine; it was a self-determining and self-organizing machine, even perhaps an autopoietic one.

It would therefore not be inaccurate to say that an unspoken distinction between machine and tool inaugurates Rush's republican theology of mechanism. Whereas a tool can only be wielded through the force of another (principally, the human), the machine is powered by independent forces.¹²² While this energetic force is usually understood as mechanical, chemical, or electrical, in the case of the citizen-machine it is the generative power of the virtuous soul, at once political and theological, that motors. In this regard, the republican-machine establishes its enabling condition in an absence that haunts Rush's text. This is the absence of the *animate tool* reared "in a state of depression [and] deprived of the means of regular education and religious instruction," the black body wielded in total availability by white subjects' will and absolute dominion (qtd. in D'Elia, "Rush and the Negro" 420; see also Rush, "On Helping the Africans" 24). The specter of human disassembly introduced by the machine metaphor and the subsequent attempt to

¹²² This is Marx's distinction that he draws from William Schulz, which has less to do with the complexity of the machine in opposition to the simplicity of the tool than their respective sources of energy: "From this point of view we may draw a sharp line of demarcation between a tool and a machine...no matter how complicated they may be in other respects, man is the motive power...all this falls under the category of the tool; but the plough, which is drawn by animal power, and windmills, etc. must be classed among machines" (*Capital*, Vol. 1 493n.3).

distinguish firmly between the citizen-machine and the slave-tool, however, exposes a contradiction between the volitional subject of self-governance, on the one hand, and, on the other, an image of machinery that threatened to harness the citizen as mere instrument or tool of state power.¹²³ In light of my treatment of bibliotherapy, I submit that this contradiction achieved its staunchest resolution in the figure of the white criminal, that wayward but reprogrammable machine in need of repair.

Indeed, to the extent that bibliotherapy assumed the possibility of re-making the white prisoner as possessive individual, it disclosed a racialized and racializing dissonance internal to the political onto-theology of antebellum punishment. For the white convict, penalty figured a reversible fall to death that entailed the sudden dispossession of the lion's skin of civil life. In its effort to restore the legally dead to the human community of civil society, however, bibliotherapy traded in a conception of medium— a media theory, if you will— that gained coherency through the constitutive excision of fallen (black) flesh. If the door to no return, as Dionne Brand teaches us, marks a world-historic passage that ruptures the normative temporal sense of beginnings and endings, the door to the prison cell activated a distinct—and distinctly diachronic— arrangement: one that served to confirm (rather than disrupt) the constitutive difference between blackness and the domain of Man. Davis has made this argument most forcefully:

If, as Foucault insists, the locus of the new European mode of punishment shifted from the body to the soul, black slaves in the U.S. were largely perceived as lacking in the soul that might be shaped and transformed by

¹²³ This tension between autocratic and decentralized machinery has been described in somewhat different terms by Colleen E. Terrell, following Michael Warner, as “[t]he problem of the self-erasing center’ in the early republic’s patriotic call for a mass diffusion of public knowledge and education” (“Franklin, Rush, and the Manufacture of Civic Virtue” 128; see also Warner, *Letters* 129).

punishment. Within the institution of slavery, itself a form of incarceration, racialized forms of punishment developed alongside the emergence of the prison system within and as a negative affirmation of the “free world,” from which slavery was twice removed. *Thus the deprivation of white freedom tended to affirm the whiteness of democratic rights and liberties.* (“Racialized Punishment” 99, emphasis mine).

Following Davis, and purposively bending Foucault’s claim that the bio-graphical is important to the history of penality, under bibliotherapy’s antebellum reign, bios and graphein were fused as general complementarities inscribed in and through the autos: the reformed white subject set loose to participate once more in the life of the polis and of (popular) sovereignty. This convergence served as one technique through which white civil existence, even and precisely in the face of carceral mortification, reproduced and materialized its fundamental fantasy of transcending death and its racial ciphers.¹²⁴

The historiography of the prison’s expansion and its particularly gendered and racialized transmutations after formal emancipation is of course vast, so a fuller engagement with bibliotherapy’s vicissitudes in the “wake” of slavery must unfortunately be delayed for a future study. Allow me, however, to make two very broad observations that will have critical consequences for our return to Jackson’s letters. First, the decline of bibliotherapy and other rehabilitative projects in response to Reconstruction can be attributed to the fact that formal emancipation fundamentally transformed not only the racial composition but also the structure and function of incarceration as such. The criminalization of black existence through the Thirteenth Amendment that abolished

¹²⁴ Some of the language here is inflected by Rodríguez’s argument that “the social, political, and physical liquidation of the white world’s durable racial antagonist(s) reproduces the universality— the very ‘normalcy’— of white civil existence and bodily integrity, and provides a material opportunity for white life to *quite literally transcend death*” (“The Dominance of White Life” 137, emphasis his).

slavery and involuntary servitude “except as a punishment for a crime,” the Black Codes, vagrancy laws, marriage laws, contractual obligations, and other juridical and vigilante mechanisms rendered black freedom an avatar of deviancy and criminality.¹²⁵

Criminalization and penal servitude ensured the continuation of “slavery by another name” (to borrow from Doug Blackmon’s popular monograph) through, prominently, the development of the convict-leasing system in which incarcerated black people were sold to cotton planters, railroad operators, and mining corporations, as well as local governments. These forced labor camps should in fact more properly be called death camps given that in some states mortality rates hovered at forty percent.¹²⁶

Second, and conjunctively (convict leasing was not even in name abolished until 1941), in the mid-twentieth century bibliotherapeutic procedures would be re-tooled in conjunction with the Chicago School of Sociology and its widely influential effort to rework the discourse of black criminality in the idiom of culture.¹²⁷ In this reappearance, bibliotherapy announced an ostensible if uneven incorporation of the black offender into the terms of subjective Reason, an incorporation that was premised on an over-writing of the figure of black culture found always and already culpable. The return of bibliotherapy’s popularity was marked by a celebrated special issue of the prominent journal *Library Trends* published in 1962, which was described as “an important milestone in the development and understanding of bibliotherapy” (Tews, “Introduction”

¹²⁵ See Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* 28-33.

¹²⁶ See, among others, Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name*; Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*; Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*; and Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor*.

¹²⁷ As Khalil Gibran Muhammed has carefully shown, however, this discourse of black cultural criminality (defined over and against white immigrant criminality) far predates the Chicago School’s emergence. See *The Condemnation of Blackness*. The gestures offered here therefore are meant to signal the need for future archival work in this area.

97). But it was Herman Spector, the senior librarian at San Quentin—where George Jackson was consigned between 1961 and 1969—who was perhaps the staunchest advocate of print media’s civilizing vocation. During his tenure at San Quentin between 1947 and 1968, Spector ran a “Great Books” class as well as multiple writing groups. As the historian Eric Cummins documents, “[Spector] envisioned the enduring values of Western civilization prevailing over criminal deviancy by means of bibliotherapeutic techniques and a free interplay of ideas in the prison library... ‘We have the opportunity,’ he wrote, ‘to translate such a situation into the a most meaning weapon of bibliotherapy’” (*Rise and Fall* 26). Although he understood his library as a “hospital of the mind” and he described reading as a “civilizing influence,” Spector was also a keen practitioner of censorship. While print media were hence articulated to the project of “resocialization” (27), Spector, like other prison officials, worked to repress their insurrectionist potential beyond state-sanctioned circuits. As Rush’s heir, Spector, in the post-war era, re-articulated print as the regulatory motor of self-realization, self-regulation, and self-discipline: as medium and message, drive and destiny, of the carceral’s technics of reanimation.

In the abbreviated genealogy of the U.S. prison I have outlined, reading and alphabetic writing thus figured powerful signs of a decisively racially-adjudicated humanity’s possibility for rebirth. A particular mark of literacy became both the message that must be transmitted as well as the condition of the messenger’s delivery at the salvific destination of civil life. Through this conflation of message, messenger, and

action, the prison functioned as a tomb passing as a birth canal.¹²⁸ Certain ethical and political problems regarding our protocols of interpretation, however, follow from this observation. How, we must ask, might the critical desire to read imprisoned people's writing for a submerged humanity—a humanity undeniably repressed and censored—find itself operating within the same deadly economy of the human as that governed by bibliotherapy? How might this relation of complicity extend even (or especially) when the human who is (re)born in and through writing takes not the rhetorical shape of the rehabilitated liberal subject but its seeming inverse, the antagonistic subject of revolutionary consciousness? Is not, that is, something of bibliotherapy's coercive trace occluded in the pronouncement of *this* writing's destination as one solely of critical agency? Although within organizing circles it is a truism—and a crucial one—that the very fact of receiving letters and other mail, as evidence of a social network outside the prison, might be able to deter (or defer) some brutal aggression and retaliation from guards, corrections officers, and penal administrators, I raise with these questions a slightly different point about the letter's evidentiary status. In light of bibliotherapy's technology of the letter, it may be tempting to read Jackson's momentous intellectual production as evidencing the "successes" of Spector's programs. Or, and in a much more radical gesture, it may be tempting to read Jackson's collected letters, *the* letter addressed to Stendler, to his mother Georgia, to his brother Jonathan, to Angela Davis, as evidencing an irreducible humanity in excess of the dehumanizing violence of the prison. But while it is impossible to disagree with this second statement in itself, one must

¹²⁸ The assertion of the chiasmatic structure of "tomb" and "womb" under conditions of captivity is Jackson's. See *SB* 4.

wonder whether to read the letter this way would be to secure antiblackness's compact with logocentrism: to stand in awe at the prison slave who writes himself into being and thus humanity. It would be to reconfirm the pernicious logic of bibliotherapy, itself part of a broader racial logic that links the achievement of anthropogenesis to the self-reflexive auto-inscription of thought.¹²⁹

I want to highlight, therefore, how Jackson's epistolary interrupts this equivalence between emancipated personhood and writing, refusing to enclose the reach of enslavement in the fixed perimeter of the prison cage or to sanctify spatial ascension into civil existence as the ultimate signature of black freedom. As Jackson pointedly instructed Stendler, "Don't mistake this as a message from George to Fay, it's a message from the hunted running blacks." For the purposes of my argument, Jackson's assertion is significant for two reasons. First, in this correspondence, Jackson issues a radical non-correspondence. The form of capture and the relation of force epitomized by the prison

¹²⁹ An understanding of the mutual constitution of "writing" and "being" has been widely institutionalized in the study of African American literature and letters through Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s well-known treatment of "the trope of the talking book." My departure from this thesis, and my understanding of writing's humanizing itineraries, is fully indebted to R.A. Judy's trenchant critique of Gates in his stunning *(Dis)Forming the American Canon*. According to Judy, what Gates misses in his study of U.S. slave narratives is that "the assumption of the Negro's transcendent worth as human presupposes the Negro's being comprehensible in Western modernity's terms." For Judy, Gates erases the violent alchemy of *conversion* through which the Negro emerges as intelligible subject of representation: "humanization in writing...required the conversion of the incomprehensible African into the comprehensible Negro" (92). The rapport Gates locates between writing and birth thus renders invisible how this writing was necessarily also a writing of the African's death, "a writing of annihilation that applies the taxonomies of death in Reason (natural law) to enable the emergence of the self-reflective consciousness of the Negro" (89).

Finally, and most importantly, Judy's project is *not* to retrieve the African from writing or to posit the African *before the letter*. He is not addressing writing in general but rather a particular—let's call it logocentric—*metaphysic of writing* in which the "transparency of the material sign enables [one] to devalue writing, per se, by maintaining the fundamental immateriality of thought as discourse and situating value within that discursivity" (145). As should be clear, I have used "writing" throughout this section in consonance with the metaphysic Judy so astutely apprehends. And, in my brief detour through the runaway letter, I describe not a *before* or a *beyond* writing but a more rigorous sense of writing, one does not seek out or attain to the inscription of transcendental subjectivity and thus the "grammatology of civil society" (63) elaborated by Judy.

does not travel as a general rubric to understand the universal operations of social domination in the world. It instead indexes the general conditions of existence of *all* those who are hunted by the world—the antiblack world.¹³⁰ This is where Jackson departs not only from the Foucault of *Discipline & Punish*, but also from U.S. white radicals of this moment, including white media and video activists, who sought to make the prison—and often Jackson himself—visible as an analogical means of reflecting on multiple cultural and political institutions.¹³¹

Second, in this context of black capture, in this letter from the presumed-to-be dead, the necessarily absent sender is disappeared by the structure of the epistolary but also by the organization of a world parasitic on the author’s flesh. Yet, as Jackson’s deployment of the present-participle “running” indicates, this disappearance is itself predicated on a prior *activity of disappearance*. In the structure of Jackson’s sentence, the historical condition of being hunted follows—*comes after*—the attributive trait “running” that directly modifies the noun “blacks.” Absent of any preposition—running from, running away—Jackson’s poetics gather and disseminate a message on behalf of fugitive runners—a fugitive running that is constituted as primary, continuous, interminable; it is this errancy—this running—that precedes and exceeds the captor’s hunt and that, as Harney and Moten say, brings the hunt of white supremacy into existence. If bibliotherapy instantiates a scene of coercion that announces the medium of

¹³⁰ Again, the concept-metaphor of the antiblack world is Lewis Gordon’s. See also Wilderson’s treatment of “the ruse of analogy” in *Cinema*.

¹³¹ As Kahanna notes in his study of experimental and radical U.S. documentary practice from the 1960s and 1970s, “As activists and progressive artists and intellectuals reexamined their relation to social and political institutions of all kinds, prison became an important site for reflection” (*Intelligence Work* 205).

writing as a medium or passageway to sovereign, state-sanctioned freedom in the civil order, Jackson's epistle insists that the (barred) event of arrival marks but another instance of collective bondage. In so doing, the adestination and non-arrival of the letter—the letter that cannot, does not, and *will* not arrive where it was supposed to go—recomposes the writing of another ethics of freedom.¹³² The runaway letter discloses the *ideology of arrival* as a master term in a racial onto-theology that underwrites “the life cycle of the enemy culture” (Jackson, *Blood in My Eye* 59), a cycle founded and sustained through a genocidal logic of (neo)slavery. Here, medium figures both as technical substrate and political allegory, a terrain of struggle intractably bound to the inscription of humanity and the conditions of (human) relation. In its evasion, errancy, and dislocation, the runaway letter contravenes the cultural graphings of the bibliotherapeutic project, forwarding a future mode of being that Jackson disseminates under the heading of the present-participle “running” or what J. Kameron Carter, in his beautiful essay “Paratheological Blackness,” has more recently termed “existence in the middle itself...[t]hat is...existence as existence between” (593).

This collective errancy is foremost the affirmation of an existence in the middle, in *medias res*, itself already a fugitive signal that refuses the anticipation of arrival at

¹³² I take the term *adestination* from Jacques Derrida, the neologism by which he refers to the principle that “a letter does not always arrive at its destination” (*Post Card* 489, op. cit. 17). My return to this text and to the importance of the particular form of the epistolary to the general structure of racial modernity and its undoing was spurred by the work of Jared Sexton. In his brilliant essay “The Social Life of Social Death,” Sexton seeks to displace the simple opposition between the tendencies in black thought abbreviated as afro-pessimism (associated with a structuralist or paradigmatic analysis of the “conditions of antiblackness in the modern world”) and black optimism (associated with “black cultural studies in general and black performance studies in particular”). In reframing these conversations, Sexton remarks, in a passing footnote, that “the arrangement of afro-pessimism and black optimism... recalls and refashions the extremely complicated discourse between and among Lacan and Derrida.” The trope of the letter and its cognates that structure this argument is in this regard indebted to Sexton's generative refashioning. See “The Social Life of Social Death” 40n.11.

state-sanctioned personhood. Such affirmation of non-arrival— or, rather, the affirmation of an arrival that cannot deliver the transcendence of a prophetic messenger because the point of arrival is, precisely, with each other— is then redoubled in Jackson’s effacement of the proper name: “Don’t mistake this as a message from George to Fay, it’s a message from [all] the hunted running blacks.” In this address, the signature “George,” which is already more than one, becomes a switchpoint around which ongoing histories of capture and practices of marronage congregate and condense. In the sending and scattering of this contraband letter, the name “George Jackson” is at once posited, deposited, and deferred. This passionate diffusion, this writing as collective running, is the condition of the message’s otherwise delivery and its differential response. One such arrival would be at cell block D in Attica, New York, where over 800 prisoners seized control of the Attica Correctional Facility two weeks after Jackson was shot dead at Soledad, as television crews and national audiences looked on.

4.2 TELEVISION’S SURPLUS

Time does not pass but accumulates.
—Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*

Herman Spector retired from San Quentin in 1968 but he was not replaced by another librarian.¹³³ What did replace him was the in-cell broadcast television set in 1972.

¹³³ The decision not to replace Spector was in no way unique. Indeed, Spector’s retirement must be read within broader trajectory in the defunding of reformist education and literacy initiatives in the neoliberal prison system, with the most well-known case being the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (1994), which overturned the Higher Education Act of 1965’s provision for Pell Grants for the purposes of prisoner college education. But I argue we must also read this moment as part of a history in which imprisoned people are increasingly denied any access to courts, which is inseparable from the material circulation and censorship of print. In the case of *Bounds v. Smith* (1977) the Supreme Court upheld the obligation of correctional facilities to provide law libraries as an “adequate, effective, and meaningful” means to access to courts and legal defense. However, the Court reversed this affirmative principle in *Lewis v. Casey* (1996) on the grounds that judges should

Although television entered U.S. prisons as early as 1954, it was in 1972 that imprisoned populations were first permitted to purchase in-cell TV sets in institutions such as San Quentin. Early reformist efforts to bring television to prisons initially mimed the rehabilitative impulse of the bibliotherapeutic project. Speaking at the Annual Meeting of the American Prison Association in 1955, Donald B. Pelch, an administrator from an Iona, Michigan multi-level correctional facility, hailed TV as an “interesting, modern, and effective” educational medium, which “we feel...[is] an economical answer to the problem of how [to] best broaden our...cultural program” (“Uses of Television” 51). Described by wardens as evidence of progressive penal policy, media education was articulated to a post-war emphasis on prison time not as an abstract measure of debt to society— “a dead unit of time to be paid back directly,” as documentary studies scholar Jonathan Kahana has put it— but rather as a qualitative, if not personalized, experience (*Intelligence Work* 218). Institutionalized through a brief though largely symbolic interest in indeterminate sentencing practices, penologists of this period advocated a conception of incarceration as a “flexible schedule” of moral and psychological uplift that could include the pedagogical apparatus of TV. In these early penological forays into TV’s installation as a means to generate “healthy” outside influences, it is the regulation of

not be able to “micromanage” the operations of prisons, shifting the legal burden of proof by maintaining that prisoners do not have “an abstract, freestanding right to a law library” but must instead be able to demonstrate an “actual injury” caused by inadequate or lack of legal materials. See *Bounds v. Smith*, 430 U.S. 817; *Lewis v. Casey*, 518 U.S. 343; Clark and MacCreigh, *Library Services to the Incarcerated* 11; and Seamone, “*Fahrenheit 451** on Cell Block D.”

Besides the obvious point that to prove (in the state idiom) “legal injury” would of course first require access to litigation materials, this progressive assault on the infrastructure of the library in *Casey*, as Dayan compellingly argues, compresses the possibility of legal redress by functionally returning the prisoner to the juridical status of the slave. She writes, “the slave is reared in ignorance. It would thus be unreasonable for a slave to contract legal obligations, to be treated as a competent witness, to be party in a lawsuit... in other words, to have access to the courts” (“Held in the Body of the State” 242). This juridical rollback of the library must be understood alongside the machinations of television and neo-slavery I adumbrate in this section.

televisual content that marks the point of stress, registered in the language of “media effects” as an anxiety of over the mimetic faculties of the criminal type and the potential eruption of mass counter-violence that particular programming might augur.¹³⁴

In the discourses of state science at the cusp of the neoliberal era, however, one notes a general divestment from the language of penal liberalism and the psychological and anthropological imperatives to recraft citizen-subjects through television, as well as the displacement of the entire problematic of hegemony altogether: those insurgent possibilities unleashed at the moment of reception and collective meaning-making. Rather than locating TV as one ideological apparatus among others, what one finds in its stead is the state’s recalibration of television as a privileged durational form and temporal machinery. “Television,” David Ladipo writes in an article on the birth of the prison industrial complex, “is omnipresent in U.S. jails—and sometimes the only form of ‘therapy’ offered to distressed prisoners—but the rays only go one way” (“Rise” 122). Lapido’s observation leads me in this section to cull selectively from critical prison studies, media studies, and black studies in order to ascertain *a state theory of post-Fordist spectatorship*. Working carefully through the productive tensions at these fields’ points of articulation, my initial presupposition is that the imagined target of disciplinary punishment, who was partially a technopolitical artifact of bibliotherapeutic procedures, vanishes in a state optics geared neither primarily toward carceral labor nor carceral reform (a distinction, I have already shown, that was historically administered as and through racialization). My principal argument is that the emergent deployment of

¹³⁴ For one post-World War II account of television and other media as a means to “establish for the inmates general contacts with the outside world,” see Heyns “Supervision of the Inmate’s Relationships,” esp. 70.

television represented the ascendancy of an attempt to manage those warehoused populations addressed not with the reformist and productivist imperative to live and to labor but rather to wait and to waste in medias res.

Indeed, in *Golden Gulag*, Ruth Wilson Gilmore's ground-clearing study of the massive build-up of California's prison system during a moment of marked decline in crime rates, Gilmore reminds us that despite the popular misconception that the purpose of the contemporary prison is to repeat the brutal processes of coerced labor and value extraction that was the signature of the convict-leasing system, 95% of U.S. prisons and jails are in fact publicly funded and very few prisoners work for anyone while incarcerated (21). Gilmore underlines this point for two reasons that are particularly germinal for my argument. First, the primary objective of incarceration is neither retribution, deterrence, nor rehabilitation, as in principle it once was, but rather total *incapacitation*. If "incapacitation," she writes,

is not ambitious in a behavioral or psychological sense, it is, ironically, the theory that undergirds the most ambitious prison-building project in the history of the world. Incapacitation doesn't pretend to change anything about people except where they are. It is in a simple-minded way, then, a geographical solution that purports to solve social problems by extensively and repeatedly removing people from disordered, deindustrialized milieus and depositing them somewhere else. (14)

The terrors of bodily incapacitation and forced immobilization ground the core logic of mass incarceration because it is neither the legal brutality of coerced labor nor the tyranny of re-educative reform that drives the post-civil rights revanchist movements of criminalization, imprisonment, and prison construction. Instead, Gilmore charts the complex interchanges of political economy and the crises of capitalist reproduction that led to the state-capital partnership she calls "the prison fix." Beginning in the 1970s,

neoliberal restructurings in the allocation of public resources and global capital flight that structurally under- and unemployed vast U.S. populations produced massive surpluses in the domains of land use, finance capital, state capacity, and population (88). The crises generated by this structural idling required new channels of investment that would absorb these surpluses (83). Industrialized punishment in the “postindustrial” landscape responds to these restructurings as a strategy to “resolve” the crisis of surplus. Whereas in the postbellum nineteenth and Fordist twentieth centuries black populations were differentially drawn into industrial sectors as surplus labor— including through the “post-slavery” convict leasing systems that functionally industrialized the U.S. South— the transnational configuration of post-Fordism ushered a mass expulsion of African Americans from the relations of production, rendering significant populations superfluous through job elimination, uneven global trade liberalization, and capital flight.¹³⁵

This mass idling became a critical point for mobilization across a heterogeneous array of social movements, whose political analyses ranged from the call for guaranteed full employment (a persistent demand of many civil rights veterans in the Poor People’s Campaign) to competing platforms for the full automation of production. This latter demand is a less often remarked upon aspect of some members of the Black Panther Party’s political writings of this moment, insofar as these analyses pivoted on the figure of the black lumpen who, as former Chairwoman Elaine Brown put it, “had absolutely no stake in industrial America” (*Taste* 136).¹³⁶ To siphon off multiple surpluses of land,

¹³⁵ See also Mukherjee, “Bio-work in the Blacking Factory”; Holt, *The Problem of Race in the Twenty-First Century*; and Hong, “Existentially Surplus.”

¹³⁶ This point is further exacted in former Minister of Information Eldridge Cleaver’s 1971 outline of a “Lumpen Ideology”: “And we are no longer seeking a job... Lumpen consciousness is more advanced than the job-seeking, fringe-benefit consciousness of the AFL/CIO/Communist Party/Working Class accomodationist movement. *The basic demand of the Lumpen, to be cut in on Consumption in spite of*

infrastructure, and population and to control the crises of state-capitalist power augured by the multiple social movements that these surpluses inspired, Gilmore therefore contends that “the state’s criminal justice apparatus present[ed] the relative surplus population as the problem for which prison became the state’s solution” (113). Most succinctly, then, the post-Keynesian criminalization and imprisoning apparatus does not primarily make those it captures directly productive as exploited labor but stockpiles its captives as the fungible material through which the crises systemic to racial capitalism are “managed.”

In “Neocitizenship and Critique,” Eva Cherniavsky builds on Gilmore to make an argument about the neoliberal withdrawal from the mediating institutions of civil society and the subsequent decline not only of particular bourgeois liberal norms but, much more generally, the very premises of “normative culture as such” (9). She refracts, “*Golden Gulag* specifies with admirable analytic precision the shift from a disciplinary production of bourgeois sociality through the criminalization and institutionalized reform of deviance to the contemporary production of crime or criminality in the interest of directing capital and population flows” (12). Cherniavsky’s analysis of *Golden Gulag* is a part of a larger speculative treatise on transformations in political culture and crises of civic practice after neoliberalism. Her project proceeds as an extended engagement with Michael Hardt’s contention that “disciplinary society can be characterized as civil society seen from a different perspective” (qtd. in “Neocitizenship” 10). If in liberal bourgeois

being blocked out of Production is the ultimate revolutionary demand... We look forward to the day when all work can be done by technological advances, which will be a good thing. (“On Lumpen Ideology,” emphasizes mine). The emphasis in this passage is neither inclusion within the production process nor simply the workers’ control of the means of production. Neither offered is a moralist castigation of consumption or a romanticization of the liberation of labor from alienation. Rather, in the face of job elimination under new cycles of cybernation, Cleaver called for the elimination of a productivist work ethic.

democracy the disciplines of civil society function as the mediating terrain between capital and the state, Hardt argues that, with an accelerated transit to processes of real subsumption under post-Fordism, capital no longer requires the mediating apparatus of state and civil society. According to this assessment, the once relatively autonomous superstructural realm of civil society that was socially necessary for the ideological reproduction of capitalist social relations now becomes fully subsumed into the accumulation regimes of capital itself.¹³⁷ Gilmore, however, provides for Cherniavsky an important counterweight to Hardt's thesis because it is Gilmore who shows, in Cherniavsky's terms, that we witness not the retreat of state mediation but rather the fomenting "mediation of a different sort," one that is "not primarily disciplinary in its aspirations and techniques" (11, 13). Such techniques, as Gilmore's treatment of incapacitation and the compulsory non-productivity of the surplus makes so evident, are not at all premised on "the production of reproducible interiorities" (9) nor do they aim to "interpellate subjects through processes of compulsory (mis)recognition" (20) but cohere as a system of management and liquidation that Cherniavsky refers to through the position of "the dominated-but-undisciplined" (18). What this category introduces is the heterogeneity of force-relations operative in a political economy and political culture that does not evenly culminate in, nor truly aspire to, the production of docile bodies or the

¹³⁷ In this regard, Hardt seems to exchange Althusser for Foucault in the argument that generally appears within Autonomist readings of Marx's discussion of real vs. formal subsumption in his chapter from the *Economic Manuscripts* on "The Direct Production Process." As Jason Read explains, "Whereas formal subsumption was perhaps content to relegate the production of particular conditions of subjectivity to the ideological state apparatuses, real subsumption puts these particular modes of production—their perceptions, styles, and beliefs—to work" (*Micro-Politics* 157). A more careful parsing of the relationship between dispositif and apparatus, discipline and ideological interpellation, is beyond the scope of this chapter, so I repeat some of Hardt and Cherniavsky's conflation. But in the terms of the present discussion, it is important, as Judith Butler ("Subjection, Resistance, Resignification") has compellingly argued, that a subjectivizing process of interiorization unites discipline with interpellation.

self-managing subject of *homo oeconomicus* (that ur-subject assumed within most established genealogies of neoliberalism in the global North).

I am persuaded by Cherniavsky's assertion that a preoccupation with subject formations and struggles over hegemony blinds us to some actual operations of neoliberal governance, particularly in its constitutively carceral machinations. And while I suspect that much of what Cherniavsky diagnoses as the neoliberal undoing of disciplinary and bourgeois democratic protocols appears truly *novel* only from the analytic standpoint of the white rights-bearing citizen-subject (Cherniavsky is not alone in this; it is the trademark of so much of the Euro-American literature on neoliberalism and precarity), I take from her provocations the need to produce analytic vocabularies that allow us to theorize critically the (anti)social functions of technologies and cultural forms beyond (or, I think better, beside) the symbolic regulation of common sense and the co-articulation of "citizen" and "subject." This provocation is especially urgent—and challenging—in the case of cultural studies of television where the analytic of hegemony has provided *the* dominant lens to think the work of media since the landmark publication of Todd Gitlin's 1979 "Prime Time Ideology," in which he located the medium as a crucial channel for active contestation in a perpetually evolving process of association, articulation, and agonistic struggle over popular consensus.¹³⁸ But if television emerged in the prison alongside a neoliberal-carceral cultural economy that has divested from the disciplinary program of normalization, what kind of technology is carceral television and

¹³⁸ The importance of Gitlin's article to the institutionalization of "hegemony" as TV studies' primary political compass is well accepted. See, for example, Spigel and Curtin, "Introduction" to *The Revolution Wasn't Televised* 7-8. On the preeminence of the model of hegemony in television studies more generally, D'Acci, "Cultural Studies, Television Studies" 434-6.

what forms of social mediation does it enact?¹³⁹ Our answer will require a certain degree of abstraction that brackets, at least momentarily, those questions of thematic and representational content that have so far dominated studies of neoliberalism and TV.¹⁴⁰

In order to arrive at an answer, it is first worth noting that, perversely, Jackson's abolitionist call to decimate the epistemological foundations and state implementation of criminology and penology, sent from his consignment to captivity and cited in the beginning of this chapter, found resonance with University of Chicago economist and future Nobel-prize winner Gary Becker's articulation of "a law-and-economics model" of human behavior. Today Becker is perhaps most remembered for his seminal theory of *Human Capital* advanced in his monograph of the same title. Yet it is his contemporaneous theory of criminalization and law enforcement that most distills the constitutive encounter between the neoliberal state and the carceral state. As Becker argued in his 1968 article "Crime and Punishment: An Economic Approach," "A useful

¹³⁹ In his book, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, Frank B. Wilderson III expertly reads the representational and formal strategies through which a range of cinematic texts—as well as the discipline of film studies—disavows what he calls "the structure of antagonism" through a "ruse of analogy" that mislocates blackness within civil society (35-53), which he elsewhere defines as itself a constitutive "state of emergency" for black people ("The Prison Slave" 19). Whereas Cherniavsky, through Gilmore, understands the withdrawal of hegemonic power as a historical feature of the neoliberal epoch, Wilderson argues non-hegemonic direct relations of force provide the principal form of violence characteristic of racial slavery. Cherniavsky, Wilderson might say, as he says elsewhere of Agamben in his writing on the Jewish holocaust, "is not so much wrong as [s]he is late" (*Cinema* 36). One question that Wilderson's book raises, however, regards the status of the cinema itself as an institution of civil society. In other words, if antiblack violence is primarily non-hegemonic and is instantiated through direct and gratuitous relations of force, as Wilderson argues, (how) are we to account for the structural violence of media in non-hegemonic terms? My effort to elaborate the institutionality of carceral television is also in part a response to this question provoked by, if marginal to, Wilderson's important text.

¹⁴⁰ My argument in this regard departs from the very fine work of Laurie Ouellette and James Hay on reality television and neoliberal governmentality. They influentially understand TV's thematic presence of the ideal of entrepreneurial citizenship qua privatized self-rule as a neoliberal technique of governance that operates within the pastoral circuits of civil society in an age characterized foremost by the rollback of the state. Alternatively, I am arguing the neoliberal, in its structural proximity to the carceral, compels a thinking of the political circuits of television outside, if not after, the medium of civil society and the "self" of self-rule. See *Better Living through Reality TV*, esp. 10-2.

theory of criminal behavior can dispense with special theories of anomie, psychological inadequacies, or inheritance of special traits, and simply extend the economist's usual analysis of choice" (qtd. in Harcourt, *Illusion of Free Markets* 133). It bears remembering that Foucault's later engagements with the production and administration of criminality, namely in his 1978-9 lectures collected as *The Birth of Biopolitics*, directly turned to Becker, who, in turning away from an anthropology of *homo criminalis* as a type of person, Foucault would nominate as "the most radical of the neoliberals" (269). This engagement with Becker's penal philosophy and with the Chicago School law-and-economics movement more broadly would also lead Foucault to re-assess his earlier elaboration of the birth of the prison and its expansive capillary network of disciplinary power that aimed to govern the interior regions of the soul. As Foucault himself suggested, "what appears on the horizon... is not at all the ideal project of an exhaustively disciplinary society in which the legal network hemming in individuals is taken over and extended internally by, let's say, normative mechanisms" (259). What Foucault can only begin to hint towards and what Jackson's proclamation that "imprisonment is the closest to being death that one is likely to experience in this life" fully registers is the state's divestment from even the appearance of disciplinary coercion as a primary mechanism of social control, of the simulated resurrection of those rendered mortified by the impression of civil and social death.

This divestment was indexed in the emergent media ecology of the post-1970 prison and urges an account of the ascendancy of television as its dominant media form. Whereas bibliotherapy sought to gather the subject through a hermeneutics of meaning and transparent self-identity for reincorporation into the productive circuits of labor, what

is gathered by the neoliberal prison is, quite simply, the mass aggregation of *time*. This time is neither socially necessary labor-time nor surplus labor-time exploited for the generation of value; it is time stolen and accumulated as waste.¹⁴¹ This is the time of suspension without movement or interruption that Mumia Abu-Jamal has theorized from “the morgue-like holding pens of Pennsylvania’s penitentiaries” as “the spectral imminence of slow death.” Slow death describes a chronopolitical temporality of unhumaning in which “‘life’ is thus but a grim metaphor for death” (*Death Blossoms* 40), that is, where death no longer marks absolute finitude nor signifies the condition of transcendence but rather is made coterminous with extensivity of a life.¹⁴² With this indictment, Abu-Jamal issues a critique of a political economy and political ontology parasitic not on life-as-labor but on the administration of the chiasmatic crossing of life and death. Slow death discloses a racializing infrastructure of abjection from the relations of production as the spectral condition of the contemporary horizon of proletarianization qua (waged or unwaged) labor. (This death must be slow not due to any ethical regard for black life or racial capitalist investment in the command over black life as surplus labor but, recall, only because an entire political calculus depends on this protracted duration and its material substratum of encaging.) Moreover, it suggests that any “radical” politics or political philosophy that begins with the subject of production as its ineluctable possibility of existence will unthink this laboring subject’s conditions of emergence

¹⁴¹ For a brilliant meditation on the accumulation of life as waste, see Tadiar, “Life-Times.”

¹⁴² Five years after the publication of Abu-Jamal’s *Death Blossoms*, cultural theorist Lauren Berlant repurposed the concept of *slow death* in an article on precarity, obesity, and competing imaginations of sovereignty, though she does not cite or engage Abu-Jamal. A comparison between Abu-Jamal and Berlant’s deployments of the concept is beyond the parameters of this chapter but would be interesting, first, because Berlant activates TV (along with sex and eating) as her primary examples and, second, because her account of slow death—and also of neoliberal precarity—pivots on the status of U.S. American *workers* who are being worked to death.

against the backdrop of incapacitation and obliteration: *those who will not be returned to life*— and this will become key— *where life is conceptualized as the vital capacity for labor*.

In Abu-Jamal's exposition of a slow death that holds the prisoner in perpetual suspension without interval, he echoes Jackson's account of the metaphysical violence of capture in which death signals not a horizon of absolute finitude but a non-teleological, stretched-out abyss of coerced movement without closure. This 24/7 administration of slow death, which Jackson prominently linked to the humiliating presence of TV, reformulates the issue of television's function in the prison by signaling how the medium has been channeled not only to gather and regulate the time of social life but the time of (social) death as well. An excursus through television studies' dominant modes of conceptualizing the medium's structuration of time, labor, and relations of force (hegemony, domination, resistance) is necessary in order to establish the differences between these abstractions of lifetime, a difference that is, among other things, a difference between exploitation and total expropriation. To do so, I try to keep in mind where and when the prisoner appears in television theory even, or especially, when seemingly only at a distance or not at all in sight.

Given the temporal calculus I have hitherto engaged, it is indeed significant that historians and theorists of television have long turned to the category of time as a structuring rubric that braids together the formal, political, and technical exigencies of the medium. In 1974, at the moment of the post-war Keynesian compromise's disintegration, Raymond Williams would influentially leverage "the fact of flow" as a heuristic to describe the tightly connected sequence of images and sounds that define the immersive,

ubiquitous, and seemingly endless character of commercial broadcast (*Television* 96).

The television text, as Williams would have it, could not easily be delimited to the single episode or a discrete series but instead encompassed the totality of audiovisual succession, including advertisements, that determined a given schedule. In a strong sense, for Williams, televisual flow refused the very operations of discursive closure.

In the wake of Williams's field-defining work, critics have further textured the concept-metaphor of flow to account for the segmentations within programming that at once perforate television's flow and that make it possible, thus bringing TV's diegetic economy into dense relation with the segmentations that scaffold the general economy of everyday life. In television studies, it has therefore become commonplace to assert that a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity, flow and segmentation—rather than flow as such—organizes the formal and aesthetic strategies through which the medium *schedules* the temporal rhythms of production, reproduction, and consumption through what Rick Altman calls “household flow” (“Television/Sound”).¹⁴³ Highlighting “the relation of the [television] schedule to the structure and economics of the workweek of the general population,” Nick Browne has illuminated how TV participates in the manufacture of the distinction between labor-time and leisure-time and, in so doing, “helps produce and render ‘natural’ the logic and rhythm of the social order” (“Political Economy” 72, 71). Similarly, Tania Modleski (“Rhythms”) contends that television functions in the household to script the “rhythms” of the sexual division of unwaged domestic labor, thereby ideologically reproducing, as Thomas Streeter and Wendy Wahl add, the

¹⁴³ On flow's constitutive dependence upon segmentation and discontinuity, see, prominently, Ellis, *Visible Fictions*, esp. his critique of Williams' reliance on metaphors of liquidity in ch. 7 “Broadcast TV as Cultural Form”; Feuer, “The Concept of Live Television”; and White, “Crossing Wavelengths.”

work/non-work distinction that makes “invisible and unthinkable” the fundamental centrality of women’s reproductive labor to regimes of capitalist productivity (“Audience Theory” 244). Due to its primary institutionalization within the household immediately after World War II in United States, televisual flow, it has thus been argued, socializes and genders the times of production, reproduction, and consumption through the domestic architecture of the family unit.¹⁴⁴ No longer understood as the ceaseless procession without closure first apprehended by Williams, flow in fact profoundly divides and segments social life according to the institutions of civil society and the schedules of labor upon which these institutions are grounded.

Taken together, these canonical assessments reorient the time and place of televisual flow in two related ways. First, by redrafting the phenomenological experience of flow as a technique and effect of capitalist social relations, these critics present TV as a machinery of discipline aimed foremost at the socialization of time. Second, by emphasizing that this socialization weaves together the discontinuous temporalities of production, reproduction, and consumption in a mutually-supporting infrastructure, they articulate the medium as enabling and enabled by a mass consumer economy— one that depends upon the existence of both “leisure-time” and “disposable” income (gained through from waged labor). In the most vulgar terms, then, the price audiences pay for

¹⁴⁴ The classic account of television’s early institutionalization as a domestic medium is found in Lynn Spigel’s *Make Room for TV*. Spigel documents efforts to discipline women’s domestic labor around the rhythms and flows of the console and shows, particularly in her chapter “Women’s Work,” how the medium was ambivalently articulated in the U.S. cultural imaginary as at once securing and threatening the “flow” of household reproductive labor relations. In *Ethereal Queer*, Amy Villarejo builds on Spigel and other feminist television historians to pinpoint the relationship between TV’s socialization of time and its production of social identities. Television, Villarejo argues, is “one of the— if not *the* most— gendered and sexualized repetition apparatuses of modern technoscience, the modern implantation of gendered and sexualized social time” (7, emphasis hers).

television is bought and sold as advertising time, in the submission of would-be leisure-time to the commercial imperatives of consumption. As Browne summates, “the [television] network is basically a relay in a process of textualizing the interaction of audience and advertiser” (74).

It is from this perspective of consumption that television critics have traditionally initiated a critique of the political economy of media culture. One consequence of such arguments, as Patricia Ticineto Clough usefully highlights, is that “[i]t is simply assumed that television is a machine befitting a Fordist advanced capitalism; it is assumed that television is a vehicle of advertising, a conveyor of an ideology of mass consumption” (*Autoaffection* 75). Television is figured as the technical substrate of a Fordist social system characterized by the industrialization of mass production and mass consumption, a system, I would add, that was consolidated in the historic instance through the (now eviscerated) racialized and white heteropatriarchal provision of the family wage. In this composite, television can appear foremost only as a vehicle of semantic transmission (however polysemic, always of the order of the signified) but that television’s machinery of transmission might not take a vehicular shape nor its sociopolitical drive be solely toward consumption and reproduction remains largely unthought.¹⁴⁵ What remains unexamined, in other words, is that television may be part of the mediatic means of production in a capitalist regime of accumulation that is specifically post-Fordist in its

¹⁴⁵ Clough makes a similar observation vis-à-vis television scholar John Fiske’s conflation of polysemy and dissemination (the latter of which, as she quotes from Derrida, is “irreducible to polysemy” insofar as its horizon is not in the first instance semantic or meaningful). She relates this conflation to a more general move to locate the possibility of “multiple interpretations” that similarly “confine[s] television’s openness to a politics of hegemony that is at play at the point of reception” (74).

mode; as Clough notes, it is precisely this formulation and the counter-pressure it exerts that is the signature intervention of Richard Dienst.

In *Still Life in Real Time*, Dienst cogently proposes that “television appeared at a certain historical moment to incorporate everyday life and culture as ‘free’ time into the body of capital through the mediation of the image” (53). Dienst’s aim to specify “the work of watching” (58) in the terms of this specular morphology of value is therefore addressed as a challenge to hermeneutic accounts preoccupied with audiences’ interpretative practices of “decoding” and as an effort to displace the isomorphism between reception and consumption in television studies. When critics foreground a viewer’s chance empirical encounter with advertising (in opposition to “programming”) as television’s economic *raison d’être*, Dienst surmises, they repeat the logic of bourgeois political economy by confusing individual labor with social labor power and by “reducing the systematic to the subjective and the episodic” (61). Advertisers certainly buy time, but this time, he emphasizes, is *socialized time that is valorized as exchange value in advance*. Dienst agrees with Browne and others that “the fundamental concept of television is time,” but argues that TV’s channeling and circulation of socialized “time-power” as a source of value production destroys the distinction between labor-time and leisure-time but also the commercial distinction between advertising spots and the show

itself.¹⁴⁶ Televisual time “precedes and envelops any semiotic [signified?]... Time must be theorized at the greatest level of generality without taking for granted that it bears sense, narration, or discursivity” (159). It is not that televisual content or meaning are insignificant but to pursue the medium’s underlying machining of time and its valorization of attention will mean that, on one register, TV brings the production process wherever it goes, regardless of what appears on the screen. “We” do not consume television but it is rather “television [that] consumes our time, producing value and reproducing social relations along the way” (62), as “an original form of reification performed in time rather than through finished things” (63). Television, as a new productive force, partakes in a kind of primitive accumulation where capital moves to previously untapped sites of valorization, blurring the divisions between labor-time and the times of reproduction and consumption.

Strikingly, Dienst’s treatment of television anticipates and prefigures what has since emerged as a full-fledged effort in media theory to ascertain the ways in which the labor process and the production cycle have been increasingly diffused through changes in the growth of fixed capital (e.g., communications and information technologies). Media studies concerned with the recomposition of labor have most often turned to the heterodox marxist idiom of the operaismo/workerist tendency in Italian political thought.

¹⁴⁶ Dienst is in this regard perhaps too quick to distance his project from that of other television theorists given the significant existent body of work on the ambiguous meanings of the televisual “text” and the medium’s multiple perforations of anything like a unified diegesis. (This, indeed, was the precise conceptual innovation of Williams’s theory of flow). But Dienst’s substantive point nevertheless remains that the nexus of advertising and audience consumption are generally posited as the primary economic mechanisms of television. Sut Jhally, to mention just one notable example, takes this argument to an extreme in *The Codes of Advertising: Fetishism and the Political Economy of Meaning in the Consumer Society* (71-87) when he equates necessary labor-time with programming “proper” and surplus labor-time with commercials.

These thinkers posit a transition, in Mario Tronti's terms, from the Fordist mass worker to the post-Fordist socialized worker, a transition that is marked by the erosion of boundaries between labor and non-labor—in fact, the erosion of any boundary between work and life—such that value-producing labor now takes place across the totality of what is dubbed “the social factory.” The social factory thesis was first posed as an attempt to describe how capital responded to the general strikes and the refusal of work within the 1960s uprisings by fundamentally deterritorializing the labor process across the social terrain, thereby presenting a formidable challenge to the Gramscian attempt to locate the relative autonomy of the political and the social.¹⁴⁷ In its more recent appropriation by media studies, however, the concept of the social factory has been put to work most prominently in digital media theory due, for example, to the Internet's facilitation of the monetization and unremunerated expropriation of user-generated content and services.¹⁴⁸ But, as Dienst has shown, television was already at the avant-garde of such processes in its subsumption of “free” social time as laboring activity. That the entirety of *lifetime* is said to become subject to capitalist valorization is enunciated clearest in Paolo Virno's rearticulation of biopolitics as a historical philosophy of labor-power:

¹⁴⁷ See Tronti, “Strategy of Refusal”; and Hardt and Virno, *Radical Thought in Italy*, esp. 246, on capital's appropriation and neutralization of the Gramscian insight.

¹⁴⁸ For a survey of these arguments, see the essays collected in Scholz, *Digital Labor*, as well as my discussion of black box capitalism in the previous chapter. Most of the work in television studies that has since engaged the social factory thesis focuses on trends toward TV/Internet convergence and questions of interactivity. See, for example, Andrejevic, “Television without Pity.” Dienst, despite his limitations, is a beneficial counterweight to this focus on “television after TV” because his account is consonant with the broadcast model of the immediately post-1970 moment with which I am primarily concerned but, even more so, because such an account affords attention to the uneven development and implementation of televisual technologies across site-specific locations, including the prison, in ways that are potentially occluded by a universalizing thrall to convergence.

Capitalists are interested in the life of the worker, in the body of the worker, only for an indirect reason: this life, this body, are what contains the faculty, the potential, the *dynamis*... One can say that while money is the universal representation of the value of exchange—or rather the exchangeability itself of products—life, instead, takes the place of the productive potential, of the invisible *dynamis*. (*Grammar* 82-3)

For Virno, labor-power holds in reserve the general capacities and potential faculties immanent to life itself, and it is for this reason alone that a positive power over life comes to the fore in a post-Fordist moment allegedly marked by capital's attempt to valorize all social activity and social time. Two critical problematics emerge from this ascription of life as the generative substratum and proper identity of labor-power. First, Virno vitalizes (and arguably ontologizes) the category of labor-power. While value remains for him a diacritical effect, the productive character of life-in-itself is nevertheless postulated as the originary source of all wealth. In so doing, the qualitative differences and internal variations of *social life* recede in the universal equivalent of bios. Second, and more pressing, while Virno exchanges the proletariat for the more capacious category of life so as to account for a multitude of social workers who exist outside the formal wage relation (such as students, homeworkers, spectators, and media users), productive labor, albeit in a much-expanded field, nonetheless remains the privileged referent of revolutionary action. Life-as-labor figures at once the object of capitalist expropriation *and* the common antagonism that motors the insurgency of all political struggle. Accordingly, Virno calls for the “dramatic, autonomous, and affirmative expression” of life to organize and produce for itself rather than for capital (71). Not coincidentally, it is precisely on behalf of this insurrectionary auto-valorization of life that Dienst would ultimately have “us” stop watching TV; refusing to interface with the machine is to take “our” labor,

“our” life, out of circulation at the point of re/production.¹⁴⁹ Life, understood as the absolute capacity of the productive social body, thus re-emerges here as the antagonistic force and the radical agency of history.¹⁵⁰

Crucially, in positing a post-Fordist neoliberal horizon in which labor occupies an ever-expanded field, Dienst and Virno stand in unacknowledged and antipodal relation to another body of thought that highlights the contraction of value-producing labor under neoliberalism, that is, the tendency for “opportunities” to perform (wage) labor to diminish. This deliberate tendency, as we have seen, is part of the plantation project of the long contemporary, “the biggest prison building project in the history of the world” (Gilmore, *Gulag* 3) that falls away through the morphological equivalence between life and labor established by post-operaismo (media) theory. On an empirical register, we can of course note that a preoccupation with the ascendancy of the neoliberal entrepreneurial subject, both inside and out of the “creative industries,” emerges quite literally against the backdrop of a draconian infrastructure of “urban renewal,” the euphemism given to racial/capitalist imperatives of displacement, gentrification, increased police occupation, and capture. But at a much more fundamental level, we are also now prepared to locate the structural theoretical and political lacuna of contemporary marxist media theory that is disclosed by the dispensations of carceral TV: those *non-laboring populations* who are

¹⁴⁹ Dienst ends his book with the following ethical injunction: “But if we insist on the possibility of seeing the future anew, delivered from the constraints of this unbearable present time, our eyes ought to be trained not on television but on the active and critical powers of thought” (169). As Clough also notes, this is indeed an extremely curious way to conclude a book that has thought so actively and critically with and through television.

¹⁵⁰ Tremendous thanks are due to Beth Capper for speaking with me about post-workerist conceptions of life and labor and for helping me realize why a certain increasingly celebrated idiom of the “refusal of work” cannot think but fail to respond to the post-1970 recomposition of racialized disposability, in particular, and the structure of racial slavery, more generally.

subject not primarily to production and consumption but rather circulation, speculation, and disposability. The carceral regime's imperative of incapacitation, which forms the structuring supplement of the neoliberal and which Gilmore exacts as the dominant rationale of contemporary penalty, marks a dissonance both within the political-economic calculus of contemporary mediatic circuits and within the frameworks of those media theorists whose diagnoses of these circuits hinge exclusively on the expropriation of the vital capacities of living labor. The capitalist, Virno tells us, is interested in the *life* and the *capacity* of the worker. But the unthought question remains: of what interest is the prisoner?

Carceral television trades in the inducement and the management of the time of death rather than, as my detour has shown television theory to emphasize, the socialization of lifetime. This necro-work *makes time* for the productive worker and makes possible the life of the civil order; it is exactly this compulsory unproductivity of the prisoner, who Jackson calls the slave, that is disappeared—*rendered surplus*—by current discourses of “free labor” euphorically fixated on the compulsion to production. What Abu-Jamal refers to as slow death hence suggests a dissonance in the logic of post-Fordism insofar as it indicts a chronopolitics concerned not with the social time of production but with the mass accumulation of the idled time of the racially stockpiled. His analytic thus returns to Williams' fact of ubiquitous flow, but this is a flow that neither displays the promise of transcendence nor exhibits the segmentations that organize the disciplinary circuits of civil life. It is in fact more akin to an unreconstructed conception of planned flow, one that aims to arrest the possibility of those interruptions, breaks, and discontinuities that TV critics have faulted Williams for obscuring in his

representation of the broadcast system. While carceral TV shares with its civil counterpart textual segmentations at the level of form and content, these segmentations do not correspond easily to the normative temporal orderings of life, labor, and leisure.

In this section, I have attended to this radical non-correspondence to complicate accounts of television as a Fordist cultural machine, as well as the dominant account of television as a post-Fordist one, by arguing that both confront a structural limit in the form of the prisoner and the procedures of antiblackness that scaffold the mediatic present. I have charged, first, that the prison regime instantiates a shadow economy of incapacitation that upholds the economy of vital capacity and, second, that the televisual's massification and gathering of time is internally differentiated between the socially (re)productive site of the home and the deadening time of the prison house, which stands outside the schedule of civil institutionality and its temporal compass. From this analysis of the black captive's *disappearance* by both a metaphysics of living labor and the transmission of televisual "rays," which, as Lapidó noted, necessarily "only go one way," I now wish to turn to commercial broadcast news coverage of the 1971 rebellion at the Attica Correctional Facility in order to ask about the prison(er)'s *conditions of appearance* on television.

Indeed, so far I have referred to the prisoner as the structuring *supplement* of the neoliberal and its media theory, and I have done so to stress that, rather than proving secondary or a deviation, racial captivity in fact provides the inaugural but unspoken grammar through which the U.S. neoliberal state formation coheres. I have thus primarily deployed the term in consonance with one meaning that Jacques Derrida gives to supplementarity when he states that the supplement is not simply an "exterior addition"

that stands “outside of the positivity” but instead functions as an enabling condition of that positivity, thereby unsettling the apriority of that to which the supplement is typically imagined to be inessential or merely adjunct. However, according to Derrida, the supplement that is put to work on behalf of a system or structure also exceeds and unworks that system or structure insofar as it fundamentally problematizes the structure’s propriety and plentitude; the supplement is the structure’s condition of im-possibility, at once its opening, its disturbance, and its potential undoing. Paradoxically, that is, the supplement that constitutively supports the accretion of a positivity is inseparable from the *threat* or *danger* that the supplement poses to this positivity in its capacity as substitute. What makes the supplement dangerous is precisely that it “supplements. It adds only to replace, the supplement is an adjunct, a subaltern instance which takes-(the)-place” (*Grammatology* 145). As Moten clarifies, the “dangerous supplement” is “the fact out of which everything else emerges” (“Case” 187). At the same time, it is because the supplement stands as the hidden center of everything that the supplement simultaneously de-centers everything; it is the destructive trace and promise—the nothing (in da Silva’s sense)—burrowed in the heart of everything. The supplement is the violently extravagant *surplus* that holds without reserve the promise to unravel, stop, and, perhaps, destroy the very structure of the everything. Translated into the terms of the present argument, the mass surplus of the black captive—expelled as unproductive waste—provides the structurally necessary supplement for the smooth functioning of racial neoliberalism. As (dangerously) supplementary class, however, the surplus(ed) issues not only a limit—as unassimilable remainder—but a veritable challenge—as corrosive force—to the structure of racial neoliberalism’s protracted apocalypse, including its imperative of

productivity and governance of production. To inquire further into this corrosive threat of the surplus(ed), we shall now turn to the televisual production of the Attica uprising as a “live” media event, when, in a reversal of Lapido’s observation, television’s rays spectacularly went both ways. If television foremost gathers and accumulates time, the rebels at Attica “seize[d] th[is] time” (to recall Jackson’s injunction) to make way for *another gathering*: one in which gathering was irreducibly inscribed as dissemination and where this counter-violence of dissemination was nothing other than but a kind of collective gathering.

4.3 STOLEN LIVENESS

But why does governance not work on the prisoner? Or to put it the other way around, why is the prisoner not made directly productive? (And he is not! Prison industries are not productive and prisons no longer resemble other institutions.) Well, to answer these questions [we must] learn something more about the blackness of the prisoner today, and also therefore [we must] learn something more about blackness.

—Stefano Harney, “Abolition and the General Intellect”

“Riot or Rebellion?” This begging question (or, better, false dichotomy) provided the subtitle for *CBS Reports*’ 7 December 1965 eponymous special “Watts,” a retrospective aired six months after the six-day Los Angeles uprising that, the televised documentary emphasized, was the costliest in terms of property damage within recent U.S. history. Throughout its 53-minute run, “Watts: Riot or Rebellion?” interspersed actuarial footage filmed from police helicopters and blurred shots of black crowds, arresting officers, and burning vehicles taken “on the ground” that August with voiceovers from reporter John Stout, as well as one-on-one interviews with, among others, LAPD chief William H. Parker and Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (who drew

on his freshly published *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action* to authorize an etiology of Watts' "lawless hoodlums"). The documentary special harnessed television's technological capacity for live broadcast, in which transmission time and viewing time are simultaneous, to impress upon the viewer the medium's immediacy, spontaneity, and veracity, even though what was being broadcast had in fact been filmed months before. This activation of the live/non-live distinction, as Jane Feuer ("Concept") has argued, functions as television's signature of unmediated presence by collapsing the actuality of "real-time" documentary footage with the presentist appeal to the urgency of the here and now. Thus, narratively, the documentary sutured the spectacle and spontaneity of *this* instance of (counter)violence—the instant that television was uniquely posed to capture—to the argument that this instance gave expression to the truth of "the Negro revolution." The enduring crisis for the U.S. social formation to which Watts pointed hence demanded not only coverage of this particular crisis, but a reckoning with its aftermath—a retrospective assessment by government officials that would result in a *decision* that would adjudicate the program's query. Mobilizing aerial footage that facilitated an identification with the police's point of view in concert with frenzied low-fi tracking shots that established the immediate danger and mayhem of "the street," the program addressed and constructed a political constituency of viewers defined in contradistinction to the Watts community. At stake in the construction of this constituency was the assertion that television, through its centripetal capacities, could protect citizen-viewers by keeping them informed while holding their others prophylactically at bay: allowing audiences to "oversee" Watts from a safe distance, mediated by the high-angle long shots of the helicopter/camera's gaze. In contrast to the

disjunctive offered by the program's subtitle, *CBS Reports* thus highlighted the conjunctive affordances of the medium's spatial technology, its uncanny potential to be both *here and there* at the same time. In so doing, it promised that TV would be on scene so the viewer would not have to be. But while the program emphasized the marked difference between here and there, inside (the home) and outside (on the street), Stout's voiceover and his multiple references to a rhetoric of law and lawlessness simultaneously intimated that the "here" was imminently threatened by the encroachment of the "there." This invocation of spatial-cum-racial miscegenation was hysterically denounced by Stout's verbal rhetoric even as it was phantasmatically actualized through the tele-vision of his medium of dissemination, that is, television's essential capacity to bring an "other" (vision) into the home.¹⁵¹ The urgency of CBS's question and the *force* of response it demanded were, in this regard, buttressed through an unstable oscillation between the pleasure of voyeuristic distance and a paranoid inscription of spectatorial violability.¹⁵²

From the mid-1960s, broadcast news in particular harnessed the specific affordances of television in order to legitimate the consolidation of a "law and order" political bloc that demanded increased policing and criminalization in the name of

¹⁵¹ Samuel Weber has described this uncanny quality of television in term of the medium's activation of the double genitive "a vision of the other"; television disseminates visions of others as it produces for the viewing subject a transposition of vision, an other kind of vision. See *Mass Mediauras* 121.

¹⁵² See Robert Stam's classic "Television News and Its Spectator" on the structure of narcissistic voyeurism produced by TV news. Whereas the sheer magnitude of cinematic projection provokes the awe of total immersion, Stam suggests that because the TV viewer is "[l]arger than the figures on the screen, we quite literally oversee the world from a sheltered position" (26). While I agree with Stam's point about the relation of power established by the viewer's contrast in size with the televisual image/screen, I would underline how in the present example the undifferentiated mass of bodies surveilled from the police helicopter greatly exceeds the shape and magnitude of the individuated viewer's body. In other words, a *diegetic economy of scale* exerts a contradictory pressure that destabilizes the production of the sheltered or empowered spectatorial position offered by the *screen's economy of scale*.

protecting whiteness and/as property. Television consolidated this metonymic slide between the white American home and the U.S. American homeland by making an “elsewhere” present in the domestic setting. The invasion of TV’s vision of “the other” into the site of home and hearth shored up the demand to police the border between the nation-state project of racial domesticity and the “domestic” insurgency of Black Power. This was part of a larger ideological and infrastructural project that drew upon the imagined capacities of teletechnologies to enable a direct and live line of address between the ear of the police power and the voice of white civil society. On the heels of Senator Barry Goldwater’s televised declaration of race war against “the license of the mob and of the jungle” (qtd. in Rodríguez, *Forced Passages* 20), 1967 saw the birth of the National Crime Information Center. This networked crime database promised, as FBI director J. Edgar Hoover wrote in the pages of *Popular Science*, “instant information” for the police and “increased security of his person and property” for “the law-abiding citizen” (“Instant Crime Control” 68, 67). Soon after, in January 1968, AT&T nationally introduced the 911 emergency number.¹⁵³ The widespread development of computer-aided dispatch (CAD) systems, federally funded by the now-defunct Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA), followed in the early 1970s. Bolstered by the twin ideologies of immediacy and interactivity that subtend electr(on)ic communications media, these technologies helped secure a personalized logic of “demand-led” and

¹⁵³ Much of this discussion of the telephone’s carceral itineraries is reproduced, with permission, from Capper and Litwack, “Fighting Bodies, Fighting Apps” 12-3.

“response-to-calls-based policing.”¹⁵⁴ This legitimization of racial state violence and the rapid growth of policing and surveillance infrastructures were secured through appeals to the power of white popular sovereignty, bringing together racial fantasies of white injury with communicative fantasies of teletechnology in addressing what were made to appear as “immediate, simple and clear-cut crime situations” (Hall et. al., *Policing the Crisis* 54).¹⁵⁵

As Christine Acham argues in *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power* (29-33), CBS indeed responded unambiguously in the former to its query “Riot or Rebellion?”: Watts was uncontestably a riot. In making this claim, the *Watts* special marked a decisive turning point that would shape how black struggle and black life would be configured and addressed within post-1965 network news coverage of congruent uprisings such as in Newark and Detroit. This narrative posited a resolute break that counterposed a truncated, and settled, Civil Rights movement against an emergent Black Power in generational (pre- vs. post-Great Society), geographic (southern

¹⁵⁴ On the ideology of demand-led policing, see Manning, *Technology of Policing* 52. Lawyer Lee Loevinger is often credited with the push for the consolidation of a national emergency number after his move from the Justice Department to the Federal Communications Commission. See Zarkin, et. al., *The Federal Communications Commission* 184-5. The broader sociological and communications studies scholarship on media, technology, and practices of policing, which stands at the periphery of this chapter, is a vast. For a useful survey, see Reeves and Packer’s essay “Police Media,” which moves adroitly from the gazette, the automobile, and the two-way radio up to computerized data management and prediction systems in order to argue that the “work done by the modern police apparatus...has from its outset been imagined to be accomplished through media” (359). “Police media” per se, however, are not my subject. By underscoring how teletechnological media were activated to produce racialized constructions of criminality and innocence, as well as fantasies of state address, I am instead emphasizing how such media were mobilized to enlist the national body politic as police.

¹⁵⁵ “Once this point has been grasped, it is difficult to continue to consider the agencies of public signification and control, like the police, the courts and the media, as if they were passive reactors to immediate, simple and clear-cut crime situations. These agencies must be understood as actively and continuously part of the whole process to which, also, they are ‘reacting.’” See Stuart Hall et. al., *Policing the Crisis* 54.

vs. northern and western), national (U.S. state-centered/rights-based vs. internationalist), and philosophical (non-violent vs. militant) terms.¹⁵⁶ This narrative of rupture belied the real continuities (both tactically and in terms of movement participants) between what should more properly be understood as overlapping phases, rather than clean breaks, within a heterogeneous twentieth-century black freedom struggle.¹⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the discursive effect of this spin was such that the sign of black freedom no longer was and no longer could be assimilated to the terms of the U.S. nation-state and its imperialist permutations under the auspices of democratic exceptionalism.

This discursive break proved decisive to broadcast coverage of the Attica uprising, which both thematically and formally cited *Watts* and, in so doing, enunciated an equivalence between “free” and “captive” black communities through the terms of a shared criminality. Where Watts’ “black celebration” or “destruction of the commodity” (to borrow from video artist Tony Cokes) could only appear as senseless to the commercial logics of television, Attica would provoke for reporters and pundits a similar quandary, one summated by superintendent Vincent Mancusi’s televised plea upon the rebellion’s commencement: “Why are they destroying their home?” Indeed, as Walter Cronkite announced on 9 September 1971 from the headquarters of *CBS Evening News*, four cell blocks in the upstate New York compound were now controlled by “800 rebellious prisoners,” less than one month after the murder of George Jackson. From the

¹⁵⁶ On the media industry’s “framing” of Black Power in opposition to a southern-based Civil Rights movement, see Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers* 52-3.

¹⁵⁷ On continuities in movement leaders, veterans, and practitioners, see, for example, Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers* 59. On the continuities in a “long civil rights movement” and attendant problems in the historiographic premise of periodization, see Singh, *Black is a Country* 6 and Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement.”

station in New York City, the program then cut to an establishing shot taken from a news helicopter that featured five flaming buildings and an indecipherable sea of bodies. Here, Wharton Dean “report[ed] on the riot that racked Attica today” (as Cronkite put it) and offered the terse lead-in, “The place is blowing up.” This footage, which was recycled in CBS’s coverage throughout the next two days, fixated on the spectacle of the destruction of the state’s property (its buildings) by the state’s property (its prisoners). This footage was marked by a visualizing practice that refused the close-up and its pathos that would, in contrast, provide the signifying pivot and moral authority in subsequent interviews with prison officials (prominently, Chief Commissioner Russell Oswald) and, on the fourth day at the rebellion’s apparent “conclusion,” with the white wives of prison guards.

While *CBS Evening News*’ Attica segments shared more than a family resemblance with the dominant ideological content deployed in the network’s *Watts* documentary, its narrative intelligibility drew upon the visual citation *and* the reversal of formal conventions already established by TV news coverage of much earlier civil rights struggles. In her treatment of TV and print photojournalism surrounding the 1956 trial of the men who lynched Emmett Till, Jacqueline Goldsby argues that liberal media outlets stylized a moral grammar that often converged with the interests of certain black civil rights campaigns. Of telejournalistic images circulated during the trial of murderers Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam, she writes, “Sweeping birds-eye views and elevated camera angles of the jury and gallery spectators showed a courtroom packed full of white-shirted white men, where there looked to be no room for difference or space for dissent.” In Sumner, Mississippi, the birds-eye view that captured a homogeneous mob of whiteness

carried with it a premonition that would later be confirmed upon Bryant and Milam's acquittal: there had been no possibility for justice in this court. Against the authority of the verdict, Goldsby contends that these images established the distance—physical and moral— between the objects of televisual representation and the media apparatus (as well as its implied spectator), between the southern court and U.S. liberal democracy, by “shifting the scene of judgment... to the court of national public opinion” (“Meaning of Lynching” 259). In an age of accelerated media publicity, the anonymity of the white crowd indexed an unregulated and “lawless” violence that refused to show its face, that classically humanist figuration of interiority and personhood. By contrast, Mamie Till-Mobley virtuosically appropriated national discourses of sentimental motherhood, allowing her grieving face to be photographed and televised by the press while also choosing to put on display her son's brutalized and dismembered body as an icon of what Ida B. Wells-Barnett called lynch law's horrors.

Goldsby's astute assessment of the stylistic strategies through which antiblack violence was conveyed and moralized is echoed in Sasha Torres's contention that, during the period between 1955 and 1965 (the “short” civil rights era), “television asked its viewers, black and white, to identify *with* nonviolent black protest and *against* the violent representatives of the southern state” (*In Color* 11, *emphases hers*). According to Torres, protests such as those at Little Rock, Selma, and Montgomery helped legitimize the emergent medium by offering proof of television's cultural prestige and its up-to-the-minute veracity, while leaders in the SCLC and SNCC simultaneously and strategically leveraged televisual publicity to consolidate national claims against the immorality of white supremacy. This interest-convergence between informational programming and

civil rights “often looked to the storytelling conventions of Hollywood,” as well as to the no less media-driven conventions of Cold War closed-world discourse, in which “the distinctions between good and evil were sharply drawn” (17). At Attica, I am arguing, this Manichean iconography of the antidemocratic mob versus the human face that cemented before 1965 remained critical to television’s moral grammar of life, liveness, and death, but was harnessed to vastly differential ends.

Across the televisual coverage of the four-day Attica uprising, the crucible of narrative concern was, unsurprisingly, the 42 officers and civilians held hostage by the rebels rather than the thousands of hostages who had already been held captive at Attica, many for decades. “The inmates have a list of grievances but the warden says he won’t listen to any of them until the hostages are released,” Wharton’s voiceover explained as frenzied shots of prisoners with visibly raised fists engulfed the frame. In a very basic sense, Attica, whose organizing vocation remains death-dealing, could only come alive to the national imagination and its media infrastructure here at the moment of white vulnerability and the production of a white death that was, to invoke Wilderson’s terms, contingent rather than structural in its form. This should not be surprising given that absolute contingency, of course, is the undergirding lure of television’s ideology of liveness—its reminder that something new is unfolding, that what will happen next is radically underdetermined, and that TV will be there when it happens. In her celebrated essay, “Information, Crisis, Catastrophe,” Mary Ann Doane makes the key point that “[f]or all its ideology of ‘liveness,’ it may be death that forms the point of televisual intrigue.” According to Doane, while televisual flow mimes and constitutes the rhythms of everyday life, “[t]hat which, above all, cannot be contained within the daily social

rhythms of everyday life is death” (258). Death’s promise of referentiality, the unmediated touch of the real, introduces the shock of “pure discontinuity, disruption... pure chance or accident” (259) into an otherwise continuous stream of information. Doane’s precise rendering of the temporality and epistemology of death as unanticipated and uncontrollable *instant* discloses, by way of occlusion, that which is structurally dissimulated by TV’s thanatological drive: the state-engineered assimilation of (slow) death to the rhythms of everyday life that neither Doane nor the medium can represent. The everydayness of terror and the extensivity of death that is illegible to television’s temporalizing impulse can only appear through subjection to a conversion process in which death becomes visible as spectacle, as a rupture that simultaneously disturbs the flow of (civil) life *and* maintains the organization of the life/death distinction.¹⁵⁸ It is hence the contingency of death, (counter)violence, and the derangement of the ordinary that grounds the appeal and the epistemology of the televisual event; the ongoing catastrophe of slow death only transmutates into a legitimate crisis when the ruling order of life/death is punctured.

At Attica, it is this organized resistance to a structuring racial economy of life and death that centrally compelled the prisoners’ appearance “live” on television. Torres has referred to this generic strategy of network news as a procedure of racist, and specifically

¹⁵⁸ In their discussion of the signifying power of “police brutality” within the context of the quotidian brutalization that forms the objective mission of policing as an institution, Jared Sexton and Steve Martinot observe that the spectacle of violence traffics in the lie of extraordinary and deviation. “Spectacle [of police violence or police brutality] is a form of camouflage,” they write. “It does not conceal anything; it simply renders it unrecognizable.” They go on to make the very insightful point that it is the banal, rather than the spectacular, which inhabits the terrain of excess in a society organized around the legitimacy of antiblackness and white supremacy: “The fundamental excess of the paradigm of policing which infuses this culture is wholly banal.” See “The Avant-Garde of White Supremacy” 174. On the “terrible spectacle’s” power to dissimulate “the terror of the mundane and quotidian,” see also, of course, Hartman, *Scenes*, esp. 3-4.

antiblack, *stockpiling*: “it’s not enough for television to be live: the medium needs to represent ‘authentic’ persons of color, stockpiling their liveness to be borrowed back in times of political or representational crisis” (14). With a seeming nod to Heidegger, for whom *the stockpile* incarnates the telos of modern technology’s mode of enframing the world— its injunction “to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering” (*Question 17*)— Torres helps us understand how the stolen life of the stockpiled— the relative surplus population or *standing reserve* army of labor that refused its command to *wait*— was called on as a *productive resource* for television’s industrial and discursive machinery. But while during the duration of the crisis this surplused population was summoned to live and to labor on and for television, the point of narrative intrigue remained the uncertain fate of white correctional officers and the emotional plight of their families. Particularly on the September 13th broadcast, for example, after 29 inmates had been slaughtered on the command of New York governor Nelson Rockefeller and the state had regained control of Attica, close-ups of white women screaming and running to ambulances undergird the pathos and the liveness of this footage. “There was no time to wait,” CBS reporter Robert Shackney confirmed, when a white woman is shown speeding toward her vehicle and presumably toward the hospital, pushing away a cameraman in the process.

That “there was no time to wait” was in fact the recurring and legitimizing thematic throughout CBS’s September 13th coverage. Shackney began that evening’s opening segment with a pointed declarative: “By early morning, it was clear that one way or another this would end when efforts to end this uprising peacefully had failed.” It is not at all clear what a “peaceful ending” would mean in this context, though meeting the

rebels' call for the "speedy and safe transportation out of confinement to a non-imperialist country" would certainly have been one concrete response toward the call of peace. More striking than Shackney's interdiction of this call, however, is his statement on the imperative and foreseen certainty of closure ("it was clear...this would end"), which, in one regard, interdicts the life of the media event in its present unfolding. On the register of televisual narrative, this *ex post facto* statement of resolution's *certainty* exerts a contradictory pressure on the *contingency* of liveness, one that retroactively confirms the authority of the medium, its "control" of the story (all along). This assertion of the inevitability of closure, moreover, at once insists upon the finitude of this crisis (it will end because it must) and invokes the necessity of an unequivocal decision (it must be ended) in its wake. This is unsurprising, for, as Doane reminds us, *crisis* traces etymologically to the Greek κρίσις (*krisis*), meaning decision (252), the privileged action that condenses an entire political history and political theology of the western sovereign form. While during his report Shackney did note that "friends of the rebel inmates called it murder"—perhaps as an "objective" gesture toward other possible decisions—this ethical indictment was undercut by the fact his voiceover was synced with a visual cut to a press conference featuring Commissioner Oswald, confirming the ineluctable rapport between the decision and the sovereign power *to kill the crisis*: "It became clear to me [Oswald] that many here carrying out long sentences were not going to participate in reasonable negotiations." Although, as we shall soon see, TV could place the rebels "live" on air to labor for the life and the liveness of the medium, this surplus liveness that television needed brought with it a disfigurement to the world's meaning of life that was the thought that television could not bear. Because "there was no time to wait," Shackney

reasoned, in the name of narrative and national closure, the only decision was for the prisoners to wait interminably, or to die.

Closure animates this portrait of crisis in multiple ways. The duration of crisis is terminated by the authority of the sovereign decision, which returns the world to the vitality of equilibrium. Its finitude, moreover, is achieved through the orchestration of sovereign slaughter, the finality of death. Finally, television's self-authorizing structure of address and response frames the closure of the crisis in terms of the successful conveyance of information about the crisis's resolution— a privileging of the primacy and possibility of transmission, which culminates at the point of reception qua the delivery of a message. For television, black captivity is again rendered valuable, ultimately, through the production and extraction of death. Yet this portrait that renders death the final *message* of the medium unthinks another political and ethical practice of medium that extends beyond any such a chronology of life-death and sender-receiver. Against the imperative to make death mean and recirculate it— whether for the televisual expropriation of value or as martyred icon for the generation of instrumental political or, here, academic value¹⁵⁹— we will conclude, in a certain resistance to conclusion, by asking how the fugitives lived and lingered on television, in the middle, in ways that provoked for TV, for racial democracy, for governance, the true meaning of crisis.

On the second day of the revolt the prisoners entered the diegetic frame most explicitly and dramatically, when, as one of their conditions of negotiation, Attica's gates were opened to a small group of television cameramen and reporters. In the scene's

¹⁵⁹ As Kara Keeling writes of the representation of death in the context of both popular and revolutionary ideologies, "death itself is the vehicle whereby...existence is valorized" (*Witch's* 129; see also 138).

establishing shot, the camera follows behind a group of reporters with mobile studio lights and microphones through a dark hallway, making the presence of the televisual apparatus fully visible to the viewer. A superimposed intertitle reads “INSIDE ATTICA,” in the off-chance that the audience might somehow that forget CBS was there, live on the scene. As the reporters and crew descend upon the prison, harsh backlighting progressively illumines the hallway, allegorizing on a scopic register TV’s capacity to bring everything *to light*. In the terms of Shackney’s investigation, however, TV ascends from the condition of the uprising’s visibility to the very condition of the uprising *as such*. He elaborates:

A simple fact of this rebellion: it was led by black prisoners making a very visible Black Power protest. But as much as anything else, it seemed a protest designed for maximum public attention: the television cameras, more than a negotiation for settlement. Among today’s demands: complete pardon, freedom from prison for the rebels.

Shackney’s narration curiously both diminishes and inflates the gravitas of his mode of broadcast. On the one hand, in policing of the parameters of the possible, he foreshadows Oswald’s declaration that the rebel prisoners’ “unreasonable” demands signaled a refusal to cooperate in earnest. The hostile announcement of the impossible possibility of the black captives’ freedom propels the conclusion that, far from a desire for civil discourse and redress, the prisoners had in fact redeployed the logic of the televisual spectacle for their own ends. The uprising was “merely” a media event, a bid for airtime that undercut the rationalist axioms of democratic communication and civic dialogue. On the other hand, even as Shackney invokes the difference between *realpolitik* and a mass-mediated politics of the image in order to intercept the prisoners’ dissemination of *the impossible demand*, he simultaneously reprises the power of television through his reference to the

prisoners' unstated desire for maximum media publicity: the prisoners' self-reflexive production of the uprising as a "live" televisual event performed for the camera. Indeed, what is perhaps most significant and most surprising about the September 10th segment is how it strains to articulate the rebels as citizens making a claim, in the language of the governed, on the ears and eyes of the national public, and thereby reminding the viewer that television functions to amplify the many voices of the demos (even those of the previously voiceless).

By asserting televisual transparency as the solution to the problem of carceral state-sanctioned opacity, Shackney imbues the rebels with a fairly standard agenda regarding the capacity of publicity to provoke empathic or mimetic response. This is a formulation that conflates image and message, message and action, expounding the belief that through the light of the television screen a definitive address would be illuminated and then, finally, arrive at its presumed destination— a sympathetic national public sphere.¹⁶⁰ More fundamentally, the imposition of this discursive frame presumes the rebels were engaged quite literally in a *struggle to death for recognition from the Other*, a remediation of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic that, we saw in Chapter 3, Fanon argues provides no relief for the black. But importantly, I contend, the footage does not comply with Shackney's soundtrack, exerting instead an antagonistic pressure on his privileged trope of the public sphere. In the interval before Attica was recaptured, the prisoners gathered and instituted a break in the procedures of televisual transmission; the

¹⁶⁰ For a consideration of televisual humanitarianism in the context of the Enlightenment rationalist ideal of visual knowledge that assumes publicity will beget illumination, illumination will beget knowledge, and knowledge will beget ethical action, see Keenan, "Publicity and Indifference." On the normative figurations of humanity that underpin Enlightenment ideals of publicity more generally, see Cheah, "Violent Light."

protocols of media publicity and media eventness, that is, were short-circuited and re-circuited by the prisoners through both the content of their assertions and the mode of their visual address.

The effort to *make sense* of the revolt by putting the prisoners to work for television and for democracy— understood as a metamedium for the representation of the peoples’ interests and their direct, noise-free transmission uniquely facilitated by the representational capacities of the telecommunicative apparatus— becomes most apparent during a segment that showcases the negotiation between the rebels and Oswald. Through Shackney’s voiceover, the negotiation commences as a microcosmic staging of what media historian Fred Turner has called the American ideal of “the democratic surround,” where media secure a participatory environment that epitomizes and amplifies the democratic process. It soon becomes clear, however, that it is Oswald himself and the gathering of (liberal) democracy through the strategy of negotiation that are foremost surrounded by another gathering, one that enunciates a different and unrepresentable demand. A procession of close-ups follows, each featuring the voices of the men who surround Oswald and the would-be negotiating table on all sides. Bridging singularity with collectivity through the repetition of direct address, each shot is overwhelmed by the gathering of many men who inhabit the *mise-en-scène*:

You ship troops to Vietnam, to Saint-Domingue, to all these foreign countries to oppress the [mumbles], you can bring one of these helicopters here and ship us all out of this country.

I’m gonna tell you Mr. Oswald, before you leave, if you leave: There ain’t gonna be no more games. Now this might be a negotiation, but this is a demand.

We've been lenient with you, we've been talking. We shouldn't be. We should be demanding. Why? Because we have 35 lives. Not hostages. Lives. And I repeat, a moment's hesitation will cause you their lives. Don't play with us.

Each of these statements is targeted as an address to Oswald but all significantly shift the terms and the terrain of response. Unintelligible within the political conventions of aestheticized suffering established by network television civil rights coverage, the men demand that which is impossible according to the grammar of these conventions. The impossible demand speaks not as the invitation to response but as the condition that brings to perpetual crisis the fact that *there will have been no response* in a present and foundationally ir-response-able circuit of arrival. As Shackney punctuates the segment with a closing remark, "It was consistently noisy."

It is significant to underscore, then, the collective knowledge on the part of the Attica rebels that mainstream television would not and could not adequately articulate their demands. One man recounts in the documentary *Attica* (dir. Cindy Firestone, 1974), "He [Oswald] wasn't aware of the fact that we had television sets and radios and we were watching what was going on outside these gates." Here, television and radio are shown to have been tactically repurposed for organizing and planning the rebellion—as conduits of knowledge—even as they are named as the defining limits of knowledge and understanding. During the "negotiation" Oswald is heard breaking up the commotion by shouting that the rebels "want the world," a point he repeated during a press conference the following day and that was televised on the September 11th evening news. Franky "Big Black" Smith recalls: "He [Oswald] forgot that we on the national TV and we got a TV set up, and he go, 'Oh, in there, they want everything, they want the whole world.' He changes right up" ("Interview" 500). As Smith makes clear, Oswald's assertion of the

desire *for* the world marked a tactical effort to “spin” the story in this moment of national crisis and national address. But, more than this, these signals sign the impossibility of transmitting the captive’s message to the ear of the racial state and civil society. The message indeed lays elsewhere. For what Smith and his cohort demanded was not the possession of this world but its abolition, an exit from this world and the enactment of another— an end to the world as we know it.

Sent and rerouted, outside in and inside out, between these fugitive signals, another gathering.

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