

**To Name Another Life, Already Lived: Blackness and Queerness in Love and  
Study**

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**abstract.**

In this thesis, I study Blackness and Queerness as objects of desire rather than of knowledge, and seek to demonstrate that objects of knowledge are, at the moment of their conceptualisation, always-already shaped by the desires and investments of their theoreticians. I discuss recent critical valences of Black and Queer studies (Afro-Pessimism, Black optimism, Queer negativity and Queer utopianism) in terms of the divergent desires and investments with which each of these fields imbue their object. Observing the moments in which Queer and Black studies lapse into an over-investment in the promises of their objects, and thus appear to be melding their objects according to their desire, I posit that rather than theoretical failures, these moments are indicative of the actual relation which moves the theoretician to her object. Study may thus be rethought as primarily invested and turned towards a subjective creation of the world in which we live or would want to live, rather than the objective discovery of the world that is. Finally, I turn towards an engagement with the question of the purpose and doing of study, both in its present iteration and in its future potentiality. What might it mean to think of study as, primarily and irreducibly, a modality and doing of desire, nourishment, and living? What modes of valuation, socialities, and practices might derive from such an infinitesimal shift: the unashamed avowal of the centrality of our desires and investments, both personal and political, in all of our intellectual engagements?

### **résumé.**

Ce mémoire trace l'être-Noir et l'être-Queer en tant qu'objets de désir, plutôt qu'objets de connaissance. Ce faisant, il cherche à démontrer que tout objet de savoir est, au moment même de sa conceptualisation, toujours-déjà défini par les désirs et investissements de ses théoriciens. Dans son contenu, ce mémoire se tourne vers certaines tendances critiques récentes dans la théorie Noire et théorie Queer (l'Afro-Pessimisme, l'optimisme Noir, la négativité Queer et l'utopisme Queer) à travers les désirs et investissements divers selon lesquels chacune de ces tendances forment leur objet d'étude. En observant certains moments de lapsus, où se révèle dans ces théories un sur-investissement dans la promesse putative de leur objets, et où ces théories paraissent donc modeller leur objets selon leurs désirs, je propose de lire ces moments non comme une erreur théorique et méthodologique, mais comme révélateurs de la véritable relation que nous entretenons, en tant qu'étudiants et théoriciens, avec nos objets. De cette façon, nous pourrions redéfinir l'activité d'étude comme une création subjective du monde dans lequel nous vivons et dans lequel nous voulons vivre, plutôt qu'en tant que découverte objective d'un monde qui est. Pour conclure, ce mémoire engage le sens et le but de l'étude, autant dans son état présent que dans ses possibilités futures. Que serait-ce de définir l'étude, en premier lieu et irréductiblement, comme une forme de désir, d'alimentation, et de vie? Quelles seraient les modalités de valuation, les genres de socialités, et les pratiques qui pourraient dériver d'un glissement aussi infinitésimal dans notre perception que celui-ci: tout simplement l'aveux du primat de nos désirs et investissements, autant personnels que politiques, dans nos engagements intellectuels?

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There may be more occasions to thank those three who will always appear on this page, but should this be the first and last time, I give everything I am to Victoria Flavian, Pierre Flavian and Anoush Kevorkian. What could I ever say? But this: I love you all, to the moon and back.

*The first task for criticism is coming up with names for things,  
and not assuming that we are even close to being done  
just with the process of nominating things.*

*At the same time, a name, or at least a concept  
—insofar as those names are concepts—  
those are always fantasies too.*

*Every concept is a fantasy,  
premised like every other fantasy,  
on the reduction of life's noise into something you can hum.*

Andrea Long Chu.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Andrea Long Chu, "'You Can't Eat Straight Spice!': Good Lies, Bad Concepts, and Desire: an Interview With Andrea Long Chu," *Columbia Journal of Literary Criticism* 16 (2018): 25-26.

### intro.

What will have come first: the norm or the abnormality? The enclosure or the spread? Freedom or constraint? Blackness or anti-Blackness? Queerness or anti-Queerness? Put together, these interrogations map the inquiries framing contemporary texts on Blackness or Queerness, whether or not they are overtly posed as the defining question. In cases where the question of origins and its frame remain implicit within the text, a *conception* of its answer still underpins it, in the necessity of this fundamental choice of orientation for the asking of further, more pointed inquiries. Its consequences are then essentially everywhere in the argumentation. This is to say that the politics of Black and Queer texts can be traced back to the way in which the question of origins *has already been answered* (perhaps only privately, perhaps even pre-consciously) by their theorists. Everything else unspools from this anticipatory choice of framework.

It is, for instance, the choice which separates Calvin Warren's *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* from Fred Moten's *consent not to be a single being* trilogy, which thematically gathers his essays on Black life and being. Both titles represent what, for their author, might well be the second name of Blackness: that is, their respective answer to the question of being.<sup>2</sup> For Warren, behind the question of Black being hides the horror of an endless, incomprehensible darkness; the lack of marked origins in the constant transmutation of Blackness into anti-Blackness, the inseparability of what is and what is not, what escapes and what is locked away always-already-again; what must come into language and representation in order to index what surpasses comprehension, and lies beyond the limit; and so, what, for the State and the sake of order, must be killed. For Moten, the question of Black being is the manifestation of the freedom which

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<sup>2</sup> See Fred Moten, *Black and Blur* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); Fred Moten, *Stolen Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); and Fred Moten, *The Universal Machine* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).



has always existed in constraint—always slightly prior, if infinitesimally so, in the edge of the just enough—the wild which prompts the desire for order. Like for Warren, Blackness is the nonsense which lies beyond the limit, but a nonsense here imbued with the value of Life, rather than Death, with order coming in as the deadening agent of the State. Emphatically, Blackness is life itself, life's unruliness and its excess, as it always escapes the various modes modernity has found to limit its unpredictable impact on us.

The same paradigmatic question applies to texts on Queerness, as well: what came first, Queerness as an instinct for disruption—or, in Lee Edelman's vein, as what cannot appear within the Symbolic—or the Queer person, whose actions and modes of desiring permit the thought of Queerness to appear to us? Further, is that Queer person transported by an instinct of, to, Queerness—and if so, what really is Queer, that instinct or its receptacle (the body in motion, the body activated by intention), without which Queerness would be aimless, chaotic nothingness amid so much chaotic nothingness? To an extent, these questions are occluded, in Black texts, by the epidermal problem—the matter of Black skin—so that, on a *prima-facie* level, the origin of Blackness seems to be *within itself*, forgoing the need for questions of origin, that question of the chicken or the egg.<sup>3</sup> Yet the movement of Black texts athwart from the epidermal—as there lies, as well, racist science—has brought Black studies close to these Queer questions: if we don't want to let Blackness be defined by those who read corruption off dark skin, if Blackness will have to be located elsewhere in order to possibly be thought without violence, where would it be? Would it emanate from Black people—not off their skin, but something else, somehow else, as a relation to history, a relation to life, an energy, an aura, a voice, a sound, something else again? Could it be reproduced *minus* the epidermic specificity?

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<sup>3</sup> Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Towards a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 3.

Would it still be Blackness then? Or could it only ever be this *plus* skin, for the sake of and with respect to history? If, as Laura Harris wants to demonstrate, Blackness as "irreducible difference" may be produced through nominally White bodies, or as Fred Moten argues, Black music can be played by a White person—in that case, then, what Queer thing would such Blackness designate?<sup>4</sup>

This thesis will not attempt to provide definitive answers to these questions—obviously, they cannot not be found, and perhaps even more obviously, such answers may not be desirable. Rather, what I would like to do is to follow the desiring search for origins as others have grappled with it. I am happy and energised to provide such a mapping. If I am careful, and kind in my associations, enough should come out of it to keep my readers entertained, and content to stay in the questioning space. I have more to share than to say.

What I will trace is essentially a framing problem. Not a problem to be solved, necessarily, but a problem to point to, to place attention to. Like much of the intellectuals whose thinking I have and will here follow, I am consumed by frames. The question of which framework to use in this thesis, for example, has been a harrowing, limiting thing (in the sense that it put a neat stoppage to my productivity). The possibilities of how to look at something are endless, and daunting even within the fairly limited number of frames I have engaged with in my studies. It has been only by relinquishing that mode of questioning, which interrupts production indefinitely (to briefly characterise the workings of paranoia, anxiety, and perfectionism), that I have managed to start writing. This, true, is yet another framework—the maxim that the

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<sup>4</sup> As Laura Harris writes: "By blackness, I do not mean to indicate, or to only indicate, African descent. My understanding of blackness here is(...) as that which designates irreducible difference." Laura Harris, *Experiments in Exile: C. L. R. James, Hélio Oiticica, and the Aesthetic Sociality of Blackness* (New York City: Fordham University Press, 2018), 2-3.

possibilising of production is the most important and decisive end—though I would argue that to apply this framework under the productive necessities of a Master's Thesis-Degree and to make it a universal maxim are not quite the same thing. Still, it was a vivid example of a fundamental precept of Philosophical inquiry, and arguably of the lived experience itself: that how one chooses to frame the problem is perhaps ninety-nine percent of the answer—perhaps, then, already an answer in itself. A correlate I hope will come true: the last percent is mainly undertaken for the pleasure of production itself.

Am I saying that Black and Queer studies are best understood as fields fielding, in their respectively minoritarian ways, through these universal philosophical questions into the form of thought and the formulation of what exists and how it is available for thinking—or, am I positing that these questions find their best answer in their iteration within Black and Queer thinking? Perhaps by taking away the word best and replacing it by something more modest, like "interesting," I could submit to both proposition equally. I would also submit that "interesting" may be the very most of what we can ever hope for with these kinds of questions, and with the sort of academic endeavours along which this Master's Thesis aligns itself.

This thesis think Blackness and Queerness coterminously. I do not think, or wish to imply, that one is incomplete without the other. I think their meaning, and so their content, is too fluid, too uncertain, for any determination of their constitution or plenitude. I think, as several scholars have pointed out, and as it is now customary to say, that Blackness is essentially Queer, that its meaning has been too determined as an outsidership, an excess, a problem, at the level of gender, at the level of sexuality, at the

level of sociality, for it to not have Queerness inside of it.<sup>5</sup> It is conversely argued within Black Queer theory that Queerness, if it is to be thought as a disruptor of what seems to be orderly, cannot properly be imagined if it is imagined as distinct from the question of Blackness, the mess it covers, the mess it represents.<sup>6</sup> Order is fundamental to Queerness, even as its antagonist, and Blackness, as it has permitted the myth of the epidermis (which is the myth of causality as an obvious link between form and content, the myth which has permitted scientific philosophy to construct itself), is fundamental to order.<sup>7</sup> All of this is wrapped up, coterminous, friendly. Still, if Blackness contains Queerness and vice versa, I could have easily focused on one or the other; that which is put to silence, which would have gone unnamed, would have still been available to me within the other. In this framework, Blackness and Queerness are the names we have found for all that escapes the one, and are interchangeable in their end. Their evocation confronts us to our desire to place a name and a category even on that which we would want to believe surpasses both of these. Blackness and Queerness are those categories of being and object of thought which we use to wish for the existence of limitlessness in the Real: a Real which can only be defined through and by limits.<sup>8</sup> Whether we think of this desire to have the limitless available for thought as an *Ontological Terror* or as a *consent not to be a single being*—whether we are horrified or awed by what surpasses us so completely

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<sup>5</sup> Such an assertion has been made, or gestured towards, by Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14, nos. 2-3 (2008): 191-215; Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64-81; and Christina Sharpe, *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), for instance.

<sup>6</sup> "Black being incarnates metaphysical nothing, the terror of metaphysics, in an antiblack world. Blacks, then, have function but not Being — the function of black(ness) is to give form to a terrifying formlessness (nothing)." Calvin Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, Emancipation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 5.

<sup>7</sup> da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 5.

—is secondary. What seems more important is that *we want things from Blackness and Queerness* which goes beyond the mere question of what is true or false about them. What I have come to believe is that we (a "we" that englobes those of us who think about Blackness or Queerness and find sustenance in these thoughts) desire the same thing, or the same kind of thing, perhaps in differing variations, from one and the other, that this is what can explain the similarities of theorisations which links Black thought and Queer thought as I have found them, the bridge which enables me to write these words now.

It should be noted that when I wrote above that "Blackness is already Queer," "Queer" had there already been assigned the abstracting signification of an essential and non-specified disorderly agent, or of anti-normativity itself, rather than to concretely referring to something specific within Queer theory and its discipline itself. To say that "Blackness is Queer" is not necessarily to establish the presence of a conversation between the field of Black study and the field of Queer theory, but rather implies that "Queer," as a concept, already functions and holds purchase within the discursive economy in which Black theory evolves and thinks itself, *without it being necessary for Queer theory as a discipline to be invoked or involved*. The concept of "Queer" informs Black theory's idea of itself, in a way that is not quite reciprocal, and this for reasons that have nothing to do with the ontological properties of either "Queer" or "Black"—has nothing to do, for instance, with statements like "all Blackness is Queer but all Queerness isn't Black" holding some sort of metaphysical purchase—but rather everything to do with the economies of writing and thinking which regiments Black thinking and writing, which is to say thinking and writing more broadly in the academic Humanities. In this economy, "Queer" holds a particular purchase and value, which "Black," I predict, is slowly accruing—but has not solidified or made hegemonic yet. Time—not much of it, I predict, considering the rate of trends' coming and goings within the Humanities and its

discursive economy currently—will tell whether "Black" will replace "Queer" as the signifier of this particular value, as "trans" has already been caught doing.<sup>9</sup> Should this transvaluation happen, it will, I think, teach us much of what "Queerness" and "Blackness" actually *are* within our words, thoughts, and texts—the exact scope of it.

The hypothesis I follow throughout this thesis is this: Queer and Black scholarship is performative. A corollary: that we can observe one strain of Queer and Black scholarship whose performative aim and effect is "wonder," and one whose performative aim and effect is "disillusion." Neither one of these affects is better, nor can it be classified as more politically useful, than the other. The spectrum of political engagement could, indeed, be formulated as constituted and swinging between these two ends: they are thus both essential. However, a further corollary we will mention and describe is that, following their stated aim and end, each of these strains moves according to particular and respective methodologies, which is to say to particular and respective relations to their own sense of what study ought to accomplish. A third corollary, to bring us not closer but further away, as a frame of analysis: the divisions that appear in Black and Queer studies between two distinct aims, effects, and methodologies and internal ethos, are not specific to these fields, but are representative of a much longer and broader dissensus within the enterprise of knowledge-seeking itself, and are

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<sup>9</sup> So argues Andrea Long Chu, writing on the state of Trans studies as a field of inquiry and the very meaning of "Trans" within it: "As *queer*, as an analytic, has reached a point of analytic exhaustion, queer-studies scholars have had to entertain other vehicles for the romantic fantasy of criticism as a radical political act, which *queer* has sheltered for the past twenty years. The big secret about trans studies is that its working definition of *trans* is just "queer, again." So this is what trans studies *could* offer: a safehouse for queer studies' endangered "political optimism," as Robyn Wiegman (2012) puts it. This is why most trans-studies scholars are, in fact, just queer-studies scholars especially susceptible to fads." As I will argue, this logic, of accumulation and enfolding, and of scholastic affiliations motivated by a desire for "the political" broadly felt, expands to Black studies—indeed, has no reason to stop at "Trans," since, as Chu persuasively argues, these names ("Trans," "Queer," "Black") may just be transient placeholders, validated in their use and our investment for them only through their tenuous purchase on academia's register of political meaningfulness. Andrea Long Chu and Emmett Harsin Drager, "After Trans Studies," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (2019): 105.

representative of the foundational debates and anxieties which have plagued the practice of "the intellectual" since the first philosophers. As such, this study will not tell us anything new, neither in its content nor in its framing and methodology. Simply, it is an analysis of planes of immanence that hopes to permit a better knowledge of the waters into which we're threading—we who study Queerness and Blackness, we who have an interest in or are affectively bound to either, or both, and we who would be undertaking the project of their disciplinary binding and of their conjoined theorizing.

What I attempt to do is define the conceptual plane of immanence that animates Black and Queer thought, under the predicate that we may be looking, in the end, not at two distinct planes, but at one with (at least, or at least here examined) two different declinations. This is an idea in progress. As such, I do not attempt to move outside of these fields; what I am trying to do, if anything, is to accede to and better understand the multiplicities or assemblages which form them and which they form. Since we are undertaking this analysis under the predicate that these fields can be divided into two performances of affects with their congruent and respective methodologies and corollary ethos, our assessment and discussion of these fields will attempt to stay away from questions of "truth," "rationality," and "sense," and will devote itself to examining these fields as affective things, desiring-machines that feed certain affects and produce others, or more of the same. I study Blackness and Queerness here only as they appear to us as productive and desire-laden objects within study, theory, and critique, which is to say primarily in the relations we build with them through the prism of the University and academia in its expansive sense. Queerness and Blackness *can* be taken up as total and global concepts, and must be known to travel outside of the academic discourses which seek to pin them down conceptually, but to pin Blackness and Queerness down in their totality is much too big a project for my own means and abilities, and perhaps even for

anyone's, and may not even be a desirable inquiry to probe. I prefer then to dig into the granular, particular, material specificity of Queerness and Blackness as they live and exist with and for us, here, now—and, vice versa, us with them. I think Queerness and Blackness as things in that they can only be apprehended when we place them within a particular context of relations, socialities, and desires. Contextualized this way, we can access modes of relation to these objects that we might not be able to conceptualise should we keep imagining them as global or universal ideas. Here, it is only a matter of observing relations, in that our relation to Blackness and Queerness is integral to their materiality as objects, and is already there, in our grasp. This prevents us from needing to and falling into the trap of adjudicating what Blackness or Queerness *are* and turns us towards an experiential definition of Blackness and Queerness which presupposes their existence as concrete forms to which we relate. Here Blackness and Queerness are formations to which we relate in a desiring way, and which we have modelled through, by, and according to our desires.

To these aims, I will move through three aspects of Queer and Black inquiry through which I have been able to mine particular insights into the relation which scholars of Blackness and Queerness have formed towards their objects, and how these relations themselves *are*, and become, the form and substance given to these objects. In the first chapter, I probe history and historicity as they have been used to determine the existence and being of Queerness and Blackness by their scholars. In the second chapter, I discuss two valences of Black and Queer studies, Queer negativity and Afro-Pessimism, in an attempt to determine what drives the belief and preferential stance towards hopelessness as characterising study in its ideal form. In the third chapter, I probe more deeply the preconceptions regarding the aim of study which undergirds these movements, and conclude with a call towards a mode of study which would, joyfully,



abandon itself to the unashamed truth of its desires and investments and which would move towards a potentialising of study itself as a practice of living-with, together.

### **i. the promise of history.**

My attention to the subject of history in this chapter is not exactly an attention to historical facts, the historical "factuality" of either Queerness or Blackness, the place of "their" history (whether an agreed upon version, or the contentions therein) in their internal development as fields of study and the research proper to these fields into the ontology of their object of study. I use the question of the historical to address that of being. My interrogation works through "what is the relation of Blackness and Queerness to their history, and what similarities can we find between them at this level," towards "what is the place of the historical in determinations and assertions upon the reality and being of Blackness and Queerness," and from the potential similarities I might find there as well, "what then?"

There have been works, to which I am indebted, which have attended to the conjoined nature of Queer and Black history. *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*, by Siobhan Somerville, is one such example; so is the canon of Queer of Color studies, with Roderick Ferguson's *Aberration in Blacks: Towards a Queer of Color Critique* at its helm (as well Darieck Scott's *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* and Robert Reid-Pharr's *Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire, and the Black American Intellectual*, and Kathryn Bond-Stockton's *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: Where "Black" Meets "Queer"*). These are works attentive not only to the ways in which Black life and Queer life (the expression of Queerness which comes from Queer bodies, and the expression of Blackness which comes from Black bodies) share an aesthetic similarity, but as well to the way in which anti-Blackness and anti-Queerness may come from the same place, the same structures,

and the same violent instincts.<sup>10</sup> The distinction between the two, between aesthetic sameness and shared structural depredation, is not always clear: an implied conjunction often emanates from the texts. Is one caused by the other? Is Black life Queer because, at the root of anti-Blackness lies anti-Queerness, and vice versa? How might this assertion affect how we define Black life in an anti-Black climate—as inherently tethered to the modes of governance and discipline which seek to eradicate it, which are obsessively disgusted and fascinated by it, in a relation to resistance and opposition?<sup>11</sup> Is the relation between Blackness and Queerness one based on the similarity of their desires, or the similarity of the struggle, or at the very least of its source? Are we arguing, then, for an *ontological* sameness, a *political* sameness, or an *aesthetic* sameness? Are we inferring this sameness from observation of *Black or Queer life as it is lived*, or from observations into *the formations which would seek to control, sequester, inhibit, and annihilate*

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<sup>10</sup> Which is to say that from far away, or from really up close, Black life looks Queer—more so in this direction than the other, which is not necessarily untethered from the fact that, with the exception of Kathryn Bond-Stockton, the vast majority of these studies have been published by Black Queer scholars attempting to disprove the assumed and hegemonic whiteness of Queer theory, and rarely by white (or non-Black) Queer scholars attempting to draw links from Queer life to Black life, or at least attempting to do so without a pre-existing and interdisciplinary thread proving the "validity" of their stroll into Blackness—for instance, Jean Genet's affiliation with the Black Panther Party and their Blackness in Kadji Amin's work, to which I am completely methodologically and inquiringly indebted, or James Baldwin's avowed Queerness in Lee Edelman's essay on *Just Above My Head*. See Kadji Amin, *Disturbing Attachments: Genet, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017) and Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York City: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> This is a question asked by Jared Sexton: "Must one always think blackness to think antiblackness, as it were, a blackness that is against and before antiblackness, an anti-antiblackness that is also an anteantiblackness? Can one gain adequate understanding of antiblackness—its history and politics, its mythos, its psychodynamics—if one does not appreciate how blackness, so to speak, calls it into being? Can one mount a critique of antiblackness without also celebrating blackness? Can one pursue the object of black studies without also affirming its aim? Moreover, can one pursue the former without doing so in the name of and as the latter?" Jared Sexton: "The Social Life of Social Death," *in Tensions*, no.5 (2011): 35.

*this life*? Which of these does a historical study of Blackness and Queerness attempt to prove? Which of it can it prove? And which of these matters most for coalition?<sup>12</sup>

At a first level of study, these texts had been incredibly generative for me in terms of my ability to formulate questions on the subject of Black and Queer being, and of my capacity to assess which questions, and which orientations therein, might reveal the thorniest problems, and thus the most productive road to attend to—and thus where I ought to place my energies. The pre-supposed in their frameworks of analysis was what interested me most: their supposition, for instance, of the relevance of proving a shared historical grounding to Blackness and Queerness. Should we be able to demonstrate such a thing convincingly enough, what are the ends of this argumentation? Considering the studies which demonstrate a similarity in the modes and origins of the oppressive violence which *begets* these Queer and Black communities—even if a divergence is noted at some point, so that Blackness and Queerness remain differentiated by the development of their specific history—and that what is illuminated by these sort of joint studies is thus often the violent apparatus itself, is not this violence inalienably reasserted as the core of what it is, has been, and will be to be Black or Queer? But what *else* might it be, then, to historically situate Queer, or Black, except than to trace them along lines of antagonism? To what *pure positivity*, unmediated and untouched from forces of violence, might we instead latch on to when referring to Blackness or Queerness? Will

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<sup>12</sup> Related: does the absence of one prevent the others from being the source of coalition? This specifically is the questions Calvin Warren has drawn me to in his essay "Onticide: Afropessimism, Gay Nigger #1, and Surplus Violence" by asking whether Blackness, if it is defined by an incommunicability, an impossibility to relate to the terms of the Human under which every other discourses of oppression—including Queer thought and writings—appears, can ever even be thought alongside Queerness, of if the mere addition of Queerness into the structural paradigms used to understand anti-Blackness constitutes an erasure. Here, the ontological difference does not permit bridges or coalition through aesthetic similarity, or even shared or dual political suffering, in the case of anti-Black violence against Queer Black men. See Calvin Warren, "Onticide: Afropessimism, Gay Nigger #1, and Surplus Violence," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 23, no. 3 (2017): 391-418.

there ever have been a unified body, a form of embodiment, a people, an instinct, drive, or passion, that we could place, prior to mediating relations, as the source and origin—the pure, proper, and untouched referent—of Blackness and Queerness? Should we be then be tempted again to consider the African body as that locus of originary and unmediated Blackness? We would say no: Black studies into the history of Blackness have been notably careful to distinguish it from the history of the continent of Africa and its varied people. And how might we determine, at first glance and positively, the Queerness of a Queer body, of a decontextualised Queer body, a Queer body outside of movement, whose Queerness can only be, at this point, virtual? In the very real sense that Queerness means to index an untenable differentiation from the norm and considering the tendency of Black studies to explicate the incomprehensible violence which amass towards Blackness as punishment for its assumed ontological differentiation from normativity, is not the mere act of relating the question of Blackness and Queerness to a historical standard, or the idea of a marked historical presence, by necessity the assertion of violence as their unique constitutive paradigm, as the only thing which gives nameable form to their substance? And yet we cannot seem to escape the question: for it is specifically the act of naming this substance Blackness or Queerness which permits identification, community, coalition through a shared ground of understanding. In other words, these names and an agreement upon their referent, we hope, gives Blackness and Queerness the concreteness required for their use in thought and action. In my sense, the question which it matters most to append to these sorts of interrogation into the material and ontological status of Blackness and Queerness is less "is this demonstrably true?" and more "what has this particular definition enabled?" or "which further interrogations are opened through this consensus?"

With the caveat that even the arrival to a kind of conclusion won't necessarily enable me to "do something"—and that, regardless, the production of objective "something" at the end of these interrogations may be impossible to prove and measure—I hope still that my mode of questioning, and the kind of questions I ask, will be more enabling than disabling. I'll use, as an example of methodology and to illustrate what I mean by this, two recent monographs on Blackness and Black studies: Stephen M. Best's *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life* and Saidiya V. Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. Both of these works undertake a sustained thinking through the place and effect of history within the practice of Black studies. Best's is a work of historical critique, a criticism of slavery as the paradigmatic "moment" through which Blackness may be understood, and of the moment of slavery as the paradigm of choice, in contemporary Black history and politics, to describe and understand the Black community and its formations. These first questions lead him to a more pessimistic one: whether the idea or ideal of a Black community, the *a priori* carrying and orienting all Black scholarship, is even possible. As he draws out in the following passage:

Hartman's arguments on "dispossession" and those of Jared Sexton on "Afro-pessimism" yield further extraordinary leaps in our thinking on blackness and slavery, but the underlying assumptions in this matrix shore up a notion of black selfhood that is grounded in a kind of lost black sociality, in black sociality's groundedness in horror. We are given to understand slavery as the scene of the crime and that scene of the crime as a scene of origin. But it will be my intention to show, in *None Like Us*, across a range of materials and archival encounters, that there is and can be no "we" in or

following from such a time and place, that what “we” share is the open secret of “our” impossibility. (...) Whatever blackness or black culture is, it cannot be indexed to a “we” — or, if it is, that “we” can only be structured by and given in its own negation and refusal.<sup>13</sup>

What Hartman and Afro-Pessimists like Sexton share, according to Best, is a conceptual ground of approach to the question of Black being. For them, the source of Black existence cannot be read accurately except through a precise understanding of the conditions of slavery, and as such it cannot be read without understanding the vision of the slave which haunts Blackness in the dominant White imagination—that imagination whose hegemony makes it constitutive to the structures of life in America. Afro-Pessimists, after Hartman, will extend this analytic to make of it an ontological claim upon Black being, meaning that their theories would tend to conscript Blackness in its present being and in its field of potentialities to its representation and conceptual life within the White imaginary. This conceptual conscription is an example of a *doing* of critique, a potential byproduct, and what Best struggles against in his text: the landlocking of Blackness within a framework which, while it seeks to be as exhaustively comprehensive as possible, disallows possibility for anything *else* to happen with and to Blackness. Best then challenges Black studies' focus on the time of slavery not in itself, but for the hidden assertions and investments regarding the being of Blackness and the possibility of Black life which it carries. Particularly, he critiques the reification of its hegemony and currency within Black discourses, and the extent to which it has become

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<sup>13</sup> Stephen M. Best, *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 22.

not only the dominant ground of discourse, but the only grounds upon which a discourse of Blackness can occur, whether in academia, politics, or the arts.<sup>14</sup>

Best's work, published at a time when a cursory look at Black studies reveals a field split into an oscillation between Afro-Pessimism and its detractors (namely, proponents of hope and optimism), is a fascinating text in that it proposes an externality to the frame of inquiry which would tie Fred Moten and Calvin Warren into one dialectic which then passes itself off for the whole of conceptual possibilities for Black thought, each side supposedly complementing the other to fullness. Best puts in question the very *a priori* which make Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism equally palatable to each other and the ground of shared discursive intelligibility which permits them to stand in an agonistic relation to one another. His critique moves against the shared affective investment which energises both sides of the conversation on Black being, namely "the hold on black studies that the oscillation between subjection and belonging has taken in the interest of the pleasures of a shared sense of alienation understood, in the first instance, as an unfitness for the world and history as it is."<sup>15</sup> "I can see," he continues elsewhere, "there are pleasures to be found in a shared sense of alienation, a shared queerness, emerging from a shared blackness that is still understood, in the first instance, as an unfitness for the world and history as it is."<sup>16</sup> Be it as shared depredation, or shared wonder at an undercommons privilege, it is this affect which moves to strange and disavowed coalition pessimists and optimists alike. Best thus formulates with his text a critique of a popular and assumed-as-useful framework—a framework whose ubiquity has

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<sup>14</sup> Best, *None Like Us*, 83.

<sup>15</sup> Best, *None Like Us*, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Best, *None Like Us*, 7-8.



made the determinedness of its investments quasi-invisible—and a proposal for another one, and of other ends, and other modes of valuation for these ends.

In describing the relationship of contemporary Black scholarship to the moment of slavery as one which takes for granted the value of slavery's specific moment for the determination of every Black moment and thus of Black life itself, Best posits that Black scholars have formed a pervasively totalitarian and dyadic conception of the archive. This leaves Black scholars torn between the putative expressiveness of the archive, and the experience of its obfuscations. Because the slave archive, by its very nature and by the nature of slavery itself, is closed to the reparative, or at the very least opaque to it and to the satisfaction of the Black scholar's desire for recuperation, its opacity becomes the site of a fetishistic investment. In its mystery, it is invested *a posteriori* with the *a priori* of its importance. The more it resists, the more it is invested with potential wonders, and the more scholarship invests itself in it, and invests in this task world-changing potential.<sup>17</sup> But this is a relationship in which the scholar of Blackness will be, and has always been, disappointed—if not traumatised—because the matter is not, and has never been, the archive being opaque to her desire for reparation, but her desire being opaque to its own means and conditions of satisfaction. Desire's nature and structure is that of an interminable *desiring* which cannot accept termination though some teleological arrival at satisfaction, though this is exactly the story desire tells us, and the fantasy through which it gets and keeps us. And so the relationship of Black scholars—and in the dissemination of their knowledge, of the Black community as well—to their history becomes, and can only conceive itself as, one of unmet yearning, and imagines itself under the imperative to undertake the trauma of an encounter with the mute and violent archive. This is not only, for Best, to ask too much of history, in what it

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<sup>17</sup> Best, *None Like Us*, 86.

can do for Blackness, but as well, to ask too much of Black scholars, and last but not least, to ask too much of these figures of history whose silence we yearn to break, and in whose speech we invest so much hope, so much of our selves, when mere survival was, already, so much to ask.<sup>18</sup> Best's project, then, is a proposal for another mode of relation, and for other investments:

As hard as it can be to check the impulse to redeem the past, to relinquish the desire to set it right, I want to explore what it feels like to write about figures who resist our attempts to restore them to wholeness, who resist our project of historical recovery (...) My goal is to account for the culture of the enslaved in a way that does not inspire hope for recovery—the very hope that stands behind efforts to write "history from below" and to restore documents to their proper "context." (...) *it is a foundational paradox of the archive to shape Black culture as indispensable to and yet hopelessly beyond the reach of cultural preservation and historiographical recovery.* It is my intention to show that our challenge isn't to successfully recover the past so much as it is the more modest task of simply *describing* something that appears to be vanishing.<sup>19</sup>

*None Like Us* thus embodies a shift in intellectual energy away from a space mined and potentially toxic to new thought in the presumption of its inherent value, an opening for new and potentially more solvent thinking. With it, Best directly refuses the call to rehabilitate history, or more to the point, refuses an ideation of history which would or could rehabilitate us, or itself, and thus disavows, or caution us to be mindful of the

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<sup>18</sup> Best, *None Like Us*, 84.

<sup>19</sup> Best, *None Like Us*, 85.

inherent good of, the formations which would use it as their origin and basis for coalition. To my mind, this is an apt commentary, and a powerful critique. It is also, we must note, something of a paralysing one, and one which does not give anything else as a replacement, despite its gestures towards the reparative and its yearning, within its own critical and conceptual armature, for a relation devoid of the paralysis of paranoia. It is, still one which *turns and tends towards the disabling* in important effective ways. Where Best would destroy the hold history has on us for the sake of the Black community, this turns him contrapuntally to committing to arguing the impossibility of Black kinship and community. Best would sever the hold of history to the cost of positing the impossibility (past, present, future) of Black being and Black relation. This severing may indeed be correct, necessary, and ultimately reparative: I note here only the disabling structure of his argument so-doing, though it is his argument, and the lessons it imparts on the scholar and her desire, which enabled the following reading of Saidiya Hartman's project for Black studies.

For on the other end of my argument, Hartman would hold us tighter than ever to history, her entire armature constructed on an unshakeable and palpable belief in Black kinship, and its reproduction and ongoing construction—its making-real—through text and thought. This belief drives her work and foray into Black archive. Hartman's monograph *Wayward Lives* is a speculative history, a critical fabulation of Black metropolitan girlhood at the turn of the twentieth century, tracing practices of freedom which have failed to overturn history and have thus been buried in the archive of the intimate, the personal, the un-critical, and the under-theorised:

It is not surprising that a *negress* would be guilty of conflating  
 idleness with resistance or exalt the struggle for mere survival or  
 confuse petty acts for insurrection or imagine a minor figure

might be capable of some significant shit or mistake laziness and inefficiency for a general strike or recast theft as a kind of cheap socialism for too fast girls and questionable women or esteem wild ideas as radical thought. At best, the case of Esther Brown provides another example of the tendency to exaggeration and excess that is common to the race. A revolution in a minor key was hardly noticeable before the spirit of Bolshevism or the nationalist vision of a Black Empire or the glamour of wealthy libertines, fashionable socialists, and self-declared New Negroes. Nobody remembers the evening she and her friends raised hell on 132nd Street or turned out Edmund's Cellar or made such a beautiful noise during the riot that their screams and shouts were improvised music, so that even the tone-deaf journalists from the *New York Times* described the black noise of disorderly women as a jazz chorus.<sup>20</sup>

Her book turns up a radicalism which has already failed, a revolution we know has not come to save us, a critique which, if it is there in the gestures she traces and indexes and pulls out of the archive, cannot give us the missing framework, the final one, the one which will pull us out of inertia, the one which will marry thought and action, which will lubricate their union and permit their un-impinged movement towards liberation and total abolition. Esther Brown would not have failed to turn up the scorn of theoreticians of freedom and revolution, whether her contemporary or ours. The frequency of her revolt—the frequency of the quotidian, of the joyful aimlessness which makes joy, its

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<sup>20</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman, "The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 117, no. 3 (2018): 466-467.

maximising and its seeking out, all the aims one could need—does not appear on world-historical frames, and Hartman sings alone to the tune of these frequencies much to the displeasure of those who would gauge the interest of Black girlhood relative solely to the revelatory pathos of their racialized existence and tragic ends. This is exactly the tune, one might add, which Best enjoined us to listen to and for, that of "figures who resist our attempts to restore them to wholeness, who resist our project of historical recovery."<sup>21</sup> Alive and kicking, Black girls are of little interest to revolutionaries and their totalistic frames of reference for what constitutes victory or defeat. "Mere" survival certainly isn't on their roster, but it is only a part of Esther Brown's anarchy, in a world which would have her dead. Alongside the revolution of her staying alive is her dictating her right to an intimate and directive desiring-relation to the terms under which this life will be lived. It will be joyful and free, and it'll involve her friends, or it isn't a life—and no one can, or will, tell her how to live hers. Esther Brown, and Hartman in recuperating her partition and reassembling her chorus, sings the tune of life elsewhere, possible and realised—a life, too, which both exceeds and underwhelms our desires for reparation, which can only be caught and sung along with through our own tuning in to it, rather than its reduction to that predictable something our reparative desires always yearns to hum. A life, finally, whose commonality, both more and less than what we would want it to be, Hartman's writing succeeds in making us desire above, and to the divestment of, our desire for reparation and world-historical possibilities.<sup>22</sup>

It is a recurring trope of Afro-Pessimism to formulate an indictment of sociality and community while refusing to propose different formations. This refusal is, in fact, integral to their anti-social denomination and position. It is proof of their refusal to pad

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<sup>21</sup> Best, *None Like Us*, 85.

<sup>22</sup> Hartman, "The Anarchy of Colored Girls," 468.

their open-eyed critique of reality with hope, or possibility. It is this rigour, somewhat paradoxically, which enables them to perceive a kind of utopia they will not name, in their devotion to naming, to the adverse, all that is anti-utopian (anti-Black and anti-Queer) in its most profound and far-reaching spread, its most opaque corners. But their critique is thus as well an intellectual project beholden to that which it abhors. It cannot allow the abhorred to exist, or at least to exist unremarked, and so it continually seeks it out. The prevalence of anti-Blackness in the discourse of Blackness is not a mystical or ontological obviousness onto whose shore any thought on Blackness cannot help but arrive. It is the byproduct of a theoretical recurrence and a reified framework of inquiry. It is consent to the perpetuation of a force of habit, to a shared language and set of presupposed agreement, ostensibly for the sake of moving forward and further, together. But what of when, as Best posits, it is this agreement which prevents *actual* furthering, *actual* deepening, in keeping us, all together, in the shallow end of our own unquestioned desires? Theory, its writing and thinking, is always a doing—always a movement, either deeper within or outside of. It says, and then it does—sometimes, in contradictory movements.

Best's historical critique attempts to pacify the wounding of history as a Black scholarly project. It is a text convinced of the hermeneutic seal of the archive and of the past to any bettering and any healing—and which thus encourages us to ask a little less of it, for our sake and for that of these past figures whom we would like to meet. In short, it is a study which encourages us to probe our own desires, to perceive their shape and their vicious cycles, and which makes an ethical argument for our divestment of them, towards fairer, kinder ones, both for ourselves and our objects—and for the relation which goes between us. Hartman's work, while implicitly critiquing the methodology of historical practice (the prevalence of official knowledges and the burrowing and

disavowal, overwriting and silencing, of subjugated knowledges) in the same way Best does, offers with her text a mode of doing history as a reparative practice which makes us complicit in its alternative mode of relating to and reading the past, by making us *desire it* above our old desires for reparation and totalising narratives of trauma.<sup>23</sup> Hers is not merely a critique of history and historical narratives as complicit with the categorical imperative and its disciplinary machine: it is an enjoinder to relate to figures from the past without constraining them to a narrative doing of history which would have them murdered before they died, and will kill them again with silence after it. It is an argument through pleasure, rather than reason. It is an enabling text which leads by example: it permits us to join Hartman in the relation she is already enjoying, which she has opened us to, and opened to us. Both texts move from the predicate that history is unbearable. Only one practically answers the question: "How, then, to bear it?" Afro-Pessimists, in their rigour, might chime in here, saying that it cannot be borne, it cannot ethically be borne, the bearable cannot and will never be our relationship to history, nor should we seek it to be—and they may be right. But it appears to me, increasingly, that an intellectual imaginary formed entirely of the demand to bear the unbearable would be just that: unbearable. Impossible. It is a paradox. What cannot be borne cannot be borne. Even, we must admit it, for Afro-Pessimists. What they tout as unbearable must then, somehow, allow itself to being borne by them. Afro-Pessimists, in their devotion for the unbearable, can only keep asking: if Black life cannot be borne, what do we do of

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<sup>23</sup> I take the term "reparative" from Eve Sedgwick. Relevant to Hartman's project: "Reparative motives, once they become explicit, are inadmissible in paranoid theory both because they are about pleasure ("merely aesthetic") and because they are frankly ameliorative ("merely reformist"). What makes pleasure and amelioration so "mere"?" and p. 150-151: "What we can best learn from such practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them." Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2003), 144.

those who bear it?<sup>24</sup> Texts like Hartman's permit the unbearable to become bearable and borne, as they reframe the question of unbearable history aside the reality of life, it they force the supposed unbearable to contend with those who have borne it—and with those who still do.<sup>25</sup>

What prompted my opposition of Hartman to Best is not a question of one of these modes of interrogation—Best's critique or Hartman's fabulation—more accurately capturing and representing "reality." As we have seen, they tend to an ethical and paradigmatic agreement, and "reality" has never quite been the subject of theoretical inquiry, though it will masquerade itself as such. The question is of a difference marked by the longstanding duality of conceptions regarding philosophy's aim in practice: to move us through reason, or through pleasure.

We are used to thinking that philosophy has primarily been concerned with the search for "truth" and definition, with the elaboration of what things are. But there is an equally prolific

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<sup>24</sup> "Unbearable Blackness" is the title of one of Jared Sexton's reflections on Afro-Pessimism and political life, and a key text of the movement's canon. In it, Blackness is, indeed, found unbearable, but Sexton still likes to go march with his Black students for progress and redress. Is he moved by the beauty of non-teleological and hopeless politics finally actualized—unable to be anything else but that, hopeless and already lost? See Jared Sexton, "Unbearable Blackness," *Cultural Critique* no. 90 (2015): 162. The same goes with Queer negativity, as "the unbearable" has there too a place of honour, as it titles of one of the framework's signal monograph (here a potent stand-in for what Queer negativity would have Queerness definitely mean): Lee Edelman and Lauren Berlant's *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>25</sup> Christina Sharpe thought it beautifully at the outset, as the outset, of her monograph on Black care in the wake of slavery—of the unbearable: "In this work, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, I want to think "the wake" as a problem of and for thought. I want to think "care" as a problem for thought. I want to think care in the wake as a problem for thinking and of and for Black non/being in the world. Put another way, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* is a work that insists and performs that thinking needs care ("all thought is Black thought") and that thinking and care need to stay in the wake." Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 5.



tradition oriented not at fully explicating the world but at more effectively existing in it.<sup>26</sup>

Rather than offering us a new way of critiquing—which is to say, a new way to spell the ways *this cannot be borne*—Hartman provides us with a history which has remained minoritarian, but which represents, still, a refusal and a desire for *something else* consistently upheld, in community. By not merely asking us, but seducing us, into recalibrating our expectations and demands of the past, she has allowed us to take much needed resources in it. Just because what has come before has not worked on a total and universal level for the complete overturning of this derelict social order does not mean that Esther Brown and her ilk (the too-fast girls who fill the pages of in *Wayward Lives*) cannot positively *now still* inspire our minor, local struggles and practices of sustenance—as they did in their time, even as these changes did not transform into world-historical action. To quote a passage from *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman's earliest monograph:

The intervention made here is an attempt to recast the past, guided by the conundrums and compulsions of our contemporary crisis: the hope for social transformation in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles, the quixotic search for a subject capable of world-historical action, and the despair induced by the lack of one.<sup>27</sup>

"*The quixotic search for a subject capable of world-historical action, and the despair induced by the lack of one.*" What love, what helpless violence born in and from love—and so, constantly disavowed and policed, constantly self-critical and distrusting—lies in this

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<sup>26</sup> Fuck Theory, "Shock Waves: A Syllabus for the End Times," Slant, ArtForum, December 13, 2016, <https://www.artforum.com/slant/fuck-theory-on-a-syllabus-for-the-end-times-65193>.

<sup>27</sup> Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 1997), 14.

desire, in this project? When *being* violent is neither the fault of the lover or the love, the beholder or the beheld, but rather the unbearable fact of the years and times which stretches between them? We must learn to not ask so much. We must encourage in each other the joyful learning of not asking so much—of asking differently. We learn best through pleasure. Black studies is a wounding of unmet desires. But also—but concurrently—it is the conditions of sight for something beautiful, something necessary—a touch of the beautiful "mere-ness" of existence, which will never cease to have linked all who dance the struggle for survival:

Mere survival was an achievement in a context so brutal. How could one enhance life or speak of its potentialities when confined in the ghetto, when daily subjected to racist assault and insult, and conscripted to servitude? How can I live? — It was a question Esther reckoned with every day. Survival required acts of collaboration and genius. Esther's imagination was geared toward the clarification of life — "what would sustain material life and enhance it, something that entailed more than the reproduction of physical existence." The mutuality and creativity necessary to sustain life in the context of intermittent wages, controlled deprivation, economic exclusion, coercion, and antiblack violence often bordered on the extralegal and the criminal. Beautiful, wayward experiments entailed what W. E. B. DuBois described as an "open rebellion" against society."<sup>28</sup>

Or:

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<sup>28</sup> Hartman, "An Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner," 470.

It is hard to explain what's beautiful about a rather ordinary colored girl, a face difficult to discern in the crowd, an average chorine not destined to be a star or even the heroine of a feminist plot. In some regard, it is to recognize the obvious that is reluctantly ceded: the beauty of the black ordinary, the beauty that resides in and animates the determination to live free.<sup>29</sup>

We must wonder, with Best, if to ask world-historical action from those in our past can ever not be too much to ask. In search, within history, for a perfect framework, we would forget how we have "merely" survived until then, and lose something crucial with it. These are the terms under which Best critiques Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*, as he informs his own project's ethos through a critique of this mythical text for contemporary Black studies. He writes:

Baldwin resists "a traumatic model of black history" in which the present is merely an endless, Oedipal repetition of slavery and Jim Crow; a rigid relation to temporality or "narrative stiffness," in Eve Sedgwick's phrase, which feels like the generations marching in lockstep: "It happened to my father's father, it happened to my father, it is happening to me, it will happen to my son, and it will happen to my son's son."<sup>30</sup>

The resemblance of this Oedipal schema to the mode of relation to the past which is reproduced in Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* (and which has dominated the field since its publication in 1997) is not missed: as Best points out, in *Scenes*, Hartman aimed

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<sup>29</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman, "An Unnamed Girl, a Speculative History," Culture Desk, *The New Yorker*, February 9, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/an-unnamed-girl-a-speculative-history>.

<sup>30</sup> Best, *None Like Us*, 6.

to unveil to our eyes the conditions of slavery as an ongoing prism through which we could reconsider the modalities of Black life and unfreedom in her 1997 and, seemingly, in the years from then to now, and inexorably in the years that will come. Afro-Pessimists would then yoke Blackness to slavery as the only sustainable analytic for the ongoing degradation of Black life regardless of the moment of "abolition."<sup>31</sup> Hartman herself has made clear her utilisation of nineteenth century America as a metaphor for the here and now in an interview with the Afro-Pessimist Frank B. Wilderson III: "I think of the book *{Scenes of Subjection}* as an allegory; its argument is a history of the present."<sup>32</sup> Is Hartman's not, as such, a totalising and paralysing framework—correct as it may be? Perhaps. But I feel like being generous—and with Hartman, there is no reason not to be. Let's posit that it is not the analytic that one builds, it is *why one builds it* and *what one draws from it*. To build, and to be intimately convinced by, a totalising and paralysing framework in order to find ways out of it—or better, to show that others have lived in it lives which have exceeded it, even in "mere" survival—is the fruitful congress of pessimism with optimism, optimism's relentless force, a force which it draws from pessimism.

Best's generosity lies in his desire to sever Black studies and its scholars from their totalising and paralysing holding and beholding imperative to the past, represented as the irreparable trauma of slavery. This is not only a scholastic observation; it is an intimately felt one. Ending his introduction, he writes:

Over the course of researching and writing this book, I have often  
felt undone by the archive, unable to find the subjects (the

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<sup>31</sup> Best, *None Like Us*, 84.

<sup>32</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson III, "The Position of the Unthought," *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003): 190.

precursors) that I seek. Time and again, I would set out to recover something from the archive and fail in the attempt. But what seemed to be affirmed in each attempt was not the recalcitrance of the past but, rather, the extent to which I am drawn into being ecstatically dispossessed. Facing up to this fact, I am inspired to craft a historicism that is not melancholic but accepts the past's turning away as an ethical condition of my desire for it. I try to reframe the jolt of the archive—its refusal, its rebuff—as a call to sacrifice, seeing no reason not to put such failure to some use.<sup>33</sup>

The archive refuses itself to Best's desires for kinship and affective amelioration, it cannot become the good, or even the ambivalent object of reparation. In these terms—and with the intimation that such foreclosure is endemic to all those who plunge back into the Black archive, and that this plunge is then an act of martyrdom whose necessity and virtue he would conjure us to reconsider out of his love and kinship for those Black scholars—he asks for another relation to the archive, one which does not wound. It is clear to me that Stephen Best's text is one absolutely committed to the ethics of Black care and of care in the wake to which Christina Sharpe powerfully enjoins us. It is a loving, generous act, absolutely turned, even in the throes of paranoia, towards a hope for the reparative. If I oppose it to Hartman's text, it is not because I suspect its intention to be any less generous, or any less loving, than hers in writing *Wayward Lives*. But I would propose that what might, still, be worth examining via a comparison of these works is the diversion in method to which both these scholars' love for Blackness has taken them. We are here faced by an opposition of gestures: one, Best's, which builds itself on refusing us history, and the other one, Hartman's, which is built on offering it to

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<sup>33</sup> Best, *None Like Us*, 20.

us. Best creates a theoretical framework so that Black studies may apprehend history as an object of ambivalence; Hartman contends with this ambivalence and gives from the imperfect object of the archive everything that can be mined for sustenance. This, above all, is what I mean when discussing the limits of critique. A framework, as generous as it is, as brilliant as it is, as true and necessary as it is, does not itself constitute a doing, and cannot replace one by itself. Best gives us the framework which Hartman has already methodologically internalised as the precondition to her doing of study. Her critique lies, unsaid, in her overcoming of the trauma in order to produce something else for us, and to enjoin us to produce and perpetuate this difference ourselves. She does not stop at revealing the ambivalence. She takes it upon herself and gives what is good, and brings those goods to revelation. When opposing Best and Hartman, I am proposing nothing more than a strategically opposition of *critique* (Best's critique of history) to *practice* (Hartman's historical practice), in order to better think about the complex things that texts *do*, in parallel and at times contradictions to what they *say*, and in refusal of focusing on what they do *not* do, or do improperly, as traditional critique would enjoin me to do.

Such doings can also be formed and performed as an absence. For instance: absent from Hartman's text, and thus from her framework of inquiry, is the question which now animates a large corner of Black studies: that is, the question of "what is Blackness?" It is, relatively speaking, absent from all of her work. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* is the closest she has gotten to examining this question as *the* question, but even there, it is incidental, anecdotal to the kind of loss which she describes with this book.<sup>34</sup> In it, the absence of origins, the creation *ex nihilo*, the loss of

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<sup>34</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: a Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York City: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).

"cognitive schema," is accepted as the precondition and definitional centre of Blackness, if definitional centre there is.<sup>35</sup> These observations are almost common-sense in their arrival onto the scene of her writings, drawn less from complex experiments in metaphysics than a quotidian realization, which Hartman tests out against the last possibility of a motherland—the last hope of a corrective and reparative. These truths are thus accepted as the centre from which will unspool whatever else Blackness has been or might become rather than argued for as a form of reducing the possibilities of what Blackness can be said to be. They are the grounds for the daily struggle with reality, rather than the hidden framework which would conspire to make it wholly unliveable.

In *Scenes of Subjection* and *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, the mystery of what actually, technically speaking, *is* a Black person—the question which animates equally, though differently, Calvin Warren's *Ontological Terror* and Fred Moten's *consent not to be a single being*—does not appear either. In *Wayward Lives*, she is more interested in discussing Esther Brown and her friends than rooting through the matter of her conceptual possibility. *Scenes of Subjection* and its archival work in both slavery and the myths it permitted, which subsist to this day, has other work to do than to focus on the metaphysical impossibility of the Black person and the ontological terror (or the terrible beauty) which rests within such a realization. If neither *Scenes of Subjection*, nor *Lose Your Mother*, nor *Wayward Lives*, ever accede to the definitions of Black being elaborated by racial science and racist philosophy, and in fact takes the refusal of such assumptions as an *a priori* obviousness which still bears repeating and enacting through their text, there

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<sup>35</sup>"This door [of no return] is really the door of dreams. This existence in the Diaspora is like that—dreams from which one never wakes. Then what here can be called cognition let alone a schema? A set of dreams, a strand of stories which never come into being, which never coalesce. One is not in control in dreams; dreams take place, the dreamer is captive, even though it is the dreamer who is dreaming. Captured in one's own body, in one's own thoughts, to be out of possession of one's mind; our cognitive schema is captivity." Dionne Brand, *A Map To the Door of No Return: Notes on Belonging* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2002), 29.

is never, in Hartman, the kind of existential anxiety in which a static attention to the eternally and inherently contingent and relational grasp Blackness has on being can easily bring one to.<sup>36</sup> It is not that it is not a worry—it is that it is not a worry that she proliferates and makes us stay with, or at the very least, never helplessly or without fault lines of escape.

This is not to say that her texts are devoid of any existential anxieties, nor, more broadly, that only texts which are devoid of causes for concern and filled with reasons to cheer and feel at peace within the world are the only kind which can claim to enable more than they disable. Even in reaction to what can be perceived as an overdose of glum coming from the Afro-Pessimists, this would be throwing the baby out with the bathwater. There is a great deal of fear in Hartman's texts, and there is no dearth of rigour in her attuning to the terror which prefaces and defines Black existence in an anti-Black weather.<sup>37</sup> There *is* anxiety in Hartman, but it is the anxiety of *how to love them*, the same question Moten answers by not making it about loving Black people but about loving Blackness, the internal and proliferating instinct for differentiation and communion that moves through and within them. The question of whether Black people *can be loved* is a point of contention and worry in Hartman's work, but, importantly, this worry does not place Black people and their ontological condition as the cause, or the source, of this worry. They *must* be loveable—and thus, implicitly, so obviously as to not need to be stated—*there*. Present, alive, real, in and of this world which we share. The matter has been, has always been, *how* to love them.

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<sup>36</sup> Da Silva, *Towards a Global Idea of Race*, 3.

<sup>37</sup> "In what I am calling the weather, antiblackness is pervasive as climate. The weather necessitates changeability and improvisation; it is the atmospheric condition of time and place; it produces new ecologies." Sharpe, *In The Wake*, 106.



So, on the contrary: in light of all there is to attend to, the question of the actual materiality of Black life appears as an extraneous concern. It is question whose abstract interest has no immediate correlation to its capacity. It is a question which, should it become *the* question, might even impinge upon our capacity for further moves. Does it matter whether Black life can be said to exist, if it is dying, and thus, must be also living? We must avoid dogmatisms: it is not that the question of the ontological reality of Black life is not an important critique to pose to Western metaphysics and racializing philosophical science, particularly as its predicates and definitions of the Human are the contexts surrounding the appearance of Human rights, which themselves are correlated with the question of politics and life and of the conditions of life in which Blackness is living—which we have called, and rightly so, "unbearable." It is not that "what is Black life?" is not a good question, or that the thinkers who have made it their question are misgiven. The problem arises when it becomes *the* question, when it becomes prioritised, and when it thus comes to appear as the key to the lock of anti-Blackness, of impossible Black life, of unbearable Blackness.

Calvin Warren's *Ontological Terror* is a gorgeous take on the question and on the mode of its asking: it is a rigorous and cutting study of metaphysics as a philosophical field, and demonstrates both its incapacity to take within it Black life, and its obsessive reliance upon this incapacity as a disavowed limit repressed as an attribute of Blackness—where Blackness as the limit of philosophy becomes the definitive and definitional ontology of Blackness rather than a failure of philosophy as a mode of taking in the world and thinking through its array of chaotic complexities, energies, and relations. This is showcased most beautifully and clearly in the book's closing words, in which Warren assesses the failure of appeals to metaphysical categories and thought with regards to Blackness not as a moment of paralysis, in which both he and his readers

would be caught in the necessity to renounce the project of Black life and freedom wholesale, following this defeat to make it bearable to philosophy, but as *the proof* that metaphysics must then not be the site of project of Black life and its defence. Since all we are left with is the total refusal of metaphysics to the flowering of Blackness unimpeded by anti-Blackness—of a Black life not defined by a worldly imperative towards its death—Warren enjoins us to look elsewhere: not to fall into hermeneutic nihilism, but to keep flying towards emancipation.<sup>38</sup>

What I am suggesting, ultimately, is that black being begins to get over the human and its humanism fantasies. We've tried everything: from marches, to masochistic citizenship (giving our bodies to the state to brutalize in hopes of evoking sympathy and empathy from humans), to exceptional citizenship and respectability, to protest and armed conflict; in the end, either we will continue this degrading quest for human rights and incorporation or we will take a leap of faith, as Kierkegaard might say, and reject the terms through which we organize our existence.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> He does, to be clear, still call this position "nihilism"—a Black Nihilism, as opposed to a hermeneutic nihilism. This nihilism still seeks to beget action (though not necessarily on or of the plane on which "action" has been understood—world historical, revolutionary, visible) and flight, which means that despite my own understanding of the word, which places it in relation with inertia, refusal, cynicism, I am still within Warren's project. I find it important not to disavow his vocabulary and intellectual affiliations when claiming myself to be *simpatico* with him. To cite: "Black nihilism must rest in the crevice between the impossibility of transforming the world and the dynamic enduring power of the spirit. In the absence of Being there is spirit." Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 171

<sup>39</sup> Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 170.

The metaphysical framework does not permit anything other than nihilistic paralysis as it pertains to Blackness: thus, the framework must be wrong. Time to look elsewhere.

To accept the existence of Black people (and, in parallel, Queer people) as *a priori* rather than as a fact contingent on an exploration of history, its recesses, its production of subjective modes and categorisations of the Human—in short, instead of looking at the historical and semiological movements which have permitted the sentence "Black people are" or "Queer people are" (either as complete statements of fact regarding their "being" or prefaces to a set of adjectives and supposition on the particular being of Blacks or Queers)—is an important choice of framework when it is extended to the realm of study. We must ask ourselves whether becoming experts, or focusing our expertise, on the origins and the presumptive reality of a thing called "Queerness" or a thing called "Blackness" is a tenable intellectual life-project. It can be *a* project, when neatly cordoned off in its reach and the potentialities which I would hope and ask of it and, most importantly, when one is cognisant that one has not exceeded the reach of all that Queer or Black can or might mean by plumbing its meanings within academic discourses and their texts. The supersession and apposition of theory onto the lived and material world, like a corrective lens presupposing a defect of the eye, is a myopic mode of inquiry into the existent. To think of theory and its frameworks not as distinct or corrective to real conditions of life but as concurrent and productive of them can prevent in us the creation of paranoid desires for totalitarian frameworks, a search for the one and only—that is to say, the most powerful—which inherently reduces the

potential for a relation with multiplicity and an active involvement in their production.<sup>40</sup>

To briefly use a well known example of methodological and theoretical "discord" within Queer studies: let's say that Lee Edelman's "antisocial" *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* may very well be a better accomplished and more theoretically coherent work of theory than José Esteban Muñoz' "response," *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, whose central and attractive rhetorical claim of a disagreement with the anti-utopian and anti-futurist position of Edelman's text is argued fairly sporadically, often lost within the proliferation of queer forward-leaning movements and presences which litter its archive.

Edelman's *No Future*, written in the mid 2000s, posed itself as a direct critique of Queer politics' hopefulness and Queer theorising's belief in its inherent radical investments and capacity. Its work is at least dual. On one hand, it is an incisive critique of the struggle for inclusion of Queer-identified people within the realm of the acceptably normative, and it shows-up and takes apart the reformist investments reproduced in the desire for inclusion within the political order. On the other hand, it is a work critical of the investment of Queer theorising itself, and which intends to re-orient the field towards other inquiries and other self-definitions, or, more to the point, a lack thereof. Saliently, it would disaggregate Queerness from identity, and thus from the identitarian desires which dominates the shape of its theorising and its political aims. It would critique the desire to make Queer theory complicit with a theory of the self and with the individual's production of a distinct and coherent personhood. For it is

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<sup>40</sup> In a Guattarian reading, theoretical frameworks would appear not as superposed readings of reality but as inherently tethered to the production of reality and subjectivity. Additionally, in his preface to *Anti Oedipus*, Foucault describes the book as delineating and embodying a set of principles for non-fascist living: one of them being "Free political action from all unitary and totalizing paranoia." See Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press 1983).

specifically this self which Queerness, as that which exceeds and escapes the Symbolic, is not only incompatible with, but absolutely, joyously, and *ethically* destructive of.

Describing his project in *No Future* within a later essay, Edelman explains:

As a name for this limit-experience, this impossible encounter with the zero's negativity before its reconversion into a one, queerness inhabits the place of jouissance as inextricable excess, as antagonistic nonidentity, that animates the Symbolic with its traumatizing energy. It stands, that is, beside other terms (including Woman, Black, Brown, Trans, Subaltern, and Terrorist) as the aporia of ontological exclusion on which a given ontology depends.<sup>41</sup>

From *No Future* itself, he gives us, as well, this passage:

In contrast to what Theodor Adorno describes as the "grimness with which a man clings to himself, as to the immediately sure and substantial," the queerness of which I speak would deliberately sever us from ourselves, from the assurance, that is, of knowing ourselves and hence of knowing our "good."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Lee Edelman, "Learning Nothing," *differences: a Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 28, no. 1 (2017): 164-165. Note on Edelman's usage of "Black" in the quote, as relates to this thesis: that while Warren's work on Blackness (and other Afro-Pessimists texts) do resonate with Edelman's conceptualization of Queerness as not an embodied site of identity but as an ontological excess (the site of *necessary violence and exclusion*), Afro-Pessimism would maintain the specificity of Blackness in this regard; the *condition* which Edelman describes as Queerness' is consonant with their utilisation and analysis of Black being, but their Blackness broaches no possibility of communicability with other excluded terms. See Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Jared Sexton "The Vel of Slavery: Tracking the Figure of the Unsovereign" *Discourse* 38, no. 3 (2016): 445-455; and Warren, "Onticide," 391-418.

<sup>42</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 5.

Edelman refuses to Queerness exactly what Queer theory would utilise as the most important argument for its value: he denies it *a world-historical subjectivity*. Queerness *will not* make us act better, know better, do better, *be* better. Queerness indexes, to the extent that it is indexable, the space in which these anxieties and consideration lose their sense. In announcing *No Future* to Queer theory, Edelman refuses Queerness to history, and history for Queerness. More than anything, he refuses the individualist perversities which accrue to and hide behind Queer theory as radical practice. In that, it is remarkably alike in ethics with Best: it is equally paranoid about what hides behind the desire for a place in history, and as such would rather forfeit it entirely—and enjoin us to do so as well—rather than risk being complicit in it. Edelman's is an astringent ethics of self-refusal.

Muñoz, on the other hand, weaves against Edelman's grain and fears, as a reparative, all the joyfulness which can come from an educated hope in the potentiality of every moment to become, without assurance of certainty, a world-historical action. Muñoz cannot, ethically and emotionally, cast hope away, and neither can he disavow his desire for a different tomorrow, which Edelman discounts as the impossible fantasy of a political sphere unable to imagine itself without repeating itself *ad vitam eternam*. Queerness, in Muñoz's hands, becomes precisely that signifier for what we hope will come—untethered, as per the post-Edelmanian, post-Foucauldian fashion, to any rigid sexual types or identity—and so it becomes the future itself. In a very real sense Muñoz wrote, as a response to Edelman, exactly the sort of manifesto against which Edelman was already writing. To a certain extent, this might be the very intention of Muñoz's text, or at least, forgoing authorial intent, its lasting impact. Muñoz's is the proof, in itself, of pessimism's inability to tamper hope. Calling it a joyful thing is perhaps to put it as well as one can: its tendency and effect is the production of joy, more than of hermeneutical

coherence. In this, and in his continual refusal to let the future be refused to Queerness and, particularly, to Queer thought, Muñoz is much like Best as well. Taking seriously the very real, very concrete *doing* that results from theories which would foreclose the future to Queerness' realm of possibility, Muñoz fights back with the only weapon left to him by Edelman's totalising and brilliantly effective armature. Childishly so, he contests with a resonant: "Well, who says? Look what I can do! And why should I be more wrong? It is not, necessarily, any more true to say that there is "no future" than to say that "the future is Queerness' domain.<sup>43</sup> Don't you know we're in the realm of dreaming up reality, here? We're in the realm of constructing our relation with it, in constructing our understanding of it. So, wouldn't you much rather be saying what I'm saying?" This is not a call to relativism, but to theory's relation to the experienced world, which is not ordained towards certain ideas from above but, rather, *complicit* in the concretisation or seeming-concreteness of one idea over another. In this, Muñoz embodies as well Hartman's relation to theory: that it is a doing which goes much beyond the alignment of words on a page into an intelligent argument or an effective rhetoric, but rather, one whose most important import is in its movement off the page, in what a book or a concept as relational objects can produce within a field of enunciable possibility. And so, he embodies, or I embody, or we embody together, another conception of framework: that it is the choice of which to pursue—a perspectival choice, unordained from above—which most centrally determine a theory's doing, both in terms of its shape and its effects. With Edelman, history knows its necessary foreclosure to Queerness. With Muñoz, it is gifted to Queerness, back again.

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<sup>43</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York City: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

So, let's say that Edelman's text is better argued, more persuasive and convincing. Remains the question of valuation: are we correct in assuming that the stronger and more implacable framework, the one whose claim on reality can hardly be (well) argued against, is the best one to think with? In that it does not permit much else than itself—leaves room only for additions of the same vein, but not for a tenable relation with the differential and the theoretically divergent—it appears that reevaluating what we mean by calling Edelman's the "stronger" theory of Queerness may be a useful and necessary move for us, particularly in thinking again on what we mean to do with theory, and what are the scopes of our hopes and demands for it. It is not anodyne, as well, that while Edelman's argument moves in the valence of negating the actual reality of Queerness—the possibility of an actual individualised or collective relation with the term which would permit movements of coalition and the proliferation of inter-personal and communitarian relations—through an elegant complex of theoretical movements, Muñoz, while also skeptical of etiologial search for the origin or the one "truth" of Queerness, views the experiential relevance of Queerness—or of "Queer" as an identificatory term—as obvious and unquestionable in the material, interpersonal, communitarian and ultimately, in this sense, utopian relations it has engendered and through which it flows. This is Queerness *a posteriori*, as that which will name what we want, what we find good, and what comes as resources to us:

Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness's domain. Queerness is a



structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see  
and feel beyond the quagmire of the present.<sup>44</sup>

Queerness is the name we give to our sociality when it is driven by dreams of an elsewhere, and when this dream drives our being-together: it is the name to what it is to dream-to-be-one, and thus both more, and less, than one. It is not, and does not define, a being in itself, but rather, to use the dated opposition in term, the aspiration towards a becoming un-being-in-itself.

Of course it is utopian, and in that sense also, perhaps troublingly, liable to ignore material realities by preferring its own framework over reality itself. But in Muñoz' utopianism I find, as well, a productive movement, whose production is in the essence and doing of the text. For even the future, in Muñoz, is not the idealism of what is not—and thus the disavowal of what *is*, or the constant revelation that this ideal will not come—but the hope that it will be what is already incipient and anticipatory in the present, that which can only be named "fugitively-future" in its felt manifestation, which cannot quite bear its own weight or explain its own existence. It calls to something foreign, from before, which appears to us as if perhaps from after. "The future" is there nothing else but our relation to the idea of what will come: choosing to discuss it as object of sterility and fear, or as an object of pleasure and a mode of loving what cannot quite yet emerge but which is yet still felt presently, is again a matter of framing and investment. Neither one of these modes can claim correctness in their choice. Simply, it would behoove us to think them through as two (amongst more) attitudes to modes of living: one fearful and sterile, encouraging these affects as the correct mode of relating to life and its uncertain tomorrow, and the other loving and joyfully expectant, as well as actively toiling within wonder and the proliferation of wonder through theory and writing to enact the future

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<sup>44</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

one wants to see emerge. This is not at all to reaffirm the superiority of Muñoz over Edelman, nor to close the debate. Closing the debate out of some notion of having found "the truth" of the matter would be to move against the great productivity which the debate itself has provided Queer thought. "Is the energy given to this debate misguided and would it thus be better utilised elsewhere?" would be another question, but simply and conclusively closing the debate would not, in any case, respond to it nor ameliorate it. Rather, this is to pose the possibility that what we call a "solid" work of theory may not be characteristic of its use for thinking, or of the quality of the thought which can come from it. It *may*, but should it be, its being a strong theory which brooks no digression would not be a part of it. We could do worse, energy wise, than spend some time being skeptical of master narratives or masterful frameworks, and of the affects and security they produce within us.

We do not need to understand where Blackness or Queerness comes from, or have a grasp on what they are to accept the reality of Black or Queer life. The presence of individuals constructing various forms of relationality and meaning-productions out of the vague and inconsistent content of "Black" or "Queer," as terms and concepts, gives them all the conceptual and material weight they need, and that we would need to study them. To move from the observational to the critical and theoretical, rather than vice-versa—to determine what must be studied on the basis of what we can tell is there, rather than determining what it there from study—will mean that a relation to the experienced real is the precondition of theorizing.<sup>45</sup> Of course, "the real" is everywhere, and the University is not exempt from producing reality and being subject to it. But it is

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<sup>45</sup> "A breath of fresh air, a relationship with the outside world." And, 357 (on psychoanalysis and psychoanalysts): "We dream of entering their offices, opening the windows and saying, "It smells stuffy in here—some relation with the outside, if you please." For desire does not survive cut off from the outside, cut off from its economic and social investments and counterinvestments." Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 2.

also a space which lends itself particularly well to the masquerade that the contrary is true: that we are safe and separate from reality within its walls.

Two forms, then, or two poles between which a movement occurs, can be seen here. On one hand, Queer and Black studies are the impetus to form a critique of common-sense reality—common-sense here being the pedestrian assumptions whose ideology and relation of powers, nominally anti-Black and anti-Queer, hides in the propaganda of its obviousness, and whose enemy is critical thought. On the other hand, we can look at these fields through Gramsci's idea of common-sense, which enjoins us to prioritise the relations observed on the grounds of the quotidian, exactly because of the propensity for traditional critiques of the common-sense to lose their aim to uncover more reality and produce more ways to relate to it, in their rush to find the one and best mode of relating to it—where what we desire to uncover is, through an expiation of all the lies, the single universal principle which dominates all instincts and multiplicities.<sup>46</sup> There is a divergent continuity and not a contradictory break between these two modes of seeing. One comes to feed the other when needed. In their opacity to non-relational or non-contingent (that is, stable and absolute) origins, both "Black" and "Queer" can lend themselves to modes of study whose relation to history and usage of the past, as determinant of and for the present and the future, is centred in a search for origin and clarity. This seems normal, as far as intellectual processes go: where the early theorists of Blackness and Queerness sought to cast doubts on their categorical reality, a desire to fill

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<sup>46</sup> I draw this usage of common-sense from Saidiya Hartman's introduction to *Scenes of Subjection*: "I use the term 'commonsense' purposely to underline what Antonio Gramsci described as the 'chaotic aggregate of disparate conceptions' that conform with 'the social and cultural position of those masses whose philosophy it is.' It is a conception of world and life 'implicit to a large extent in determinate strata of society' and 'in opposition to 'official' conceptions of the world.'" Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 13.

these gaps in reason appears.<sup>47</sup> To realise that this reflex is an epistemological desiring imperative similar to the kind of categorisation that litters the Western metaphysical canon is to take a critical stance on our very desire to critique, and to, instead, allow Queerness and Blackness to remain fundamentally defined as relational and contingent, multiple and productive, and most of all, allow the fact that these may be the only categorical thing we can say about them with any sort of definitiveness be enough. This has come to matter to me beyond and over concerns of truth, or even of rigour: the use of theoretical knowledge and conceptual thinking to figure out more and more ways to be in relation. And it is only possible to be in relation with what is. Even when questioning its attributes and the particularities of its appearance and its substance, the is-ness of Queerness and Blackness, almost mythical but also, and at the same time, absolutely empirical (in that they both, in quite a similar way, demand a radical belief and trust in the existence of what appears to be) cannot be questioned entirely—at least, not in a way where its being questioned could potentially erase our consciousness of it. Writing this, I am reminded of a certain vein of comments given to Fred Moten's work, whose devotion to a critique of every precepts and values tethered, close or far, to Humanism and the categorical imperative is matched only by his love of Blackness, his inciting and reciting of it—even as he would enjoin us to consider Blackness as separate from Black people. Some of these commentaries note the paradoxes within his theorisation, its inability to sustain criticisms and inquiry at a structural level. Here is Parisa Vaziri:

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<sup>47</sup> The two key texts which come to my mind to illustrate this move, respectively for Queer and Black studies, are Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: The Will to Knowledge* (New York City: Pantheon Books, 1978), and Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), both of which trouble the "reality" of the "Homosexual" or the "Negro" (as typical embodiments of Queerness and Blackness) as figures, insofar as the claim to truth of this reality operates as technology of regulation and control upon those it designates.

In Hartman, Sharpe and Wilderson, the force of repetition in black performance marks the incompleteness and impossibility of redress; in Moten that force is heightened and deepened, abstracted into a meditation on repetition as the very condition of possibility for performance and meaning itself—but along the way of that meditation, redress must itself diminish in scale, if not disappear as a problem: jazz fills and coincides with a space earlier filled with screams, or the silence covering their wake. And that is the point. There, in sum, in this place of aporia, there is no longer any problem. Not that, alas or fortunately, the solutions have been given, but because one could no longer even find a problem that would constitute itself and that one could keep in front of oneself as presentable object.<sup>48</sup>

And here, Calvin Warren:

If the issue with African American Criticism is that it is preoccupied with ontology and formations of anti-Blackness that sustain it, according to Moten, then we might say that it is ontological thinking that is at the root of this problem. We forget blackness because we are unable to disentangle our investigations from the thinking and procedure of Western ontology and metaphysics. To address this, Moten wants to ‘think otherwise’ (much like Heidegger attempted to do with his concept *An-denken*). But herein lies the problem: Moten is still entangled

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<sup>48</sup> Parisa Vaziri, "Blackness and the Metaethics of the Object," *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* no. 29 (2016): para. 24-25, accessed February 18, 2019, <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue29/vaziri.html>.

in the very metaphysical-ontological enterprise he wants to escape because his analytic depends on the distinction between blackness and blacks. (...) Moten is as much obsessed with ontology as Afro-Pessimists. But this obsession is inescapable; there is no way out (which is what Afro-Pessimists have been emphasizing).<sup>49</sup>

Looked at closely enough, with critical (and destructive) intention, Moten's theoretical armature simply folds. The wonder of a *consent not to be a single being* cannot survive the authority and implacability of *Ontological Terror*. But I like to think of what holds it together, and what would hold us to doing the work of holding it together, when reading him. I would call this a desire for relation. Sentimentally, I would call it love.

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<sup>49</sup> Calvin Warren, "Black Mysticism: Fred Moten's Phenomenology of (Black) Spirit," *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 65, no. 2 (2017): 227.

## ii. hope in study.

Theory may be more and less productive than it is often assumed to be in critical studies circle. It is a tool whose use demands a sharpened attention to the techniques of its grasping and wielding. I offered earlier that theory and its framework could not supplant observable reality; that its best use may lie in how it allows us to perceive more reality, not less; and that theory can easily lend itself to being a tool used for, or whose byproduct is, the lessening of reality and the divergent and chaotic mass of information it holds and sends forward. Theory cannot replace reality and immediate conditions or the needs these engender, which may appear and disappear without reason and outside of our ability to predict them. We will never know with certainty what is needed before it is needed. In Lee Edelman's version of Queerness, this becomes part and parcel of the ethics of Queer writing and Queer thinking. To think queerly is to be forcefully thrust into the limits of theory to predict and deliver what will sustain us and permit our survival, or more ambitiously the success of our aims. As he disclaims of his own work at the outset of *No Future*: "I do not intend to propose some 'good' that will thereby be assured. To the contrary, I mean to insist that nothing, and certainly not what we call the 'good', can ever have any assurance at all in the order of the Symbolic."<sup>50</sup> This is not to say that the goal of attempting to predict what might be the best use of our time, so that we may gather our strength for immediate action when the need springs up, is not noble. Indeed, groundwork preparation for efficient upcoming action, rooted in careful analysis of present conditions, may be a benchmark of good scholarship and theorizing. It is when this work devolves into an attempt to reach certainty, and when this certainty comforts us and allows us to relinquish our relation to a contingent and mutable reality and its immediate conditions—the mad and constant production of the socius—that our

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<sup>50</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 4.

faith in theory's all-power may have gone too far. Which, yet again, is not the same as saying that theory's comforting effect is proof of having fallen down a dangerous path, leading to complacency. Comfort is not the enemy, and neither is the search for the lessening of anxiety which a vaster and improved knowledge of the world around us and our conditions of living can provide. All this is human, and as we will see, present in many theories which would disavow it.

One's first years studying the critical Humanities tends to lead one towards to formulate for oneself, though perhaps implicitly, the following credo: "if thinking it comforts me, I'm probably not thinking about it well—or deeply—enough." Considering the state of the world, the continuing quotidian and structural violence which legal victories and the spread of civil and Human rights hides, the sharpening of inequalities and suffering obfuscated by a narrative of technological, democratic, and Human progress, all this which can unfurl under one's eye once one is given the critical tools to unreel the covers of the world, the only ethical and intelligent position which seems worth taking becomes constant paranoia, a strict habit of self-reflection to seek out what in the body and the mind asks for respite and hope to make sure, make certain, that one is not looking away from the horror that lingers, obviously or not, everywhere and at every strata of reality. Concurrently, one's investment in understanding the true recourses under which the social and political functions, though incipiently directed outwards, can risk a return towards the self, and its desire to construct for oneself the body of the times, the one that says the right things, sits in the right aisles, fights the good fights for



the good reasons: a secure body.<sup>51</sup> With even one's motives to take up the right arguments being potentially corruptible, or corrupt at the core, and the hallmark of these right arguments appearing under the guise of paranoia and the confirmation of its worst case scenario—it really *is* as bad as you think it is, *always*, unless it's actually *worse*—it dauntingly appears to the critical scholar that there is no way to correlate careful study of the world (its past and its present) with a hope for it, or to consider this study and its undertaking with anything resembling joy. Or, differently, that this hope—since stopping fighting certainly cannot be *more* ethical—has to be carried with clear eyes, that is, hopelessly, and certainly joylessly. Here Jared Sexton, on #BlackLivesMatter and activism in the midst of unredeemable anti-Black weather:

You live out a valueless form of life whose value exists as potential in and of another world, a higher-dimensional space. You cannot protect yourself and you will not be saved. You will learn that lesson to the young ones and pass it on to them as a mission or a curse. You cannot protect them with your love or advice and no one has yet devised an art of war sufficient to the task. The hatred of the world is upon you. It is also within you. It is the substance of your waking dreams, “the single most constant fact of [your]

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<sup>51</sup> This idea currently travels under the name of “woke,” or “wokeness.” One, ideally, would be “woke” to (cognisant of) the realities and machinations of structural oppressions. Note that this, when rigorously utilized, “wokeness” is not meant as a constant or stable state: one does not become woke like a flip is switched on. “Being woke” is a condition of constant criticality and attention. The imperative verb most accurately associated to the adjective “woke” is not “be,” but, “stay”—as in, in the lyrics of Childish Gambino’s “Redbone”: “But *stay woke*!” Like much other contemporary criticism and critical stances, “wokeness” travels as well under Paul Ricoeur’s “hermeneutics of suspicion.” See Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), and Eve Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 124.

existence.” *None of which diminishes your desire to fight.* {emphasis mine}<sup>52</sup>

Hope, here, is theorised as a forwardness, as the manifestation of a constant movement, a constant struggle. But it is certainly not a feeling, and certainly, if feeling it has to be, not a good one. Its beauty, its essential goodness, is heightened by the tragedy of all the odds it runs against; or rather, these very tragic odds may be the legitimators of its goodness. Hope is nothing else than hopelessness in movement, just as life is nothing else than the slowness of quotidian dying.

These are the circles of affect in which Queer negativity and Afro-Pessimism thread, at any rate. Is there a modality of hopefulness which can lend itself to their sort of rigorous radicalism—when radicalism understands itself as a clear vision of all the hopelessness which surrounds us? Hope is a powerful, seductive, cruel thing. To fight against it—against the risk of giving ourselves to it as we so dearly desire to, only to have our hopes dashed, as desires so often end up as so many lessons in disappointment—we might attempt to gird ourselves with reason's criticality and objectivity, and grow attached to criticisms of hope as a neoliberal affect and of hopelessness as a comparatively just position, of hope as proof of an intellectual weakness, or worse, of the capacity and willingness for hope a weakness of character.<sup>53</sup> Not, necessarily, a wholly defining one, but, always, characterising a moment of weakness, an inability to, as Frank Wilderson III put it, "stay in the hold," a submission to "fantasies of flight," and the privilege of making the choice to refuse the hold of the hold—that is, of the hold of the slave ship, Blackness' traumatic and paradigmatic moment of birth.<sup>54</sup> We have already

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<sup>52</sup> Jared Sexton, "Unbearable Blackness," *Cultural Critique* no. 90 (2015): 162.

<sup>53</sup> Lisa Duggan and José Esteban Muñoz, "Hope and Hopelessness: a Dialogue," *Women and Performance*, no. 2 (2009): 276.

<sup>54</sup> Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, xi.

encountered this stance in Stephen Best's criticism of it: it is the consideration that any ethical standing and enunciation must not lose sight of from whence one speaking, and towards whom, positions which in Black studies will conflate of the slave (the figure for which reparations are intended) with the Black scholar. This is what it entails to speak from the hold, the place of death and birth, of the loss of origins and of the creation *ex nihilo* of the Black slave, from whose being-in-the-world "existence without a standing" had to be improvised. This impossibility of standing, ongoing and defining, defines the para-ontological relation to any claim upon being and any existence which can accrue to Blackness for Fred Moten:

I will seek to begin to explore not just the absence but the refusal of standpoint, to actually explore and to inhabit and to think what Bryan Wagner calls "existence without standing" from no standpoint because this is what it would truly mean to remain in the hold of the ship (when the hold is thought with properly critical, and improperly celebratory, clarity). What would it be, deeper still, what is it, to think from no standpoint; to think outside the desire for a standpoint? What emerges in the desire that constitutes a certain proximity to that thought is not (just) that blackness is ontologically prior to the logistic and regulative power that is supposed to have brought it into existence but that blackness is prior to ontology; or, in a slight variation of what Chandler would say, blackness is the anoriginal displacement of ontology, that it is ontology's anti- and ante-foundation, ontology's

underground, the irreparable disturbance of ontology's time and space.<sup>55</sup>

To theorise outside of the hold is to lose sight of the most crucial and urgent reason *for* theorising: that it is all done for *them*, those who have been in the hold, and to remind Black scholars that *they* are no different from *them*, that the hold has not ceased holding, that the conditions of survival and present freedom cannot be defined as a move from the inside to the outside of the hold, but in the hold's mutation and our own. "The slave ship, the womb and the coffin, and the long dehumanizing project; we continue to feel and be the fall . . . out."<sup>56</sup> To choose flight from these realities is to refuse those bodies in the hold which Wilderson, Moten and Sharpe conjure for us to attend to, those bodies which they also claim, in claiming claimlessness, as theirs. Is the hold nothing more than hopelessness given locus and physical representability, the transmission of hopelessness, the call to our submission to it? If we think of hopelessness as the impossibility of movement, as inertia in the face of the weight of history, we can also think of the hold's hopelessness as the "traumatic model of Black studies" "in which the present is merely an endless, Oedipal repetition of slavery and Jim Crow; a rigid relation to temporality of "narrative stiffness" (...) which feels like the generations marching in lockstep."<sup>57</sup> The ethical imperative is to recognize the ways in which the hold still structurally organises Black life and Blackness's claim to life. It is not just that ethical Black theory would write itself in the hopeless hope of repairing what is irreparable but must still be constantly gestured to: it is that in recognising most acutely what it was to be in the hold of the ship, Black scholars are given the cognitive schema to recognize

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<sup>55</sup> Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (2013): 738-739.

<sup>56</sup> Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 74.

<sup>57</sup> Best, *None Like Us*, 6.

their own conditions of existence, the conditions in which Black life can, and can't, exist. The purpose of the hold, when adjoined to an analytical method of study, is to reveal the truth of present conditions, even as a hyperbolic metaphor. The truth is, or would, be, that nothing else is comparable to Black life other than the hold of the ship; that we talk of metaphor and not comparison because any moment of Black life is incommensurate, undefinable, improvisatory. The hold, as a purely negative site, where things go to die and disappear in obscurity, is the only substantive tenancy of Blackness. Should Blackness appear, it is the hold which holds its substance into the light.

This is true, but not the whole story, or the whole range of stories to which the hold metaphorically offers itself. For Moten and Harney, for instance, the hold is not merely the place of enlightenment but also that of visionaries: "And so it is we remain in the hold, in the break, as if entering again and again the broken world, to trace the visionary company and join it."<sup>58</sup> As well, to have to refuse "fantasies of flight"<sup>59</sup> in the hold must mean that "there are flights of fantasy in the hold of the ship."<sup>60</sup> "The ordinary fugue and fugitive run of the language lab, black phonography's brutally experimental venue. Paraontological totality is in the making. Present and unmade in presence, blackness is an instrument in the making. *Quasi una fantasia* in its paralegal swerve, its mad-worked braid, the imagination produces nothing but exsensus in the hold."<sup>61</sup> The hold, here, is always already more than its hopelessness and pure negativity. Something must have happened in this dark and unplaceable space. The necessity of invention for a people who, for the first time, were not people, had to become something

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<sup>58</sup> Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Minor Compositions, 2013), 94.

<sup>59</sup> Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, xi.

<sup>60</sup> Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*, 94.

<sup>61</sup> Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*, 94.

else. Those theoreticians of the commodity would have that "something" defined by he or she who owned the slave; remember that the commodity does not speak. But it is, to cross Wilderson and Moten, the unspeakable ethics of the commodity, the resistance of the object, to be the visionary of its own impossible speech.<sup>62</sup> If hopelessness is inertia, and if hope is movement, then the hold, hopelessness' hold on us, is here the very condition of hope, Fanon's leap, "the real leap" which "consists in introducing invention into existence."<sup>63</sup> Like life and death, like optimism and pessimism, hope and hopelessness know in Black studies a relational entanglement which renders impossible dialectical thinking through the oppositional logics of negation. "The tension regards the emphasis on or orientation toward life or death, or the thought of the relation between the two, as it plays out within a global history of slavery and freedom."<sup>64</sup> This means that the presencing of hope need not be defined, or undertaken as, the disavowal of hopelessness, but rather, that hopelessness is the fertile grounds from which hope takes flight. The opposition between pessimism and optimism in Black studies is, to affirm Jared Sexton, a question of emphasis: two sides of the same coin, the pessimists will settle in an ascesis of hopelessness as the only grounds from which hope as flight might someday come, though always unbidden and always by surprise, while the optimists will keep mining the hopeless for hope, knowing it to be there. The point of this tightrope act on both side is to not disavow one's entanglement with the other. Hope unmediated by the hopeless tends to becomes aimless and pointless sentimentalism and hedonism. Hopelessness for its own sake tends towards becomes inert and cynical nihilism. The

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<sup>62</sup> "Unspeakable Ethics" and "Resistance of the Objects" are the titles given to the introductory chapters of, respectively: Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 1; and Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1.

<sup>63</sup> Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, 179.

<sup>64</sup> Jared Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death," 15.

problem—my problem—is: does critical scholarship permit, or encourage, such mediations and exchanges?

One concept unites both Queer utopianism and Queer negativity, as well as Afro-Pessimists and Black Optimism: that *we will not know*. Not, merely, what Black is and what Queer is, though it may be from these incipient frustrations that we gain the ascetic skill of submitting to ignorance. More radically, Black studies and Queer studies interrupt the University's relentless knowledge-production by presenting themselves as antithetic to the intelligible. "Opacity" is the key tenet of all these divergences into the uncertain ontology of Queerness and Blackness. In my usage of "opacity" here, I remain faithful to Edouard Glissant's usage of the term. As Stephen Best puts it:

In *Poetics of Relation*, Edouard Glissant called for the "right to opacity for everyone" and for a cultural criticism willing to *moderate its epistemological ambitions* because, as he understood *the relation between ethics and epistemology*, "to feel in solidarity with {the other} or to build with him or to like what he does, it is not necessary for me to *grasp* him." {emphasis mine.}

If Blackness and Queerness fascinate as objects of study, and cannot help but prompt a constant increase of study in their name, it is precisely in the ways they evade such grasping. Putatively, the study of such fugitive objects would teach us, in our devoted attention, to desire otherwise than through the scholar's grasp. However, are we doing anything else, when we write about Queerness or Blackness, than attempting to grasp what is, thankfully, impossible to hold, and is the inoculation of Blackness and Queerness to certainty our only claim to an ethics of opacity? Is the study of Queerness and Blackness an education into Queer and Black *thinking*? Or have we already gone past such thinking at the moment where we have collected this thinking into canonised,

reproducible and transmissive Queer and Black thought—or even Queer and Black curricula? What will it be to teach Queerness, or Blackness? But more precisely, what will it be *here*, in the University, with its economy of epistemological ambitions, and its desire shaped by the grasp?

In Queer negativity and Afro-Pessimism, Queerness and Blackness' privileged relation to opacity lies in their ability to characterise the unknown symbolically and affectively: as its denomination, and via the fear and existential terror which the inkling of its existence, when named and thus open for thought, begets. Queerness and Blackness both refuse themselves to knowledge, and present us the haunting sentiment of groundlessness which the Symbolic and its categories would have us forget. They exist, and have been named, so that we do not forget the hopelessness which litters and founds existence, as it struggles tirelessly against it. Whereas in Queer utopianism and Black optimism, Queerness and Blackness similarly escape knowingness, if not the desire for knowing itself—and here the escape is joyful, salubrious, the condition of life. Its mere theorizing can even bring joy, the joy of reiterating the drive to life which links one back to ancestries of survival. Queer theorizing and Black thought can come to meld the evocative beauty of description which seeks to let escape what it names (a paradoxical and nuanced dance), and the founding of community ties as a similitude of feeling-for. Worth noting is that the differentiation between the two veins addressed here is actually more infinitesimally small than the oppositional taxonomy of pessimism and optimism would seem to indicate: what we see here is that in both cases, Queerness and Blackness is invested with the radical possibility of opacity, and their study, on *both sides*, is thus determined by a desiring-relation with this potentiality, with what might come of the unknown and the unthinkable. If differentiation there must be, it lies solely in which affects each side prescribes as the correct mode of relation and desire for this shared



investment in the radical in and of the unknown. Afro-Pessimism and Queer negativity would enjoin us towards a feeling-for hopelessness; Black optimism and Queer utopianism towards a feeling-for hope: but both are modes of access for the same object of desire, and define the same investment and enjoyment in study, the same criterion of object choice, and thus the same relation to study and conception of its ends. The difference of how this relation ought to be affectively lived and undertaken, however, is not inconsequential.

What I intend by foregrounding this overarching complicity with opacity, riddled with inner differentiations and discord as it is, is to propose a framework of my own as to how to think of Blackness and Queerness in conjunction. Rather than adjudicating between the relative claim to truth of either of these camps against the other, we might find it more profitable to stay within the more sober questioning of what it is that all of these modes of relation to the subject of Blackness and Queerness reveal about the desires and the beliefs of their practitioners, and what these want to bring into, or say about, the world. I think it may be worth considering Blackness and Queerness, as they exist within the texts which seek to define them, more as objects of desire than objects of analysis, or truth. From there, the study of Blackness and Queerness would tend towards being the study of what we desire and believe we ought to uphold within the practice of study, with Blackness and Queerness as perhaps particularly porous and thus ideal sites of analysis. To gaze at these fields and their movements with attention can inform us on differing valences and ethics of study as a mode of relating to and acting within the world. It can thus be indicative, in the modality its practice takes, of one's conception of reality, and from there, it can thus permit one to draw one's own informed principles of study and what one aims to do with it—with the inference that this will

have something to do with one's conclusion of what study even *is*. One would try, of course, not to be too dogmatic about the matter.

For instance: what does it mean for Lee Edelman's to title a conference paper, "There Is No Freedom To Enjoy"—and to pursue, through his argumentation, this statement in its most totalised implication and implacable truth?<sup>65</sup> What of the way Afro-Pessimists have taken Saidiya Hartman's pronouncement of the non-event of abolition to curtail the possibilities of freedom for American Blacks, into the realm of the ontological and into the study of Blackness and Black being *qua* being? What should we make of Calvin Warren titling the introduction to his book on Blackness and being "The Free Black is Nothing"?<sup>66</sup> What can be said of these rhetorical statements and assertive framing devices? What do they aim to do? And what do they *actually* do? What are the investments, desires, aims and ethics which lie between each iteration of this theoretical questioning of freedom's reach and possibility? How may we adjudicate their individual validity? And, most importantly, what have been the previously and currently sanctified modes of evaluating the intellectual and political value of each of these claims within their context of enunciation, academic discourse and research? What might it mean to formulate a theoretical armature based on the refusal of freedom to our enjoyment, and thus, correlatively, what might it do to spend one's intellectual energy to such a question? And, can, or should philosophical inquiry be subjected to such questions of valuation? Is study not, always, a good for itself, its own justification? And if it is not, if it is the case that it is never self-justified, but only so in select instantiations, what distinguishes study and philosophical inquiries that are value in themselves from inquiries that are not? What is the inherent value unique to study and philosophical

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<sup>65</sup> Lee Edelman, "There Is No Freedom To Enjoy," paper presented at the 2015 Summer School for Sexualities, Culture and Politics, Belgrade, Serbia, August 2015.

<sup>66</sup> Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 1.

inquiry? These are the broader question which orient my own inquiry into these specific moments of Queer and Black scholarships. Through it, I track the hidden investments and modes of valuations which have conducted my own research and philosophical conduct into the field of Black and Queer theorising. As such, this thesis does not linger far away from its own hermeneutics of suspicion, though it would place at its centre the hope that study would present another mode of value and doing than an endless repetition of suspicion and illumination, of forays into the becoming-master which the accumulation and performance of knowledge makes possible.

Lee Edelman's pronouncement that "there is no freedom to enjoy" may be considered as an assertion against the concept of freedom itself in the sense that, while it does not appear in the paper he gave at the IPAK Centar of Singidunum University during the 2015 Summer School of Sexuality, Culture and Politics, it is the title of his paper, and, for all intents and purposes, would seem as such to be conclusion to which he would orient his listeners towards both prior and during his presentation.<sup>67</sup> As a provocative statement, it functions rhetorically to destabilise comfortable assumptions at the outset. Quoting from the paratext of his lecture series at the IPAK Centar, Edelman frames his intervention as such:

"There is no Freedom to Enjoy" puts Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* into dialogue with contemporary anti-queer discourses to trouble the link between reason and freedom that informs both our pedagogy and our politics. Taken together, these lectures will suggest that the discourse of freedom remains bound

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<sup>67</sup> This Summer program could be noted as a fairly prolific site of Queer theorizing, attracting such "star scholars" of the field as Jack Halberstam, Ann Cvetkovich, Lauren Berlant, Lynne Huffer, and of course, Lee Edelman.

to the hope of freedom from the ab-sense, the pure negativity, or the nothing induced by the queer.<sup>68</sup>

We return here to the conceptualisation of Queerness as a desirable object of study in its very opacity to sense. Queerness is the Lacanian *ab-sense* given name and locality: it is what terrorises as the putative destructor of the Symbolic, and to any tether we hold to life as it can be known and experienced as liveable.<sup>69</sup> It is in this conceptualisation and for its destructive potential that Queerness is so valued in Queer negativity, and more broadly in Queer theory in general. Again, the differentiation between the Queer utopian and the Queer negativist need not be thought of as a divergence in valuation or investments in their object: *both* perceive Queerness as imbued with revolutionary potential in its very refusal of sense which makes it the object of violence and abjection of the so-called normative socius. The difference is that of the affects one can derive from this potent abjection: where the Queer utopian would tend to see in Queerness' privileged relation with the unknown, and thus with the radically transformative, possibilities for a better life, more pleasure, and the multiplication of socialities and enjoyment—all in all, the hope for the creation of a future which would better suit our desires—the Queer negativist would refuse to himself these aspirations, and turn his desiring investments in Queerness' radicalism rather towards its potential for pure destruction. We have here the same theorisation of Queerness as object of study and political actant, and more importantly, the same conceptualisation and relation to study as object and source of investment: but we arrive to a diverging quality of investments. Another study could undertake a survey of the types and temperaments studying each field, and perhaps draw interesting conclusions on the desires which

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<sup>68</sup> Edelman, "There Is No Freedom To Enjoy."

<sup>69</sup> Edelman, "Learning Nothing," 125.

underlies the investment of their scholars into each side's preferred outcome: creation, or destruction. This thesis cannot quite reach this far, but it would consider itself in the vein, or as precursor, of such a project, as it fits within the question underpinning the whole of my writings here: what do we want when we do theory? What drives us? To what ends to our desires and investment tend?

Here as in prior examples, we can determine that Lee Edelman's theorising and conception of Queerness would canalise its capacity for pure destruction by not only disavowing but impossibilising any putative potentiality for creation it may be invested with. As an agent of destruction—or destruction itself—Queerness must necessarily differentiate itself from the civilisational instincts canalised in the desire for and valuation of freedom. It is not merely that Queerness cannot give us freedom because Queerness cannot give us *anything*: this refusal would define part of *No Future's* argument, in its critique of the identiarian pleasures of Queerness, but is here extended. The desire for freedom, Edelman argues in his lecture, is irredeemably tethered to the desire for freedom *from* Queerness as the inescapable influence of the passions over reason. Freedom, so conceived, becomes the organisation of our passions by reason, the adoration of reason as guaranteeing us access to "the good" which Queerness destabilises. We will go back to Edelman's utilisation of the concept of freedom in order to define his Queerness, but, all in all, Edelman's argument in his lecture is here less interesting to me than his broader rhetorical strategy in choosing "No Freedom To Enjoy" as the main frame and, supposedly, conclusion of his intervention, and less interesting than what this signifies about what we do when we bring up and conceptualise Queerness. According to Edelman, Queerness is "pure negativity," the "nothing" that "cannot and must not be taught: cannot because it is not transmissible in the formal sequence of a truth and must not because it threatens pedagogy's rootedness

in sublimation."<sup>70</sup> Edelman, and Queer negativity in general, as an ascetic and astringent ethic of self-refusal, would have as its main import a conceptual making of Queerness which makes it impossible to relate to and compose with. Queerness is not available to us; in our very discussion of it, we can only be speaking of a non-relation. We find, in Afro-Pessimism, a similar movement. Consider this section from Wilderson's *Incognegro: a Memoir of Exile and Apartheid*:

I am nothing, Naima, and you are nothing: the unspeakable answer to your question within your question. This is why I could not—would not—answer your question that night. Would I ever be with a Black woman again? It was earnest, not accusatory—I know. And nothing terrifies me more than such a question asked in earnest. It is a question that goes to the heart of desire, to the heart of our black capacity to desire. But if we take out the nouns that you used (nouns of habit that get us through the day), your question to me would sound like this: Would nothing ever be with nothing again?<sup>71</sup>

Wilderson translates here a question posed to him by a Black woman on his relation with other Black people ("Will you ever be with a Black woman again?") into one which, to his view, would more accurately recognise the actual being of Black people, that is their non-being ("Will nothing ever be with nothing again?"). This proposes a similar conceptualisation of Blackness to that of Queerness which we have been discussing, as a term and a concept already forbidding itself to us as we attempt to relate to, and compose with it. This would be the strength of Blackness and Queerness as objects of study: they dismantle the possibility of knowledge and epistemological grasp

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<sup>70</sup> Edelman, "There Is No Freedom To Enjoy."

<sup>71</sup> Frank B. Wilderson, *Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile & Apartheid* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 265.

at every level. Theoretically and politically, certainly. But personally as well, that is, emotionally and psychically. I do not refuse the psychic and personal truth which accrues to Wilderson's words, and I am prepared to posit the same may be said of Edelman's relation to Queerness—with the caveat that "Queer" may already come with the possibility of personal disinvestment and emotional distance, which is to say that "Queer" may be easier to conceive as a purely theoretical term to compose with, whereas the relation of "Black" to the personal would require an actual movement of disinvestment which would take one outside psychic comfort and safety. When I addended that the aim of Queer negativity and Afro-Pessimism was the refusal of relation "theoretically"—or, rather, let's state it as the following, since I think it more closely defines the relationship Afro-Pessimists and Queer negativists to their theoretical output: the realisation that we have already been refused a relation to Blackness or Queerness, that this refusal is the substance of Blackness and Queerness itself—what I meant by it was that I do not think we have here painted a full, or absolutely transparent, picture. We have indeed only defined Blackness and Queerness as it is constructed within Queer negativity and Afro-Pessimism: that is, within the bounds of their discourse. Within Afro-Pessimist and Queer negativity texts, Blackness and Queerness' only value is in their refusal to sense, the known, and thus to valuation itself. They are invaluable as well as un-knowable; they will not let us know "the good," or our "selves." But, we must now ask: are such definitions of Blackness and Queerness not, already, modes of relating and composing with them into the arrival at some kind of knowability of existence and being? Are these conceptualisations not already imprinted, in the very drive which carries their enunciation, by a desire to understand and know our conditions of existence? That is, is their very conceptualisation as paragons of opacity and non-relation not already a form a rendering them knowledgeable and transparent, in the

mode of epistemological inquiry Glissant tracks all throughout Western thought's attempts to define the "universal," and which he opposes to opacity? From *Poetics of Relation*:

The universal—this generalizing edict that summarized the world as something obvious and transparent, claiming for it one presupposed sense and one destiny. He plunges into the opacities of that part of the world to which he has access. Generalization is totalitarian: from the world it chooses one side of the reports, one set of ideas, which it sets apart from others and tries to impose by exporting as a model. The thinking of errantry conceives of totality but willingly renounces any claims to sum it up or to possess it.<sup>72</sup>

Entering still more thoroughly in paranoid readings and the hermeneutics of suspicion, what if we thought of it in those terms: what if Afro-Pessimism and Queer negativity's stated investment in Queerness and Blackness as objects that do not merely index the opaque, but would teach us—forcefully, with or without or consent—to desire it, was *itself* imprinted by an investment in the transparency of generalisation which defines Western thought and its desire for knowledge as the masterful grasp of epistemology; what if, stating an investment (desiring and ideological, personal and political) in one thing, its actual doing enacted and propagated its reverse? This mode of thought may be the epitome of paranoid reading—what Sedgwick termed the "drama of exposure" as the rhetorical and critical structure and mode of valuation of successful study, in which the "residual residual forms of essentialism lurking behind apparently nonessentialist forms of analysis," the "unconscious drives or compulsions underlying the apparent play of literary forms," and the "violent or oppressive

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<sup>72</sup> Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 20–21.



historical forces masquerading under liberal aesthetic guise," must be brought to light.<sup>73</sup> Like other structures, the drama of exposure carries with it its investments and modes of desires, which means that acquiescence to its functioning and its reproduction brings with it positive affects. All this is built in; it's how it functions, in the same way that anti-Black structures function via the affective rewards and punishments they offer those who, respectively, maintain and challenge them. I am invested in study as a mode of getting behind and beneath too much not to reproduce this structure at every level of thought: I am textually, actively against it, but this does not mean that it does not structure my approach to study and to thinking itself, and, as demonstrated here, it does not mean that it does not crop up in my efforts to do otherwise. It is, indeed, the very not-so-hidden structure of my arguments for and efforts towards an otherwise way of study, which enables me to assert that study's form and study's content may, at times, be at completely opposite desiring and ideological ends. This is to be expected. On her friend Cindy Patton's refusal of paranoia regarding the question of the U.S. government's responsibility in the AIDS crisis and as a methodological preamble to her opposition of reparative and paranoid tendencies, Sedgwick notes:

I am also, in the present project, interested in doing justice to the powerful reparative practices that, I am convinced, infuse self-avowedly paranoid critical projects, as well as in the paranoid exigencies that are often necessary for non paranoid knowing and utterance. For example, Patton's calm response to me about the

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<sup>73</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 8.

origins of HIV drew on a lot of research, her own and other people's, much of which required being paranoiacally structured.<sup>74</sup>

I'll posit as well that in so far as a repeated form is much quicker to produce its own logics of reproduction than a repeated content, the ethics of forms of argumentation may be the most important site to analyse and study—not, by any means, to police (although...), but to pay attention to as the privileged site of effects.

When Lee Edelman motions that "there is no freedom to enjoy" and when Calvin Warren reminds us, in the vein of Wilderson, that "the free Black is nothing," we are meant to take these statements as incentives to challenge corrosive understandings of freedom, to reexamine our deleterious investments and bad desires for a construct that is fundamentally anti-Black and anti-Queer. Queerness and Blackness, these thinkers posit, when well studied—that is, to their limit, and perhaps necessarily past our hopes, desires and comforts—permit this thought of the outside, this vision of the structures of thought and investments which keep us entrenched within the old order of thought, and from which we must emancipate ourselves. All well and good, but then—how are Blackness and Queerness here conceptualised and used, by these thinkers, any differently than as the reason which comes to rule our passions and show us the proper way towards the good? How is emancipation, and thus freedom, not itself fetishised *again*, and here even more intensely, as it stands in itself as its own pure value, since it is not and cannot be attached to any other value or expected good, but can only promise itself—freedom, emancipation, from everything and anything, *constant* freedom, the constant freedom of the critical intellectual who will never be fooled, who will always be one step ahead of all his own desires and investments?

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<sup>74</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 128-129.

This is where it may become necessary to differentiate between the "freedom" which appears in these texts, which is to say "freedom" as indexing a roster of traditional, reformist and unthought investments and beliefs from which we'd like to emancipate ourselves, and the "freedom" towards which they would tend in their ultimate politics and as the aim which justifies their philosophical takes as the formation of an ethic, which is to say "freedom" as the abolition of anti-Queerness and anti-Blackness and the possibility for those stigmatised under these terms of a fuller claim to existence and a greater protection from violence and senseless death. We will differentiate these instantiations of freedom going forward—freedom as rhetorical concept mobilised in texts for the sake of freedom as material reality—as "conceptual freedom" and "actual freedom." Much like for Best contra Hartman, I won't here put in question the ethical investments and beliefs which either underlie these texts of Afro-Pessimism and Queer negativity or are held personally by their authors. What I will do, what I am trying to do, is propose that if such an ethical investment towards actual communities and the defence of actual people does form the root and rationale of their texts, then we can assess critically whether the structure of their argument—critique, and its investments and accompanying modes of desiring and valuation—is the most expedient and direct method for such a doing—or whether, perhaps, there is something in the investments and method of critique which prevents the accomplishments of these aims. Insofar as our primary and traditional investments and definitions may prevent us from seeing and actualising our practice of freedom, or our strategies to enhance the freedom of others, or from acknowledging as emanations of freedom the minor practices of subjugated communities and their own definitions of freedom and unfreedom, such a challenge to received knowledges moves towards the instantiation of actual freedom. On another level, such a challenge instantiates, when actual freedom is coincided with conceptual

freedom, an encouragement not only to rethink what we mean by "freedom," but whether freedom *can* mean, and as such whether it can be said to exist seriously enough to warrant consideration and action in its favour, or in another register, whether its meaning or existence, serious or not, can ever mean anything good—whether we can ever be correct in pursuing its meaning and existence in any mode, strata or thought and action or formulation.

"There is no freedom to enjoy" and "the free Black is nothing" as rhetorical and contemplative injections into the history of a philosophical concept, and the same statements as a political precept to utilise with regards to political fights and movement for rights and equal treatment and opportunity under the law, are not the same thing. Similarly, a critical reexamination of identity and recognition politics, and their pragmatic utilisation to secure the rights which would promote a freer existence for certain communities, are not the same thing. Yet each of these prior terms enjoy a slippery relationship with the latter, in which the former claim tends to be used as a way to disavow the efforts of the latter to act in response to a necessity born of observable material conditions. The choice of a theoretical framework which would see freedom as an idea to put in question rather than an essential good which it would be study's imperative to carry out and potentialise as widely as possible—and particularly in the case of individuals and collectivities whose enjoyment of it is restrained—is a political choice, even in its choice to remain anti- or a-political. The question of whether to use the active anti-political or the voluntarily passive apolitical is still up for debate, but in any case, what is emphasised here is a quality of wilfulness within Edelman's position, and that of other likeminded scholars.

Edelman's and Afro-Pessimists' approach to freedom—attempting to reach its conceptual limits to reveal what lies on its underside—is a mode of scholarship whose

utility, while presumed, I would like to put into question. It is indeed that it is presumed to be a valid and useful mode of inquiry which I find problematic—since in the *a priori* can lie hidden investments, or investments repressed, or unacknowledged, or misjudged in their eminence within the doing of the thinking. In what economy of meaning does the assertion "The Free Black Is Nothing," enunciated by a Black scholar, come to mean, as it poses itself as the most complete mode of understanding what it is, might be, and will be to be Black? Similarly, what is produced in this very economy of meaning by the statement that Queerness is anathema to freedom—with the implication that neither freedom, nor Queerness, nor enjoyment, nor a possible concurrence of the three, will ever be reachable? I treat these statements—voluntarily provocative as they be—as not the extreme of Queer negativity and Afro-Pessimism but as paradigmatic of what unites these valences of thought, not to reduce their complex philosophical and theoretical structure into such simple phrases, but because these phrases signify, in themselves, in their enunciation and use, something about the relation to study and thought upon which Queer negativity and Afro-Pessimism have built their theoretical armature. I do not aim to discredit either movement as a mode of thought, nor do I intend to challenge their claims regarding Blackness and Queerness. What interests me are the presuppositions about the role and responsibility of the thinker, and about the practice of study—particularly academic study—at the core of Afro-Pessimism and Queer negativity, and what I would posit correlatively is that these presuppositions ought to be given equal, if not increased, weight at the moment of taking up a theoretical movement as the intricacies of its intellectual output. It matters what one's production of knowledge stands for, and what it does.

Seeing how we might better understand what investments motivates the kind of intellectual production and inquiries of Queer negativity and Afro-Pessimism involves

deepening an assertion made above: that where the content of Afro-Pessimist and Queer negativist texts would place their centering of hopelessness as their philosophical and affective brand in a way that defines hopelessness as the absence of hope—its rooting out wherever one may find it—the nature of hopelessness cannot be cognised *outside* of its relationship to hope: hope is always, and everywhere, tethered to hopelessness. Which means that reviewing Afro-Pessimism and Queer negativity as a mode of study which is outside of hope may not be framing the inquiry properly: it might better be said that "hopelessness" is the mode through which Queer negativity and Afro-Pessimism formulate their preferred relation to hope. Afro-Pessimism and Queer negativity do not, thus, denote a mode of inquiry which has absented hope from its framework: they denote, rather, two very similar relations to hope, and thus to the relation of hope to the formation of frameworks and to study itself. We can call this relation asceticism, and find that from their texts proliferates more hopelessness than hope, but this does not mean that these represent a non-relation to hope, insofar as the very motion of disavowing hope as the responsibility of the scholar is itself a very mode of relating to hope. And it is this motion which I hold defines Queer negativity and Afro-Pessimism, and unites them despite differences in object: as two fields of study which claim that the responsibility of the intellectual is not to hope, and thus not to sustenance, but to truth, they represent the very same object relation, and the same approach to study. Afro-Pessimism and Queer negativity is the approach to study which would detach study and critical inquiry from sustenance and the advancement of life. This is what it means to construct one's mode of theory on the disavowal of hope and the valuation of hopelessness as the sole grounds for radical critique. Jared Sexton, on the possibility of a Blackened vantage point, is cognisant of the psychic difficulties of holding such a position for those whose

body is already under attack and restrained from composing with the world in a bearable way:

We begin from a position of those who have no recourse to an external ground in the first place, not because they have arrived (already or again) at a philosophy of immanence, but because they must practically invent everything from scratch (...) How do those whose ground is taken from them, who are taken from their ground, who are taken away from themselves as ground—how do they embrace that groundlessness as possibility when it is likewise marked by the scandal of an unaddressed crime? If I truly have nothing to lose but my chains, then why would I want to lose those and have nothing? If my psyche is assaulted so relentlessly that I cannot form a coherent self, then why would I want to subject that shattered ego to “a complete lysis” and risk losing my mind altogether?<sup>75</sup>

And yet he cannot help but maintain the superiority of such a position: "That's the challenge," he concludes. From absolute nothingness might always spring the absolute otherness which might come save us, insofar as nothing which can already compose with this derelict world could or would. One must agree to relinquish all that one has already been forced to relinquish, and only then will one be ready to be the philosopher of the coming insurrection. From there, to call Afro-Pessimists hopeless becomes almost absurd: if anything, Afro-Pessimists are those who carry an intense, burning hope for what hopelessness can compose. And on some level, who could blame

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<sup>75</sup> Jared Sexton, "On Black Negativity, or the Affirmation of Nothing," *Society + Space*, September 18, 2017, <https://societyandspace.org/2017/09/18/on-black-negativity-or-the-affirmation-of-nothing/>.

them? Regarding, particularly, the position of Blacks in America, Afro-Pessimism can become a soothing fantasy, rather than what I previously took it for—an astringent politics which refuses to pull its punches. If the affective reality of Black life in an absolutely anti-Black socius is hopelessness, then is it not a sort of kindness, a sort of reparative practice, to imbue this hopelessness with putative absolute power? The affective hopelessness which might plague one when having to live and compose a body within a quotidian of anti-Blackness, in Afro-Pessimism, becomes not strife but virtue, or virtue in strife. Even when composing substantially with hopelessness, one is composing formally with hope. Indeed, to follow Lauren Berlant, who uses the term "optimism" in a similar manner as I have used the term "hope," it is perhaps impossible to conceive of production, particularly of political production, at a remove for any and all form and utilisation of optimism or hope.<sup>76</sup> Andrea Long Chu resumes Berlant's thought well:

I do suspect that writing without optimism is also impossible, insofar as I am persuaded by Lauren Berlant that “all attachment is optimistic, if we describe optimism as the force that moves you out of yourself and into the world in order to bring closer the satisfying something that you cannot generate on your own but sense in the wake of a person, a way of life, an object, project, concept, or scene.”<sup>77</sup>

The problem is that even a formally hopeful textual investment in hopelessness carries with it its own products. To make of hopelessness a virtue, even out of hope and even out of love and kindness remains the fetishisation of a disagreeable affective

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<sup>76</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 1-2.

<sup>77</sup> Andrea Long Chu and Emmett Harsin Drager, "After Trans Studies," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (2019): 105.



mode, one which, to put it less mildly, kills. Hopelessness kills. To posit that it is all that remains to be invested with hope—the last kernel which we still have to sustain us—is an absolutely deadening position. I use "position" because I do not want to call it a "realisation," insofar as it will only be reality if we posit it to be and believe it to be: there is not one reality to which study gives us access, but only ever an infinite amounts of texts and concepts in relation to the impossibility of a full perception of reality. "Reality" is the name we have given to our attempts to totalise and understand everything: it is itself only ever a mode of relation and perception. Afro-Pessimism and Queer negativity do not offer us the "realisation" that hopelessness is all that Blacks and Queers have left: they produce a mode of relating to reality in which this would, for all intents and purposes, be true. The question thus returns: why *choose* to compose with hopelessness? Why *choose* to produce and demand more hopelessness as a reaction to the observation of hopelessness? Why not, instead, choose to counter observable hopelessness with the production of hope—with texts and studies whose effect tends towards the proliferation and activation of hope? To do the latter, perhaps, would incur indictments: one is not rigorous, one is indulging in fantasy, one just wants to feel good, *study is not there to cater to you*. But to all of these we can simply respond: why? Or, rather, why not? What if study *was* the realm of creating those things which sustain us, which permit us to live more and better—what if the intellectual, in a time of absolute hopelessness, fear, insecurity, was that person whose purpose it was to create what is affectively sustaining? Of course this would include the caveat that the intellectual would then have to be careful about not producing reformist, exclusionary or hurtful fantasies, as much as she could. We will never arrive at a simple or perfectly useful purpose to philosophical inquiry and study. But what might it be if we thought of the intellectual as that person who, in having the tool to

compose with observable reality, aims her composition for the production and proliferation of hope, the lessening of strife and pain, the offering of sustenance? It would not be perfect, but it would be something.

If the absolute perusal of reality will only ever be one prism of it, then the bargain of Afro-Pessimists and Queer negativists—that being cognisant of reality, to hold the "truth," is possible once one becomes aware of all one's investments and false consciousness, and stops allowing one's hope and passions to define the reality one advocates for and believes in—is shown up as already having lost: if there is no reality outside of the encounters of our investments, desires, and passions with what is external to them, then to compose outside of hope becomes a mere preference of composition, and not the only, or best, or most objectively ethical, way. And if relinquishing hope is not necessary—and if hope is good, if it is what is needed, since both Afro-Pessimism and Black optimism alike agree on the fact that hopelessness is the affective reality and material condition of Black folks—then why choose to do it? Afro-Pessimists and Queer negativist have built a framework in which hope is unilaterally associated with investments and desire which prevent one from observing the truth of real conditions, and, since investments can only come from what *is*, and thus desire and produce more of it, cannot offer up the elsewhere in which Queer or Black life can exist. Hopelessness is, in that framework, offered up as the reparative and the ethical, with a correlate that since to be hopeful would be to have found hope in *what is*, refusing hope is being as astringently against all that *is* as one can get. The posture and choice of hopelessness is thus presented as a radical refusal, and the only site where a vision of the outside can be glimpsed. Here Sexton again:

What I've called "a groundless or baseless politics that does not proceed from a margin of power, a politics with no (final) recourse

to foundations of any sort, a politics forged from critical resources immanent to the situation, resources from anywhere and anyone, which is to say from nowhere and no one in particular"; this approach to politics would seem to entail a total rejection of transcendence, a politics of pure immanence without the Archimedean point.<sup>78</sup>

Hope as, in Edelman's words, the "assurance of *knowing* ourselves and hence of *knowing* our 'good'" is for Sexton what prevents our leap into pure invention: only absolute hopelessness, the total disavowal of hope, can permit a conscious disinvestment in all that *is* strong enough to formulate what *could be*.<sup>79</sup> This implies fighting continuously without *telos*, or pre-planned endpoint, that is, without hope or futurity. Edelman's conceptualisation of Queerness functions under these very auspices:

This paradoxical formulation suggests a refusal—the appropriately perverse refusal that characterizes queer theory—of every substantialization of identity, which is always oppositionally defined,' and, by extension, of history as linear narrative (the poor man's teleology) in which meaning succeeds in revealing itself—as itself—through time. Far from partaking of this narrative movement toward a viable political future, far from perpetuating the fantasy of meaning's eventual realization, the queer comes to

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<sup>78</sup> Sexton, "On Black Negativity,"

<sup>79</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 5.

figure the bar to every realization of futurity, the resistance,  
internal to the social, to every social structure or form.<sup>80</sup>

I use the term "conceptualisation" of Queerness rather than "description" of Queerness for the same reason that I prefer "position" over "realisation" with regards to claims of hopelessness as the last stand of optimism. Edelman is not describing a Queerness that exists outside of his text. He is constructing Queerness, which is to say a mode of relating and composing with the pre-existing concept of "Queerness" which, mutable and multiple, might offer itself to several and infinite modes of relation and composition; and he is, furthermore, arguing for his conception as the most proper, ethical, and realistic mode of relating and composing with Queerness. Edelman willingly does this, but I also suspect that had he disavowed such a project, the implicit valuation of one mode of relating over another is a side-effect of scholarly production in general: it is embedded in the form, and requires targeted effort to counter. To conceptualise the only ethical relation to Queerness as one which turns towards and composes with hopelessness is a production of meaning, not an ethical inevitability ordained from above. It is a choice of framework. It is not an unreasonable choice of framework—it is, instead, and eminently rigorously theorised choice, and, as I outlined above, one which I believe is rooted in kindness and love, as paradoxical as this perhaps sounds. And since it is a choice, it is not one I want to disavow or annihilate. The purpose is not to lessen the amount of frameworks with which we compose, but to accept that no one framework will sustain us entirely and in every condition.

The problematic we are confronted with again and again is that there is no one way to comprehend (to understand) reality and no one way, either, to apprehend it (to

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<sup>80</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 4.

feel and to exist within it). The Humanities is where the explanatory (what will provide a mode of understanding) merges into the ethical (what will provide an intellection on how to live). The multiplicity of the ethical turns into the oneness of the ethic: the ethical as a tendency of philosophy and knowledge to contingently facilitate living turns into the search of the one best compendium of knowledge for the formation of the one best way to live. And still fighting anxiety, we choose the oneness and reductionistic practice of power, which would teach us to use the practice of understanding in order to master the world rather than live in it and which can only do so by reducing the amount of world and reality by which we are surrounded to a palatable and comprehensible amount. But the Humanities, and its englobing University, are not the world. The University cannot replace the world. The University is not where the world comes to be dissected and understood in its totality. The University is *part of* the world. Within it, we learn it. The enduring issue is that there is no moment in which a reality outside and different from the one we conceive comes to save us from our misperceptions. The problem is that reality will present itself to us as a gift in multiple ways, none more authentic than the other at an affective level. Which is why it is impossible to discuss the kind of relation to reality one builds within the University as a factitious one or as "false consciousness" in any other context than a purely rhetorical one, which would then enjoin us to follow a better fiction. I can problematise a framework-led way of approaching existence in its attempt to reduce rather than multiply existence, but I cannot in good faith argue for a framework-less mode of approaching existence, because such a mode does not seem to exist, or at least is impossible to conceptualise in its quotidian practicality. The activity of trying to understanding life, in order to better live in it, needs not be disavowed. It is the modes in which this activity believes itself best instantiated which

can come to cause trouble; say, if we come to believe we must reduce to one, to sameness, to enclosed differences, to quartered and unchanging categories, and towards only one mode of living; say, where living better can only appear to us as one thing, and not a multiplicity of things' destruction of the possibility of oneness.

And if Afro-Pessimism and Queer negativity are nothing else but one more mode of composing with reality, we might evaluate them not as totalising frameworks but in terms of what they do bring, and take what sustains us from them when we need it. The problem would be when, and that, these frameworks tend towards conceptualising themselves as the sole ethical mode of relating to reality and perceiving its tenancy—but there is no reason to believe this to be true. Such affirmation is merely a feature of frameworks, and perhaps particularly so a feature of scholarly and academic frameworks, in which work arrives on the scene under particular conditions of enunciation and a particular economy. We should be cognisant of this, so that we allow ourselves to step out of this mode of valuation and consider, instead, that perhaps we have no responsibility to believe any framework which lessens our capacity for life and hope—no matter how truthful, radical or realistic it posits itself to be. The conceptual marketplace of the University is not transparent. It will always carry investments. Being aware of those is taking one step into allowing study to become, once again, a refuge. It is important to be aware of actual conditions of existence, not to blind oneself to the horrors of the world. But why does the assumption prevail that a work tending towards hopefulness and its proliferation is immediately less aware? Is it not, indeed, the mark of a greater awareness of the current hopelessness which begets Black and Queer people and their conditions of existence that one would refuse to continue its proliferation in one's own work, despite it being the most ubiquitous material and affect around the concepts of

Blackness and Queerness? Does it not require more effort and ascesis to choose to produce something else? And what would happen if we turned our armies of critical thinkers, and the system which reproduces them, into another machine for the proliferation of all that is needed to counter all that is killing—hope to combat hopelessness? The range of action of intellectual works will always be limited—in fact a non-theoretical imperative to add to all the discussion above would be to make all intellectual output absolutely accessible to all, or our range will remain even and ever more limited. But attuning ourselves to maximising the actual good we can directly produce with our work would perhaps be a good place to start. In José Muñoz's words, as he channels Ernst Bloch, hope can be a hermeneutic.<sup>81</sup> It will never promise to offer us truth, or a full access to reality, or a total solution to everything: but as long as we take it as one hermeneutic amongst many, and one which responds to the ubiquity of hopelessness and affective deadening which attends our time, we can perhaps use it in an educated way, in a not too presumptive way, in a way purely turned towards the hope that it will do something, and that this something will be more good than bad. What I propose is for us to re-orient our investments towards the valuation of hope, the belief that there is something we can do, here, to sustain, to nourish. To turn towards that as our shared hermeneutic and ethic, so that we imagine our responsibility to be for and towards each other, here and now, urgently.

Most deadening, yet most intently potentious, in Afro-Pessimism and Queer negativity, is that we have everything to discover, everything to invent: the present which is killing us is everything which we will have to overturn. That hope is absolutely unknowable, and may thus yield absolute results, and an infinity of wonder, is hopelessness' seductive claim. The notion that what will save us must have not been

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<sup>81</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 4.

thought yet—or it would have already done so—is a powerful hope. It is an absolutely idealistic and childish way of looking at the history of political struggles—that's not how *anything* works, we might rebuke—but to tell it straight, do we not need, at time, a kid's idealised eye? It might be that this is the very hope at the heart of Afro-Pessimism and Queer negativity; the last positive investment which buoys its practitioners through their ascetic rejection of hope and futurity, and their reformist tendency. However, the notion that what will save us has already done so in minor ways, in transient moments which separated pure and total devastation from "mere" survival," that its ethic and practice is an already existing tradition toiled upon by the spectres of the archive, which are not entirely lost and whose voice is just audible enough for us to continue their work, is an empowering hope, a mature (in the Kleinian sense) hope, and one which offers in itself the means for its completion.

And we have seen this, already, in the work of Saidiya Hartman, and in the tradition of study which attends to the giving of what enables life—namely, hope—as its main imperative. Hartman is a particularly useful example to use, since, as Stephen Best pointed out, Afro-Pessimism claims itself as an extension of her scholarship: from the historical to the ontological. But I would posit that this very move is itself a move athwart her project, not in extension of it. The refusal to ontologize Blackness, or social-death, is not merely itself a choice, but the very strength of Hartman's prolific and generous scholarship. Hers is a work which refuses to refuse anything to Blackness; she does not demand ascesis, or education; she does not expect the radical from Blackness and Black people. Her observations on the limits of Black life in America in *Scenes of Subjection* are just that: observations, and moreover, observations which denotes the limits of whiteness to accurately perceive and define freedom, burdened as it is by the mythic imperative to individuality. From *Scenes*, some have



formed their theoretical definitions of Blackness as being anathema to freedom—consider, again, Warren's "The Free Black Is Nothing," which does nothing but bow down to the notion that whiteness must be respected and acknowledged as knowing what freedom is.<sup>82</sup> Hartman makes the opposite move. Whiteness knows nothing of freedom—but Blackness may have a hint, and to judge by her *Wayward Lives*, Black people may not only have a hint, but have freedom, already, freedom not defined by the legal and political framework, but by the spark of desire which fans and burns and warms Black people amongst each other, the existence and continuation of their sociality, the defence of this ontological totality which is nothing else than the protection of their desire to be always more than one. In Queerness, such a choice would compel us to reexamine Edelman's "lesser," José Muñoz, and the potential boons to be found in a study which joyously risks the indictment of wishfulness and naivety in order to promise the future to Queers, and remind them that wherever and however they may be, they are not alone in cobbling together what they can to imagine a better not-there-yet. The task at hand is the unlearning of mores which compel us to consider study as truth-seeking, which will only ever restrain us within the duality of picture-perfect reproduction of the not-enough or its total repudiation—throwing the baby with the bathwater—and to continuously remember again a use of study as led by a hermeneutic of hope, in which to study is to live, to learn how to live better, to create and share pathways to subsistence and sustenance. This implies, and impels us to, believing in the necessity of life. I do, and do.

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<sup>82</sup> Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 1.

### iii. studied attachments.

What can study do? What will it do? What are our attachments to the answer to these questions? How do these attachments affect our study, define it, drive it? How to think of study as nothing else but a mode of desiring? Could we? And if so, should we—will this permit us to gather a greater understanding and a greater field of action regarding our own study, and the perpetuation of its practice? A text to perpetually mine, and which continually lends itself to new illuminations, when thinking about such things, is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Readings, Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You." There, the question of what knowledge ought to do is not answered, but is evoked and possibilized for thought in a correlative description of two ways knowledge has been, and is, used, and the two psychic imperatives to which these tendencies respond. Part of the charm and draw of Sedgwick's writing is her abhorrence of strict dualisms and dogmatisms, or at least her abhorrence of the pretence that these are anything else than tools to think with, and of the belief that the actual world lends itself so easily to being cleaved in two for the expedition of our understanding. She deals in positions which imply mutability rather than structures, types, or other psychologically stable descriptors, such that her intervention attempts not to place scholars, their texts, or their movements of thought within either of the two categories she offers, but defines instead these categories as at least two polarities through which each thinker approaches the pleasure and anxieties of knowledge-formation:

As in the writing of D. A. Miller, a glue of surplus beauty,  
surplus stylistic investment, unexplained upwellings of threat,  
contempt, and longing cements together and animates the

amalgam of powerful part-objects in such work as that of Ronald Firbank, Djuna Barnes, Joseph Cornell, Kenneth Anger, Charles Ludlam, Jack Smith, John Waters, and Holly Hughes. The very mention of these names, some of them attaching to almost legendarily “paranoid” personalities, confirms, too, Klein’s insistence that it is not people but mutable positions—or, I would want to say, practices—that can be divided between the paranoid and the reparative; it is sometimes the most paranoid-tending people who are able to, and need to, develop and disseminate the richest reparative practices. And if the paranoid or the depressive positions operate on a smaller scale than the level of individual typology, they operate also on a larger: that of shared histories, emergent communities, and the weaving of intertextual discourse.<sup>83</sup>

She then uses this strategic categorical opposition to pose a critique of the prevalence of one model over the other, as the “paranoid model” desires and can only find its completion in the eradication of the “reparative.”<sup>84</sup> The “paranoid model,” which we recognise as tending towards the discovery of truth as its highest goal, is indeed problematic in Sedgwick’s text more via its desire for univocity and the drive for hegemony inherent in its functioning, than in some inherent flaw or immorality of paranoia as a mode of understanding. The paranoid mode cannot admit the complex structure of desires which characterises and drives it, and both in its ideology and its structure seeks to erase the reparative and all of its affective structure and

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<sup>83</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 150.

<sup>84</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 128.

investments, both from itself and from the realm of textual possibility. The paranoid mode *needs* this disavowal of reparative investments and possibilities, since the paranoid mode cannot abide the presence of an alternative to its own structure of desire, or the possibility of difference which opens the door for multiplicity and ambivalence. If a reparative mode exists, then this signifies the possibility of an alternative: fruitful or not, the problem, for the devout paranoid, lies in the mere capacity to imagine something other than a paranoid functioning, since this already begs the question "is such suffering and anxiety necessary?" To someone whose mode of mitigating the effect of the anxiety which knowledge-seeking begets is to define this anxiety as necessary and paradigmatic of the pursuit—as a necessary component and one which prove the success of the enterprise thus far—this is a particularly disabling thought, at least for a moment and while one cannot afford to follow it to its fullness: that the disappearance of anxiety and the presence of pleasure in study is self-sufficient and self-justifying, and as such might itself be both the aim and the mark of a true "doing" of study and knowledge. But ultimately, there is little sense attempting to distinguish cleanly between a truth-based relationship with study and knowledge and a pleasure-based relationship: we often find the one wrapped up in the other, which is why Sedgwick's usage of these two tendencies as mutually informing poles of behaviour and positionalities is effective. Rather than the absolute presence or absence of either modes in the face of the other, we move through her argument towards a perspective on the desiring investments which animate theory and critique, and on the aim which the mode of study as critique claims for itself. This is to say, the question which Sedgwick turns us to is: what are the justifications, personal and ethical, which permit projects of anxiety, paranoia, and hopelessness, to justify

themselves as necessary for the well-being of the body—be that the individual organism or the body-politic?

Queer negativity tends to justify its intellectual output in the same way as Afro-Pessimism: in the self-definition of being an analytic, that is to say, an unflinching description of what is, which carries no further ideological agenda than to uncover what has been hidden through a rigorous framework of inquiry. To quote a tweet on the self-definition of Afro-Pessimism, which touches upon the matter rather cogently:

afro-pessimism is an analytic. say it with me: AN/AH/LY/TIC.

it is not a prescriptive project. it won't make your commie friends like you. it won't necessarily help you sleep easier at night. if you're not ready to get buck in the muck, please leave it alone.<sup>85</sup>

Afro-Pessimism is dedicated to demonstrating the anti-Blackness inherent and essential to the construction and survival of the world. In this, the two follow and complete each other's logic, since Queer negativity, meanwhile, is dedicated to unmasking the violent anti-Queerness—as violence of differentiation—which undergirds every valuation of life and its continuation. To restate Edelman's delineation of the place of "Queerness" in the formation of society:

Such an “antisocial” jouissance may be disavowed by the social order and read into whomever it sinthomosexualizes (those, that is, whom it queers as figures of ontological negation, and so of a socially destructive violence charged with libidinal

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<sup>85</sup> Jaboukie Hartman, Twitter post, 24 November 2018, 7:29 p.m., <https://twitter.com/hoodqueer/status/1066534419945598976>.

enjoyment), but it pulses within as the motor force of social organization, repeatedly erupting in violence against those assigned to that stigmatized class.<sup>86</sup>

Neither Afro-Pessimism nor Queer negativity offer excuses for their output of unpleasant knowledge and catastrophic information about both the origins and the inexorable continuity of our existence and the order onto which they are lived: they came to uncover the truth, and it is sad but known that the truth hurts—a key tautology underpinning paranoid knowledge. If something seems too good to be true, it probably is, and if something makes you anxious, you've probably hit the nail on the head.<sup>87</sup> Pleasure, if present in these relational modes to and forms of conceptualising Queerness and Blackness could never be the stated aim of their study, not merely because their conclusions are definitely unpleasant to bear, but because, in order to justify their enunciation, pleasure must be disclaimed as subjunctive to rational and rigorous inquiry yielding unavoidable truths. It is not just that we know these truths are true because they hurt, it is that we know and came to these truths because our inquiry is robust, probing, and exhaustive (and exhausting). Jared Sexton sums up the relation to thought which defines both Afro-Pessimism and Queer negativity well in an unscripted jibe during a lecture. Regarding the distaste of certain academics for the precepts of Afro-Pessimism, namely, Orlando Patterson's concept of social death, he offhandedly ad-libs to his presentation that he has "heard now pronouncements from a number of folks who say they simply don't believe in social death—as if that's what you can do with concepts, just not believe in them," to scattered and assenting

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<sup>86</sup> Edelman, "Learning Nothing," 125.

<sup>87</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 127.

laughter.<sup>88</sup> Rigorous analysis thus intends, and is assumed to yield, a conceptualization of the truth of the world, which one cannot evade, and which, once seen, cannot be unseen. The one who refuses the consequences and the urgencies revealed by this studious inquiry is the one acting in bad faith. We deal here with study as a tool to uncover a rational truth from which we must then form our ethic. The truth presented itself to him at the moment of inquiry: what else could Jared Sexton, noted serious and rigorous scholar, do but follow it? This internal logic and ethic finds itself legitimated by an implicit belief in a rational and transcendent truth, external to thought and to life itself, which can present itself to its careful inquirer and which from then on cannot be denied. Notable here is this paradox: that this belief, while implicitly necessary to such a doing of study, is explicitly critiqued and disavowed within this doing's textual production. As we will see, we may need to imagine that, indeed, "residual forms of essentialism" may just be "lurking behind apparently nonessentialist forms of analysis" in this particular case.<sup>89</sup>

To respond to Sexton's jibe with another: sir, a concept isn't a table. Certainly, not believing in a concept does not simply make it disappear, if one person's disbelief would even be grounds for invalidating it. A concept would keep existing even if only one person were able to think and believe in it, and a concept would continue to exist if everyone on the planet were devoted to denying it—in which case, it would exist as limit or opposition in a dialectic. To this end, he is correct that "not believing in social death" is not an actual argument against the strength or the usefulness of the concept. However, it is absolutely possible to not believe in concepts: belief is the only way one relates to concepts at all. Unlike the aforementioned table, belief in it is

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<sup>88</sup> Jared Sexton "People-Of-Color-Blindness: A Lecture By Jared Sexton," accessed on March 13 2019: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qNVMl3oiDaI>.

<sup>89</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 8.

what materialises the concept, whereas the table, like it or not, is just *there*. Another way to put it: a concept represents and enacts the material relation of a belief about reality. It is not only expected but obligatory that some concepts would simply not be believed. Not believing in a concept is one of the two things one can do with a concept: the other being, believing in it. The precondition for the opposite belief, which Sexton holds—that concepts do not exist to be believed or not believed in—would assume that concepts, once formed, represent truth. "Truth" with a capital "T": the one truth, the one we study to find and, if we are full of good faith, enact.

What I find most interesting in pulling this quote to its most absurd conclusion, as a methodology to think through it, is that it is telling of the relationship which Afro-Pessimism and Queer negativity share with the practice of knowledge seeking and study, and the modes of valorisation and affirmation which undergird their enterprise. It is not conceivable, in Afro-Pessimism, to simply choose to not believe in social death because it makes one feel bad. Admittedly, such a choice, justified in this way, does not sound particularly good or ethical, especially when stated in opposition to a movement of thought with such an elegant and complex theoretical armature. It sounds lazy. It sounds disingenuous. It sounds like one's relationship to study and knowledge is effected out of pure, fetishistic self-interest and desire for pleasure, and in the face of an ethic of knowledge as the toiling uncovering of truth, how can this sound any other way than downright unethical? In a relation to knowledge in which study is a tool, and in which uncovering hidden truths can present for us the terms of the good life and the ways to act well within it, the statement "this cannot be true because I don't want it to be" is not only childish, it is dangerous and violent. It is, to use a topical buzzword, "anti-intellectual."



And yet, to be moved towards the truths which we would want to be true would seem evident within in a framework where study is not a tool through which we can uncover the good life, but a mode of living the good life itself—study not as truth-seeking but as pleasure-seeking, and reality not as that immutable substance which a careful and probing study can reveal to us, but as the shifting material which we weave and which weaves us. To be clear: this need not be a relationship to study which aims to erase the potentiality of bad feelings, negative conclusions, the violence of existence and the horrors of history. It need not be a mode of study which attempts to erase or deny substantial knowledge-claims. It need not be one, either, which validates as true any assertion which makes its holder feel good, or as false assertions those which do not, or which cause pain. Rather, what I am trying to explicate is that there is, already existing and existent within our practice, a mode of study in which the idea of an external and transcendent truth is not the validating paradigm of the enterprise, but one, rather, in which the concept-value of truth is not only problematised but effectively subjunctive to the valorisation of the modes of living and acting which study can produce. Here, the "truth" of study lies in this very proliferation of life, in the belief that life itself is the good, a good worth pursuing and whose pursuit and hopeful enactment through study, not as a point of arrival but as process, is the point and the sole justification study needs to affirm its own necessity and claim to exist and proceed as it does.

Let's accept, for a moment, that intellectuals are those persons who hold themselves to a particular sort of relationship with knowledge; let's call that relationship one of responsibility. The intellectual is that person whose relationship to the knowledge he uncovers and holds—and I think we can also define uncovering and holding knowledge as the activity of the intellectual—cannot be completely based on

relativity and moods: under whichever precepts and values which led him on this road, the intellectual must swear and perform a kind of fealty to those ideas that seem to make sense to him. What could distinguish an intellectual from any other relationship to knowledge formed by any other is the sort of overdetermination which characterises the relation to ideas. I think the word "responsibility" covers this overdetermination well. Those of us who, for example, don't make chairs for a living are allowed, should we want to, to imagine chairs in whatever way we want them to appear, to be unprescribed from the shape which characterises a chair as "a chair." The person who makes chairs, however, has a responsibility to uphold the idea of a chair—to maintain the "chair-ness" of the chair. He is not beholden to any hard obligations to this integrity, but it is this integrity which distinguishes him from non-chair-makers, who have no such responsibility and can spend the rest of their lives acting as if a table were a chair. There would be no particularly noxious consequence if the whole of humanity, including chair-makers, believed that chairs were tables; it's just that if the chair makers also believed it, there would no longer be any chairs in construction. Similarly, it is the integrity of intellectuals with regards to the materiality and the particular shape and conceptual limits of their ideas or concepts that distinguishes them from other people's relation to ideas and concepts. It is an absolutely voluntary responsibility, but it is an important one for them: intellectuals are those who protect the materiality of ideas and their unique and distinctive shape. The distinguishing characteristic of an intellectual lies neither in training nor ability—plenty of people who don't actually make chairs could, probably, make a chair, and some have also been trained to do so, but then became cooks, or dancers, or librarians—but in this overdetermined relationship to concepts and ideas. This is what I hear in Sexton's comment: "as if that's something you can do with concepts: just not

believe in them." He is talking to a cohort of students, making a commentary on fellow scholars as an intellectual himself, and insisting that the intellectual has a responsibility to ideas.

Concepts here are untethered to the affective, the emotional, or the holy; they are held to be nothing like a matter of faith, and build their relationship to truth in opposition to the particular relationship to ideas which defines faith. They have little to do with personal feelings and preferences. What Afro-Pessimisms, and other movements which define and defend themselves as being an analytic, add to this relationship between the intellectual and ideas about the world is another degree of determination: the primacy of this relationship to thought and concepts within the construction of a principled and ethical life. The concepts which constitute the canon of Afro-Pessimism and Queer negativity are given the power to determine not only perceivable reality but one's relation to reality. The Afro-Pessimist presents himself as that person who is able to subordinate personal feelings and the desire for faith in a better description, a more hopeful perception, to the implacability of the analytic—to the extent that the analytic is trusted to yield reality. In this subordination would lie integrity, the capacity for a principled, ethical life. On the contrary, in the subordination of the fruits of the analytic, and, implicitly, of logic and rationality—even as both Queer negativity and Afro-Pessimism claim to divest themselves from Humanist methodologies of rationality in order to come to their findings—to desires for hope, optimism, and belief in a better tomorrow, in the beauty of the coming days and even the beauty of past times, or the half-breathed beauty of the quotidian, lies immorality, soft-headedness, weakness of the will, and, more terrible of all, bad academics and bad thinking. The hopeful is a bad intellectual: an intellectual who has rejected her responsibility to the sanctity of ideas and their inalienable materiality.

The hopeful believes she can pick her way through concepts, immure herself within the joyful, to the exclusion of all the real, material badness which the analytic reveals—the hopeful intellectual takes what she wants and refuses the cost of knowledge. The hopeful intellectual is a fraud. Worse, she is disrespectful; even worse, in this disrespect, she is unkind. "{She} steals to the University, and there {she} steals."<sup>90</sup>

I think, if a problem lies with the above, it is in the assumption of a life lived, and of life liveable in the very general and universal sense, under a single, if putatively exhaustive and complete, framework, constructed through a hierarchy of modes of relation to reality in which the rational—as external and objective set of methods to observe and analyse reality—still primes. It is the assumption of study's height as lying in these methods, and thus that the phrase "the studied life is the only life worth living" refers not to a life which studies itself within contingencies and always to different conclusions and effects, but a life which follows to its most rigorous conclusion one mode of study and reads itself continuously through this exhaustive and purportedly complete lens. Here, the allegiance to a single, exhausting and masterful framework of analysis makes of study one thing, and defines it not through its action as a continual practice but through the substance of knowledge and truth which it yielded through lengthy, complex, rigorous practice. I do not think it would be wrong to define the problem as well as an opposition between what living better entails, its correlation to being better, and the corresponding level, degree, and most importantly the quality of responsibility these principles are thought to entail and require. Between the paranoid and the reparative, the moral and the ethical philosopher, the analytic and the aesthetic purpose of education, we can distinguish two tendencies correlative with the above distinctions: one in which life and being

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<sup>90</sup> Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*, 26.

must justify themselves to a transcendental and judgmental power, and one in which life and being are their own causes and justification, in which the only possible principle can be "more life and more being is good." In the paranoid, the moral, and the analytic, being better is the starting imperative which can promise the rewards of living better, which may, in some historical valences of this mode of pursuit, not even guarantee a better quality of life on Earth but a promised place to a better beyond. Past the death of God, in the world in which paranoid theory and analytics such as Afro-Pessimism and Queer negativity formed their canon—a world which refuses the promise of a better life after death as the reward for good deeds and a moral existence, and which sees this refusal, as Zarathustra did from his mountain, as the precondition for the thinking that brought him down to speak—there still remains the function of a higher moral imperative, in which the knowledge of living an accurate and studied life means to be its own reward, a reward not quantifiable nor qualifiable in feelings of satisfaction, intellectual and emotional satiety, and respite from the anxiety which attends reflective existence and the pedestrian occurrence of consciousness.<sup>91</sup> The paranoid must have complete faith that his mode is right. As Sedgwick points out, he is certainly not immured through his prediction from the awful things he sees coming, so without any kind of qualitative amelioration of existence through this choice of living, what else could sustain him?<sup>92</sup> Well, actually, faith, disavowed as it may be: or in another word, stubborn habit; or, yet in another, and this may be the undiscovered thesis within this writing, pure uncut masculinity. A generational stubborn habit, within which the modern Humanities, critique and theory was born, and which it reproduces.

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<sup>91</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *The Portable Nietzsche* (London: Penguin Books, 1976), 124

<sup>92</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 127.

But from the presupposition that if a theory will be anything, it will be driven by a desire, a particular desire and desiring-relation towards its object, with the hope that should the object be desired (and thus conceptualized) in such and such way, we, the theoretician, will become in this way, Queer negativity and Afro-Pessimism can be looked at in another light. We can cite again Lauren Berlant's conceptualisation of optimism as of necessity the force which directs writing, insofar as any writing is directed towards something, towards the completion of *some* desire:

*All attachments are optimistic.* When we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us. This cluster of promises could seem embedded in a person, a thing, an institution, a text, a norm, a bunch of cells, smells, a good idea—whatever. (...) Attachments do not all feel optimistic.<sup>93</sup>

I find it useful to think of Queerness and Blackness, and the ways we invest in them, under these auspices: here are objects of study and thought to which we attach some conception of what we want and how attaching to them can allow us to get what we want. I would assert that, following Berlant and, elsewhere, Robyn Wiegman, such a desiring structure is the precondition of study, as it is of all doing.<sup>94</sup> Our attachments determine our study. We are always more than impersonal, more than objective, around our objects. Here Wiegman on her book, *Object Lessons*:

Whether in the mode of dialectical materialism,  
deconstruction, feminist standpoint, critical race, or queer

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<sup>93</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 23-24.

<sup>94</sup> Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

reading, critique has been alluring because of the promise it makes, which is that through the routes and rhetorics of knowledge production we can travel the distance from speculation to truth, from desire to political comprehension, from wanting a different social world to having the faith that we can make it so. To be sure, critique can also be repetitious and exhausting, self-congratulatory and self-absorbed, but the narcissism it cultivates is nothing if not thrilling. Even when cloaked in skepticism, it allows us to proceed as if we are right.

How can I not want everything that it aims to make true?<sup>95</sup>

I posited earlier that we might rethink whether it is possible, as Lee Edelman claims and performs, to think of Queerness and Blackness *as* "ontological exclusions" which *are* the unthinkable and the unbearable, and which become thinkable and bearable (but then corrupted in their original term) by the name "Queerness" and "Blackness," via which they erupt into the Symbolic under its law of the turn from zero to One—thus into identity, and from there relation via identification, and everything else.<sup>96</sup> Indeed, we might assert to the contrary that Queerness and Blackness, and any thought enunciable, can only be thought and composed with if they are already agreed, tacitly, to be something rather than nothing, to be thinkable, and for such thought to be bearable. This is made obvious by the fact that Edelman still has all his mind. But rather than question the truth value of Edelman's position, let's take his assertion positively, as producing something, rather than the nothing it would rather (not) be producing. To make such a claim, as Edelman does, and as Jared

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<sup>95</sup> Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, 33-34.

<sup>96</sup> Edelman, "Learning Nothing," 133.

Sexton does too elsewhere when discussing a "Black negativity" which would be the "affirmation of nothing," would then be, under Berlant and Wiegman's logic, to desire from Queerness and Blackness a particular thing, to desire them in a particular way, to want from this desiring-relation a kind of touch, a kind of affect.<sup>97</sup> Could the claims of and towards Queer negativity and Afro-Pessimism be, or index, a temperament for being-negated? A psychic preference for obliteration and destruction, as opposed to sustenance and creation? A particular inclination for the pleasure of dissolution, or the thought of nothingness and of the void? We would posit this not to reduce Queer negativity or Afro-Pessimism to such kinks, but so that we could add such an idea to our understanding of Queer negativity and Afro-Pessimism as theoretical frameworks—so that we may understand them better. Adding to add, rather than to reduce to one simple answer the desiring phenomenon produced by these theories of nothingness and anti-productivity. And could we not think too in similar ways of their desire for non-productivity, which, in the face of the incentive for capitalist production, turns into a call for anti-productivity, interpreting desire as radical action? Lee Edelman's searing critique of futurity wherever he finds it—reproductive futurism as the imperative to generation and procreation in *No Future*, which turns the figure of the non-procreative and thus non-productive Queer into the materialisation of danger and disorder, and later in his more recent work, the reproduction of the social order through education, and thus both the imperative and the impossibility to teach non-productively, to "learn nothing," and for Queerness to come to represent this "bad education"—comes to mind as a for instance.<sup>98</sup> This desire for non-productivity, could it not be thought of as a more than sensible response to, everywhere screaming, the

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<sup>97</sup> Sexton, "On Black Negativity."

<sup>98</sup> Edelman, "Bad Education," 125.



injunction to produce—to exhaustion? This is Andrew Culp's argument in *Dark Deleuze*, in which he cautions for another valence of Deleuze-studies, as the Deleuzian attraction to production has come, in Culp's sense, to resemble dangerously late capitalism's own values, and thus risks losing grounds as a radical force of revolt and radical politics.<sup>99</sup> He thus characterises and praises Afro-Pessimism as suitably "outside":

Frantz Fanon describes being caught between “infinity and nothingness” in his famous chapter on the fact of blackness in *Black Skin White Masks*. The position of infinity is best championed by Fred Moten, whose black fugitive is the effect of an excessive vitality that has survived five hundred years of captivity. He catches fleeting moments of it in performances of jazz, art, and poetry. (...) In contrast, afro-pessimism is not the opposite of the black radical tradition but its outside. According to afro-pessimism, the definition of blackness is nothing but the social death of captivity. (...) Cultural representations of blackness only reflect back the interior of white civil society. The conclusion is that combining social death with a culture of resistance (...) is a trap that leads only back to whiteness. Afro-pessimism thus follows the alternate route of darkness. It casts a line to the outside through an un-

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<sup>99</sup> Andrew Culp, *Dark Deleuze* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 3.

becoming that dissolves the identity we are given as a token for  
the shame of being a survivor.<sup>100</sup>

Afro-Pessimism, as discussed earlier, is the possibilisation of a politics without a *telos*, a study without end, a mode of desiring knowledge which does not desire the arrival to shores of certainty, and thus rejects reproduction wherever it may be found: it is, in the words of Jared Sexton, "a groundless or baseless politics that does not proceed from a margin of power, a politics with no (final) recourse to foundations of any sort, a politics forged from critical resources immanent to the situation, resources from anywhere and anyone, which is to say from nowhere and no one in particular."<sup>101</sup> And yet, undeniable in Sexton's work as well are his desires, hopes, and investments in Black studies within this particular conceptualisation of Blackness. In his own words: "The field of black studies helps me understand all of this in a way nothing else does and black studies in *any* field seem always to be the best around, meaning they exhibit the greatest explanatory power."<sup>102</sup> The desire to arrive at an understanding, and the pleasure derived therein—which must inform his preference—denotes the foundational paradox: if Queerness, or Blackness, truly could be valued as objects which destroy the possibility of knowledge, no one, much less Sexton or Edelman, would study them. That they are studied is the unquestionable mark of the desiring relations which their students form with them as objects of knowledge and understanding. This Edelman himself sees as well, and posits implicitly as the paradox undergirding his desire for "bad education":

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<sup>100</sup> Andrew Culp, "Ending the World as We Know It: Alexander R. Galloway In Conversation with Andrew Culp," *boundary2*, 29 June 2016, <https://www.boundary2.org/2016/06/ending-the-world-as-we-know-it-an-interview-with-andrew-culp/>.

<sup>101</sup> Sexton, "The Vel of Slavery," 589.

<sup>102</sup> Sexton, "On Black Negativity."

Could any pedagogy renounce the sublimation inherent in acts of reading, taking seriously the status of teaching as an impossible profession and seeing ourselves in relation to our students as agents of a radical queerness whose assault on meaning, understanding, and value would take from them more than it ever could give? What *Hamlet* does not and cannot teach, and what we can never know, is how to escape the will-to-be-taught, the desire for a lesson—a profit, a one—to take the place of the zero; how to allow for not saying “yes” to the imperative of life; how to let the future be by being what lets the future.<sup>103</sup>

Despite Edelman's enjoinder and investment in thinking Queerness as that which teaches us nothing, he is confronted with the impossibility of both desiring this and writing this desire into being, and the latter obviously gives lie to the former. The desire to be educated cannot be annihilated. Queerness and Blackness as objects of study, and particularly as objects of analytical strains of study such as Afro-Pessimism and Queer negativity, can never be anything but objects to which is attached investments towards understanding and some sort of approach to "truth," or "the good." This is a contentious statement, insofar as both Afro-Pessimism and Queer negativity would proclaim themselves as rejecting the desire for both "truth" and "the good." Afro-Pessimism, for instance, explicates the grounds of its study as groundlessness itself, which can never permit or desire arrival at such certainty as

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<sup>103</sup> Lee Edelman, "Against Survival: Queerness In a Time That's Out of Joint," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (2011): 169.

"truth." Sexton describes the doing of Black studies as a wilful disinvestment and disengagement from all anchors:

This is not about a return to one's literal or figurative native land—mother, motherland, mother earth—except to learn how to lose that grounding, to see it dissolve or vanish, and eventually to let it go and to rejoice in that separation. Why? Because separation, as psychoanalysis has shown powerfully, is a precondition for any relationship whatsoever.<sup>104</sup>

Meanwhile Edelman, we have seen, has built his own theoretical armature on the ascesis of the desire to know "the good," either as possible or as ethical and desirable. Again, we are confronted with a slight differentiation between what these theories textually claim and support, and the investments and desire they must yield to in order to appear as written texts and to circulate so effectively. The question is thus one of congruence. Queer negativity and Afro-Pessimism have produced crucial theories for a disavowal of truth as a violent and ethically undesirable apparatus, in the very same way that they have produced great teachings on the problematics of freedom, and on the deadening hopes invested in history and the reparative potentiality of the archive. Yet we do not need to diminish "truth," as a concept, to a totalitarian and reformist investment: we other Foucauldians know too much, already, about "truth" to compose with the belief of its universality and its transcendence over material conditions and the contingency of the "real." Why could we not, instead, face what seems to be obvious: that Afro-Pessimists and Queer negativists compose with the affective promise of "truth" even as they would disclaim the concept of a universal "truth," following Foucault? Is this not what critique does? Are these not the

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<sup>104</sup> Sexton, "On Black Negativity."

desiring investments which linger behind the drive to produce critique: the belief that there is a better truth behind the truth? That this hidden truth can give us what we yearn for? Is it not this very yearning which motivates critique? But Edelman knows this. Implicit in his quote is this truth, which he would rather forget, is this: any writing, and particularly any scholarly work of critique, is necessarily both an investment in the good life and an argument for the correctness of one's particular idea of it. Were Edelman truly invested in nothingness, he would say nothing: and so I for one am happy that he *is* invested. Were the investments which Queerness and Blackness teach us truly desire nothingness, lack, non-productivity, there would be no more, nor would there ever have been, books or articles from Queer negativists and Afro-Pessimists discussing Queerness or Blackness. Their investments thus can only be towards the productivity, and the putative revolutionary ends, of thinking Blackness or Queerness in these ways. This is the paradox. We can never truly desire to reach what Queer negativity and Afro-Pessimism would want us to desire, which does not mean that their desires are unethical: merely that they are impossible.

The matter is thus one of transparency: what are we actually doing, here, and with these objects? I seek here not to be exhaustive in my analysis of the drive behind Queer negativity and Afro-Pessimism, nor to be critical and incendiary, and certainly not to unlock the truth behind the pleasure of Queer negativity and Afro-Pessimism to better lock them away. Rather, I attempt to appreciate the possibility of Queer negativity and Afro-Pessimism to function within, and not in opposition to, the framework we've constructed to think through study as a set of desires and relations. We don't need to take nothingness, negation, annihilation, hopelessness, and lack away from those who have made pleasurable connections with the terms, have made machines out of and with them—but neither, so doing, do we need to accept their

absolute reality as principles, anymore than we need to accept the reality of the death drive, or of social death, in the way that proscribes them as totalising frameworks forbidding positivity, shifts, flight, or action. Turned here into particular machines with which these thinkers connect—to undeniably beautiful ends, to some kind of pleasure, the proof of some sort of optimism, cruel as it may be, where pleasure and optimism are understood as those things which moves us—nothingness and lack can reappear in this thinking not *usefully*, as the reproduction of capital and accumulation, but, and in the valence which Queer negativity and Afro-Pessimism would prefer, *uselessly*, in the uselessness of the production of beauty and pleasure which, as it values itself and demands no justification for itself, attacks the notion of value-through-use, and the sense of "use" itself. It's just that now what produces this potential radicalism is not nothingness *qua* nothingness, non-relational and unconnected, but nothingness as a particular thing, a thing with which we connect, a connection from which derives pleasure, and a pleasure which makes something. A nothingness that is something, a desiring-machine, to which Queer negativist and Afro-Pessimists connect optimistically and pleasurably. We do not need to disavow anything, but if this thesis has been an effort towards anything, it has been towards a greater transparency regarding what we actually want and mean when we talk, think, and spread particular conceptualisations of, Blackness and Queerness, Black life and Queer life, Black being and Queer being, Black time and Queer time, Black value and Queer value. As soon as we grow aware of the personal investments which characterise our theoretical choices, we may gain the greater freedom of a lessened responsibility to truth as universal and totalitarian holder of real conditions and real relations when doing study, just as Afro-Pessimism and Queer negativity would enjoin us: if "truth" will always-already be understood as "the subjective reality of our desires and relations,"

we are already doing something else, and study can become something completely different while retaining what it already is and has never not been. It is not that we must change study, or that we are currently doing bad study, or study badly; it is that an idea of study as the sharing of pleasures rather than claims to truth might not only be a better description in its closer relation to what is actually going on, but a better description as its enunciation may bring us closer to what we actually desire, here and now, when we study.

Yet we must also address the ways in which an investment in lack, hopelessness and annihilation poses problems, which is to say, why I am moved to discuss Afro-Pessimism and Queer negativity on those terms, and to value their pendant strains (Black optimism and Queer utopianism) over them. It is interesting, and ethically necessary to my mind, to read Sexton's comment on the tenancy of concepts in resonance with the incipient event which called Calvin Warren to write his monograph *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*: namely, a public forum on the death of Michael Brown, the progressivism of which, in its enjoinders to hope and to action, Warren could not bear. He describes the event as fundamentally mistaken in its orientation, less as a malicious lie than as a tragic obscuring and obfuscation of the depth of terror and impossibility which marks Black life in order to retain some sort of hope for its liveability:

I anticipated a festival of humanism in which presenters would share solutions to the problem of antiblackness (if they even acknowledged antiblackness) and inundate the audience with “yes we can!” rhetoric and unbounded optimism. I decided to participate, despite this dread, once students began asking me deep questions, questions that also filled them with dread and

confusion. I, of course, was correct about my misgivings. I listened to one speaker after the next describe a bright future, where black life is valued and blacks are respected as humans — if we just keep fighting, they said, “we’re almost there!”<sup>105</sup>

Contra hopeless optimism, he felt compelled, when came his turn to speak, by a "nihilistic duty" to bring the unavoidable fact of the unredeemable Black body, the impossibility of Black freedom (past, present, or future), and the uselessness of hope in the face of a metaphysical terrorism which captures the entirety of the Black being:

I told the audience there was no solution to the problem of antiblackness; it will continue without end, as long as the world exists. Furthermore, all the solutions presented rely on antiblack instruments to address antiblackness, a vicious and tortuous cycle that will only produce more pain and disappointment. I also said that humanist affect (the good feeling we get from hopeful solutions) will not translate into freedom, justice, recognition, or resolution. It merely provides temporary reprieve from the fact that blacks are not safe in an antiblack world, a fact that can become overwhelming. The form of antiblackness might alter, but antiblackness itself will remain a constant — despite the power of our imagination and political yearnings. I continued this nihilistic analysis of the situation until I heard complete silence.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 2.

<sup>106</sup> Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 3.



Almost providentially, his strawman—a Black woman—stands up, and berates him in quasi Edelmanian terms ("Think of the children!").<sup>107</sup> "How dare you tell this to our youth! That is so very negative! Of course we can change things; we have power, and we are free."<sup>108</sup> To this he responds: "Then tell us how to end police brutality and the slaughter of the youth you want to protect from my nihilism."<sup>109</sup> We come here, again, at the limits of critique. For, beyond Warren's belief that he is correct, what is the utility of his intervention, here? Through an elegant twist, it is now the onus of she who does not want to call herself dead and done—who does not want to call *her children* dead and done—to prove her will to live, as if the will to life is not in and of itself the *everything* which does not need justification. What does it serve to disavow from Blackness the possibility to compose with "freedom" and with "life"—particularly in a forum in which no one present, as they assembled to mourn the police killing of Michael Brown, could possibly be unaware that, from the point of view of the State, Black life is not free, nor can it live? But the question, posed as such is aslant, for it is, rather, a question of why one wishes to compose with the impossibility of freedom as stringently and uncompromisingly as Warren does. Does Warren's preference for Heidegger and nihilism follow from his observation of Black life, or does it, rather, form such impressions? Such an intervention as Warren's during this forum, and in specific reaction to the Black woman's protest, acts as if Black care and Black love is always nothing more than a tragic and piteous error in judgement, or as if Black love can manifest only through the honesty of a call to Black death. This is

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<sup>107</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 2.

<sup>108</sup> Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 3.

<sup>109</sup> Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 3.

what Jared Sexton enacts himself in "The Social Life of Social Death," when he quotes Gordon and utilises the following as the baseline for an ethical Black study:

"There is no way to reject the thesis that there is something wrong with being black beyond the willingness to 'be' black – in terms of convenient fads of playing blackness, but in paying the costs of antiblackness on a global scale. Against the raceless credo, then, racism cannot be rejected without a dialectic in which humanity experiences a blackened world." In a world structured by the twin axioms of white superiority and black inferiority, of white existence and black nonexistence, a world structured by a negative categorical imperative— "above all, don't be black"—in this world, the zero degree (...) of transformation is the turn toward blackness, a turn toward the shame, as it were, that "resides in the idea that 'I am thought of as less than human.'" In this we might create a transvaluation of pathology itself, something like an embrace of pathology without pathos.<sup>110</sup>

Afro-Pessimism has always loved to blur the lines between Blackness and anti-Blackness in this way.<sup>111</sup> Cynically, we might say that it is *almost* as if Afro-Pessimists

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<sup>110</sup> Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death," 26-28.

<sup>111</sup> As Sexton points out, this is Fred Moten's main issue with Afro-Pessimism: the emphasis any and all of its discussion *on* Blackness places on the forces which act *against* Blackness, as if Blackness could not be thought extant of anti-Blackness. Moten, himself, built his career on arguing for Blackness as, precisely, that which precedes and escapes anti-Blackness. I refer to this ontologizing of anti-Blackness at the heart of Blackness, and of the importance of textual strategies to bring Blackness into being through text, in my first chapter. See Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness," *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (2009): 177-218, and Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (2013): 737-780 for his most focused writing on the subject. Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death," 24.

had a unified rhetorical strategy of positioning themselves as the martyred bearer of unbearable knowledge, and if this knowledge is and must be disavowed or disagreed with by those whom it concerns, this is only because it is so unbearable—those moved to disavow are too psychically weak—thank God some of us have the fortitude to hold this horror for them!—or even worse, because such knowledge is so elaborate—too elegant for the perceptive capacities of the *hoi polloi*. This may be a totalising and emotional reading, and certainly it cannot be made against the whole of Afro-Pessimism. But it is not an unjustified one. This strategy occurs often enough in public events on Afro-Pessimism that we may find it auspicious to tether it to the functioning of Afro-Pessimism itself, if only for the bettering of the field itself. What is this tendency, in which a pedagog coining a problem (discovering a bad affect and locating its structures and sources), a mode of intellectually approaching it (talking about it and being understood by his student, forming a plane of understanding and exchange with them in order to discuss the problem and move forward), and, subsequently, attempting to collectively discern how to lessen the problem, how his students may be taught not to suffer from the problem, or suffer less from it—how is *this* suddenly a sign of the intellectual weakness of this pedagog, and, worse, warranting his demotion from pedagogy to demagoguery? For is not this the implication which Afro-Pessimism and Queer negativity's pedagogy of hopelessness and bad affects carries? Does the pedagog not risk becoming, here, forever the bearer of bad news, rather than he or she who makes the bad world bearable?

But then, let us not act as if Afro-Pessimism is corrupted at its roots, for at its roots, that is to say in Frank B. Wilderson's coining of the term, Afro-Pessimism meant to be a space in which Black life would and could be centred. Not as dialectically coherent with White life, not as communicable to anything that we

might bring up to distract ourselves from Black life proper, but a space in which, as Black life came to be recognised as specific and world-breaking, a constant invention, we would be forced to remain constantly with it in order to keep it in our eyes, to not forget it as we so easily can. In Wilderson's conception of the task of Afro-Pessimism:

The Afro-pessimists are theorists of Black positionality who share Fanon's insistence that, though Blacks are indeed sentient beings, the structure of the entire world's semantic field—regardless of cultural and national discrepancies—"leaving" as Fanon would say, "existence by the wayside"—is sutured by anti-Black solidarity. Unlike the solution-oriented, interest-based, or hybridity-dependent scholarship so fashionable today, Afro-pessimism explores the meaning of Blackness not—in the first instance—as a variously and unconsciously interpellated identity or as a conscious social actor, but as a structural position of noncommunicability in the face of all other positions; this meaning is noncommunicable because, again, as a position, Blackness is predicated on modalities of accumulation and fungibility, not exploitation and alienation.<sup>112</sup>

Afro-Pessimism meant to think of nothing else but Blackness, in a way that they did not see occur, and did not think possible, in traditional academic spaces, and in traditional cultural and intellectual discourses, whose implied reliance on Humanism and its conception of being prevented Blackness from ever being their object, much less their subject. At its core, Afro-Pessimism meant to be this space of alterity, where a Blackened vantage point, a Black escape, could be held. How has this

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<sup>112</sup> Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 58-59.

discourse for a Black space, for an intransigent Black love, for a sustained attention to Black beings and Black things, become the imperative to know Black life only as Black death?

We work for the preservation of Black life. When optimism and hope function off, through, and for, the eradication of Black life, the silencing of Black suffering, the simplification of the multiplicity of Black life, we may wage a fight against these modalities of hope and optimism, which are flawed and incomplete. This again is nothing else than Saidiya Hartman's project and success in *Scenes of Subjection*: the attempts to displace the Black community's wounded attachments towards a disingenuous and coercive conception of freedom as held up by Whiteness and the State, and the reminder that freedom for Black folks has always lied elsewhere than in the hope for those empty gestures and promises. But when nihilism and hopelessness, posited as a reparative positions in their opposition to the former threat of reformist desires, function instead as persecutors of Black students and Black youth, when these contrary logics become themselves functions of the eradication of Black life—the textual and conceptual equation of Blackness with non-being which forbids Blackness' conceptual offering to those who need it to compose with, and yet is in itself nothing else for the Afro-Pessimist writer but a mode of composing with it, with Blackness *qua* nothingness in a desiring way—and the silencing of its joys, the simplification of its multiplicities, then against Afro-Pessimism it is the same weapons we must draw, because we must remember that the fight is *for Blackness*, even contra Afro-Pessimism's grain.

At the ground of this problem is the supposed incongruity of the anti-Black world and Black life. Having to theorise as if in such an analysis we have hit an *aporia* is *one* framework, and granted one which hits on the head the duality of the problem

—there *is* an anti-Black world in which Black life exists, and which puts pressure on Black life—but one, as well, which forces these two into an oppositional relation which has no absolute reason to be, and which rather, everywhere one looks, is given lie to, *because Black life exists*; or, should one find this discussable, at least because we are all moved, Afro-Pessimists and Black optimists alike, by the hope that *it will exist*. Another framework, for example, could very well choose to discuss the effect of the anti-Black world not as putting Black life under erasure or as necessitating Black life to be theorised as existing solely outside of the world, but as affecting Black life in particular ways—think about schizophrenia, and other neurodivergences of the sort which Deleuze and Guattari address, which cannot be thought dissolutely from the madness of capitalism as socius.<sup>113</sup> I think at the incipit of Afro-Pessimism is the necessity to address the nebulous *mal-être* which plagues Black communities seemingly as an effect of Blackness within a world which is not meant to accommodate it, and which indeed seeks manifestly to destroy it—*mal-être* and routinised violence and death. But the leap to escape the world—the stated impossibility of life and the world for Blacks which is in turn posited by Afro-Pessimism as a response to the violent pressure of the world on Black life—is not an obviousness, nor is it the only way of conceptualising the world—and should study be rather thought of as a constant fantasy of the world, and Black study thus as a fantasy of what Blackness will be and do, we might even say that such a dichotomy between Blackness and the world is a masochistic absurdity. To the extent that it compounds the problem—resolves the felt impossibility of Black life by ontologizing and institutionalising it by and within its discourse—its effectivity has been perverted and is limited. Blackness and the world may in fact be the very point in which study

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<sup>113</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti Oedipus*, 374.

cannot sustain its ideation of being a representation or a perusal of the world: it may be the point in which we finally arrive at no other alternative conceptions than to accept study as a shared and proliferated fabulation of a world-to-be, with all the methodologies and ethical imperatives this implies.

But this instinct does not need to be invented: it is already in study. A pleasure instinct, a desire, dormant and refractory in every paranoid reading, the site of the pleasure which really keeps us coming back for more, fully avowed only in some corners, in the mouths of those derided for their optimism, in those who keep probing the archive for hope in the face of relentless violence, who keep on with nothing else to keep them going on than the hope to find what will, in those who talk about the things they like with depth and in all seriousness, as incidental as these things may be to anything structural or deep or serious, which is to say to anything that might "come save us" except for how its own pleasure and the pleasure of its pursuit already does. Those who are *not* serious. Those who plunge into the archive and come out with fabulation and aesthetic pleasures. Those who can't claim the name of "pessimist" or its habit as a sustainable ground or as a home because their own intellectual responsibility calls in them an inalienable belief in existence and the transmission of this belief. For them, to be an intellectual impels the transmission and continuation of life in its tendency for multiplicity and as its own value and *a priori* goodness. Here living better—the psychic and somatic feeling of better, the capacity for hope and continuation, the energy to fight hopelessness—comes as the validating correlate to being better, where this better is no longer adjudicated by any force beyond being but knows being as its own principle, the proliferation of its power to multiply and produce as the only good to which we can aspire. Attuned not to the truth of this world but to its beauty, we can oppose the tendency for an aesthetics

based approach to study to the analytics based one which informs Afro-Pessimism and Queer negativity. I have used these two as my paradigmatic examples of the analytic strain not because they are not, themselves as well, infused by the aesthetics tendency in minor ways, but because in their major chords, they would aspire to a pure and univocal relation to analytics as a tendency, and thus perform as a core of their methodology and ethics a necessary decrying of the aesthetics tendency. Again, it is the belief in the possibility of the One, and of the virtue of reduction to the essential and total, which appear to me as the instincts to keep in check in analytics, which are not necessarily present only, or every time, in paranoid readings or in tendencies towards an analytics-based approach to study, but which these environments tend to foster better than a rigorous reliance on and practice of the reparative and aesthetics-based approaches to study. The latter two instincts, in reverse, would tend to proliferate a lessening of anxiety, a greater willingness and capacity for action, and an ability to withstand greater amounts of existence without falling back onto the technique of reducing it to comfortable and easy to master quantities. These valences call to the tradition of study which I would like to think explicate a great deal of the actual doing of study: study as the avowed and acknowledged good which begets from learning, and the expansion of those qualities which make it possible to apprehend the beauty and the necessity of life, and to multiply and share these knowledges amongst ourselves and forward into the world.

In Sedgwick's explanation, the reparative mode denotes the utilisation of the skills of inquiry to peruse the world, its form and its substance, for "good enough" psychic sustenance and aesthetic pleasures, which is a sustenance whose standard of quality is verified in its ability to permit the continuation of mere survival and perhaps a modicum of joy, rather than the imperative to be entirely good or entirely



bad, and the correlative necessity to define these two categories with authority and stability.<sup>114</sup> Muñoz makes of it a principle: Queerness and our study of it will be those things which nourish us in harrowing and exhausting times, and Queerness will be the turning of our energies towards these things, the speaking of their name which will propagate and continue their existence. The Queer scholar, using the chops particular to his craft and training, digs Queerness from the archive and throws it forward as resource, heightened and made more beautiful, it is hoped, through the aesthetic pleasure derived from an affected and wondrous description as postscript to the archive.<sup>115</sup> Hartman refused the hermeneutic seal of the archive over the acts and minor gestures of freedom of the slave in her first monograph, and her newest work is an exegesis of the beauty which a traumatised and trusting relationship with the truth of the Black archive, which is the truth of violence, would prevent one from seeing.<sup>116</sup> Her academic career appears not as the enactment of the principle of aesthetics and of the reparative, but of the strength which begets projects toiling with the numbing and paralysing analytic when the imperative for reparation and a reliance of an aesthetic purpose of study informs its core. In all, study as an aesthetics rather than an analytic exists to complement and illuminate the beauty of, and the beauty that is, existence, in so far and because existence is in this vein the highest and only value—there is no higher calling and no higher good than allowing for its passage, destroying what would block it, and strengthening what facilitates it. Amongst the latter, and to my eyes the greatest production of the three theorists cited above and the highest output of the educator, is hope. Hope begets action. It begets the imagining that

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<sup>114</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 128.

<sup>115</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 32.

<sup>116</sup> Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 14; Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 3.

action is worth itself. Hope enables the continuation of existence, and hope permits as well a mind receptive to existence and its beauty, and eager to take on the work of finding more hope, creating or uncovering more beauty, a mind in love with existence for itself and prepared to battle for its survival. Those teachers who do not see fit to shield from their students the reality of the world and the extremes of its horror, both quotidian and historical, but who can yet instil in them the understanding that in response to this horror the search for beauty and the defence of existence is non-negotiable, and who can, in addition, teach and share the joy of this practice—those intellectuals have made themselves responsible not for ideas or knowledge as abstract values or goods extant from life and adducible, in the ideal, to it, but for ideas and knowledge as life itself. The intellectual will be that person who, against all that horror which surrounds her and which appears to her unbidden in her quest for what can be salvaged from it, can summon enough possibility to send her students forward. In this sense, the responsibility of the intellectual is a responsibility to life, and study the mode through which we might reach a radical acceptance of life, even as we might work to change the conditions in which it expresses itself, insofar as these conditions minimise the quantity and quality of life liveable. This is a lot to ask. The capacity of the intellectual to parse the accumulation of defeats which litter history and the proliferation of bad conditions which constitute the present for what remains to be taught and pushed forward demands attentive training, and is an invaluable skill—if only to respond to an existing and urgent demand. And whether or not there should be a class of individual which deals in ideas and the pursuit of knowledge and receives compensation for it as capital, here we are. And if here we are to be, there might as well be figures capable of responding to the anxiety of their students with joy rather than with a cycle of yet more anxiety and dread. As we have seen, even within

hopelessness, it is only hope, perversely as it may have to insert itself, which may come save us.

### **coda.**

Study should permit the emanation of what is good and worth keeping hope for in the world. Not all the time. Not on every level of thought, or in every conversation. Not in every text, not in every theory, not in every conference, not in every classroom. The point is not to make more dogmas; the point is not to legislate what can or cannot appear in theory and in critique or in academia, because less is not more and the song of existence works through a radical acceptance of its multiplicity and its ever spreading pluralities. But if this were the structure which attended our own personal approach to study, and which informed our relationship to each other in study—as teachers, as students, as readers, and as writers—this would already be something. Study as an analytics asks: what is the truth? Study as an aesthetics asks: what do you need from me in order to move with joy? We need both, but only one of these contains its own justification within its practice. The creation and proliferation of joy does not need a second step. It is a good in itself. For me, there is a decreasing value in being able to point out the wrongs and the horrors of the world. I can accept its necessity. I can accept how it is not opposite but integral to the joyfulness of study insofar as study attends itself to the fullness of it all, but I cannot relish it anymore, and I cannot get so easily behind its continuing and seemingly intrinsic value—which is both validation and valuation—nor its proliferation of anxiety and refusal of the possibility for action and change. Couching it in "truth" does not excuse it, either, because reality is a relational term. Reality is the amalgamation of the sensorial input of our body to what appears as external to it and the concepts which we use to apprehend it. Reality is vast. Reality is multiple. Reality is produced. It is produced, here, by us, in relation, with and for each other. The reality of Queer negativity and Afro-Pessimism may be useful as fragmentary parts of a larger approach to reality and as principles of how to live through it, but that

they would argue for hopelessness as the most expansive and exhaustive framework to constitute one's reality, I cannot sustain in my own body. I cannot sustain the study of frameworks that would try to cease the work of possibility, both in their substance as theories of hopelessness and their methodology as strong theories that would brook no other option. To value truth or hope is a choice on how to relate to existence. It is a choice of how to study and how to live; it is a statement on the relation of study to life. The reaction to the horror of existence does not have to be horror. This is a reproduction of one aspect of existence, the reduction to one which itself forms a self-reifying and self-sustaining framework, where horror begets horror. To learn how to react to the horror of existence with a redoubled intensity of hope and fervour for the beauty which is also existence is a multiplication and proliferation of difference: where there was horror there is now also hope.

Is study an end in itself? I would like to think so. I would like to think of a definition of study as everything which has to do with the contemplation of the beauty of life as it permits its enjoyment; in this sense, it can be found everywhere. The imagery which Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* encourages is, for this reason, and this reason only, not entirely satisfying to me:

Some still stay, committed to black study in the university's  
undercommon rooms. They study without an end, plan without  
a pause, rebel without a policy, conserve without a patrimony.  
They study in the university and the university forces them  
under, relegates them to the state of those without interests,  
without credit, without debt that bears interest, that earns

credits. They never graduate. They just ain't ready. They're building something in there, something down there.<sup>117</sup>

What Moten and Harney mean by their undercommons rooms of study is the mining of all that can be needed—which is to say: all of it—and the possibility to find it, perhaps even the greater chance of finding it, even in those dark rooms, underground, in the burrows of the University's structure. But what I like to imagine, and what I would hope for study, is the opposite. I hope this will not ring like a lack of love for those rooms under the common of thought, life, and study. But what I like to imagine is this: the call of an open window, with only the sky in perspective. A window into an untamed outside. A voice from within: you're ready. Go get some real air, now.<sup>118</sup> And then, bring some back here, under, where we work and dance and practice, endlessly, what it is to live and love life.

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<sup>117</sup> Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*, 67.

<sup>118</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 2.

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