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Blackness and the Metaethics of the Object

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"Speak and break speech like a madrig, like a matrix (material, maternal)"
—Fred Moten, *In the Break*

[1] The poetical brilliance and oppositional politics of Fred Moten's theoretical oeuvre^[1] is animated in specific ways by meditations on the object. The introductory chapter of his seminal *In the Break* (2004) makes apparent Moten's suspicion of the adequation between blackness and objecthood that permeates black studies discourse—an adequation derived from the global history of chattel slavery and the myriad social and political transfigurations subtending and ensuing from its very possibility. This equivalence between blackness and object has sparked a renewed quality of interest in the classical philosophical reserve of the object, assuming, further, a psychoanalytic dimension at least since Frantz Fanon's fulminations against the phobogenic object in *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952).^[2] The superimposition of blackness onto philosophical and psychoanalytical landscapes should be understood as more than mere catachreses or dissident responses to historical interdictions. "Superimposition"^[3] exposes the fiction of philosophical neutrality by placing concepts (like the object) back inside the history of racialization, where philosophy disavows its integral role.^[4] The explosion produced in and through the mobilization of blackness, as both transcultural identity marker of social death and philosophical concept approximating "object" within current black studies discourse, is exemplary in bearing out the magnitude of this provocation, as well as revealing its own internal frictions, gendered irresolutions, and threats of self-disintegration.

[2] Opening *In the Break* with an invocation of Saidiya Hartman's 1997 *Scenes of Subjection*, Moten engages a paradigmatic analysis^[5] of the black-object equivalence. Moten puts under pressure the correlation that is born of Hartman's diachronic extension of the meaning of antebellum slave law^[6]; if the latter is a frame through which to think the emergence of black subjectivity in violence, Moten's explicit aim is to disrupt that frame,^[7] to disrupt the "representational thinking" that makes framing possible.^[8] Thus, whereas Hartman's unrelenting labor in *Scenes* works to elaborate her claim that the concept of self-possessed individuality sustained by the history of liberalism requires "the black as will-less actant and sublime object,"^[9] Moten responds with a counter- or oppositional suggestion, one—it will later become clear—meant to unsettle the assurance of proposition in general: "The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist."^[10] Moten thus imbues the object with "dispossessive force"^[11]—that force within the object which penetrates, infuses, deforms subjectivity

also renders available the ruse of self-possession that furnishes subjectivity with its anxious force of meaning. Unsatisfied with apparent limitations of the white subject/black object paradigm wherein white subject possesses and violates black object, Moten returns to the classical reversal wherein object modifies subject, extracting liberatory potential there.

[3] Moten's revaluation of the equivalence between blackness and object often seems to transcend the repository of historicity from which the expression finds its charge, achieving a differently enigmatic philosophical pulsion: "Blackness is the site or mark of the ideal object."^[12] Defined by its own possibility of repetition, ideality bears a peculiar bond to both presence and sound—its disappearance made manifest in the phenomenality of the voice's power of repetition. Without disappearance, neither repetition, and therefore neither meaning, nor objectivity—in any sense—would be possible. It is the barely noticeable requirement of this disappearance,^[13] the blank space, fade, interval, "break," and "anarchization[s] of [its] variation"^[14] which might be said to guide Moten's labyrinthine musings on the strange objectness of blackness. But, where Moten seeks procedures through which to "disrupt the totalizing force"^[15] of violence's primality for both blackness and the object, his journey, elaborated in part through spatial metaphors mediated by poststructuralist responses to Husserlian phenomenology, at moments clouds the very gender problematic which his nuanced feminist critique appears initially to grip.

[4] Moten's interest in phenomenology betrays a similar kind of complex ambivalence perceptible in Jacques Derrida's writings on Edmund Husserl. While a dense history of complicity between African-American theory and (what is often hazardously thrust under the label) poststructuralism has enjoyed a long-lived, if fraught and internally striated relationship,^[16] Fred Moten brings this relation to a new kind of poetical and conceptual height, while at the same time raising structure to a different order of peril. The French poststructuralist tradition Moten's thought inherits should not be privileged at the expense of forgetting that the history of black radicalism informs the profoundest substrate of his writing—and constitutes his work thematically.^[17] Rather, I take up the poststructuralist strain in Moten's work in the spirit of a curiosity about the power of dissolution that emerges when particular methodological forms converge. Throughout this essay, I revisit the status and significance of "the break" as spatial metaphor, all that it makes possible and entails, in part I, through Moten's engagement with the early work of Julia Kristeva—where a break structures the transitional stage in the signifying process between semiotic motility and passage into the symbolic—and in part II, through its relation to the Derridean critique of transcendental phenomenology. First, there is at least one other key and correlated sense of the break, and it is amply thematized on most occasions of Moten's theoretical work under the guise of "appositionality."

Prelude: Appositionality—a good nowhere.

[5] In the opening pages of *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman famously redacts from her prose the canonical spectacle that initiates Frederick Douglass to slavery in his 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. "The blood-stained gate" that forms Douglass's entry into the anguish of capture is structured by a furtive surveillance of his aunt's beating from a dark closet—a passage so famously

replete with graphic torture and prescient of the recurring future of black female violation, but also, so prone to striking the hazardous chords of audience identification, that Hartman elects not to participate in its literary transmission. The witnessing of Aunt Hester's persecution by her jealous white slave owner "establishes the centrality of violence to the making of the slave" as object, identifying it as "an original generative act equivalent to the statement 'I was born.'"^[18] Hartman's prolonged attention to anti-black terror as a form of diffusion marks the structural^[19] quality of her analysis. The primal scene of Aunt Hester's beating thus operates as an allegorical moment of the extreme violence that also exposes the difficulty of tracking. Diffusion here signals an ambivalence with regard to recognition and exactitude. "Simulated jollity"^[20] in the slave quarters and coerced minstrelsy in the marketplace become, in Hartman's hands, sites of violence comparable to the more recognizable forms of violence associated with lashings in the plantation fields; in Hartman measurement is complicated to the limits of intelligibility. Under slavery, violence is incommensurable to itself, lacks not only a grammar but a standard of dimension or scale. This incommensurability of black violence and the complexity, even impossibility, of fully perceiving its distribution, informs the structurality of Hartman's problematic. Beyond her legal framework, the prosaic historical minutiae that bind black subjection to human subjectivity gesture toward ways in which anti-blackness is sutured to structure in unfathomable ways. Hartman thus opens us to the thought that anti-blackness demands a rethinking of "structure" as concept.^[21] In Hartman, structure disavows its putative claim to transparency, releasing the exigency or "aggression" and "anxiety"^[22] that usually lead to the theoretical desire to expose what is vulnerable in the structural, to identify with what trembles and breathes inside the intransigent. Pursuit of dissemination implies less a commitment to the structural than it reveals a response to anti-blackness as a totality.^[23] Even when that pursuit veers off into horizons where violence is no longer recognizable in the forms to which her audience has become accustomed and immured, anti-black totality constitutes Hartman's exposition of and demand for redress and it explicitly informs one of her primary reasons for writing.

[6] In his commentary on Hartman's decision to abstain from reproducing the "terrible spectacle" of Hester's beating, Moten seems to first accept the equation between blackness and object, only to imply that Hartman has not fully engaged "the proper objecthood"^[24] of blackness— has not entirely appreciated the potencies of the object, its "being catalytic."^[25] Moten seeks an underside, beyond, or in apposition to Hartman's foregrounding of the violence that "dramatizes the origin of the [black] subject"^[26] inside of this witnessing, locating her in "a mode of reading Douglass that conflates his story (and its graphic and emblematic primal scene) with the story of slavery and freedom."^[27] If Douglass's text mediates the imaginary space between the slave's nonhumanity and the interiority of the subject marked by the modern Western device of autobiography,^[28] it also—through writing—lends ideality to the infinitely repeatable and transmissible scene. Whereas Hartman's sustained attention to the repetition of black narrative and performance elucidates the infinite failure of redress marked by that repetition,^[29] Moten's questioning of Hartman's elision opens up onto a different order: an opportunity for philosophical engagement with the meaning of ideality in general.^[30] Accordingly, instead of scoring through Hester's shrieks, Moten suggests meditation on that phenomenal aspect of the scream which exceeds the

requirement for meaning and internal coherence origin demands of its object.^[31]

[7] Juxtaposing Douglass's passage on Aunt Hester's beating with another well-known excerpt on slave songs a few pages later in the *Narrative*, Moten produces a resonance between Hester's "shrieks" protesting the violence of the whip, and those "tones loud, long, and deep [that] breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish."^[32] For Moten, this coincidence of literary passages thematizing violence and music respectively produces an "encounter [that] is appositional."^[33] Moten thus renders Hester's figure a conduit for his theory of improvisation: "Hester's shrieks improvise both speech and writing."^[34] Appositionality becomes the guiding thread that cryptically connects meditations on sound and (female) aurality to Moten's notion of blackness as "lived experience." Taking seriously the literariness of her figure, Moten ruptures the mode of conflation that he claims structures Hartman's reading, inviting an additional dimension enabled by the analogy between escape and irreducibility of both meaning and sound.

[8] With Moten, appositionality shares a potent relation to flight; the blackness of lived experience and the lived experience of blackness are often conflated—and that is the point: blackness is just that "mode of being...for which escape or apposition is the prime modality."^[35] In addition to a dimension assured by recourse to a concept of "life" or "living" or "experience," in Moten apposition takes on the sense of an in-between, an inhabitation of the break that structures the passage from meaning to nonmeaning, "a nondetermining invitation to the new and continually unprecedented"^[36] metaphorized as sound, and as the limits of symbolization. Appositionality is a kind of being-situated *nowhere* serially articulated across his heterogeneous theoretical output as "a space off to the side or out-from-the-outside";^[37] it is the release of "the very idea of worldview";^[38] it is "a step back or away from the kind of thinking that produces worldviews."^[39] In "Blackness and Nothingness" appositionality might even be conflated, in the precarity of a casual reading, with the phrase "transcendental standpoint,"^[40] even though that is exactly what it is supposed not to be. Since for Moten, blackness simply is the desire for something, anything, other than transcendental subjectivity,^[41] it is the desire for a nothingness which, by definition, remains indefinitely speculative.^[42]

[9] There is, ultimately, a good nowhere and a bad nowhere. Phenomenology, the philosophical school against which poststructuralist thought has frequently defined itself,^[43] imagines transcendental subjectivity as the unifying substrate of all particular experience: "all background experiences belong to it...and it belongs to them,"^[44] writes Husserl, but transcendental subjectivity—sometimes called the pure ego or phenomenological residuum—stands apart *from* experience, retaining, nevertheless its constancy, and making possible the phenomenological project of the discovery of essence and radical freedom.^[45] The Husserlian phenomenological project, Moten argues, is nothing but its own "obsession with blackness"^[46]—a search for the outside (and genesis) of history, from which Western philosophy has produced/expunged blackness^[47] only to proclaim its recovery (freedom) as revolutionary revelation. Where Husserl is cited directly in Moten's writings, it is thus always in an equivocally critical mode. A

passage in *In the Break* tells of Moten's mistrust and distaste for phenomenology's decadence, where the phenomenological reduction^[48] is analogized to a "point of embarkation for the europhallic journey to the interior, to the place of the other, the dark continent, the motherland that is always coded as an imperial descent into self."^[49] But, although he mocks its premise,^[50] Moten's sympathy for at least part of phenomenology's initial impetus is latent—its most fundamental aspect which assumes as its primary task the exchange of fact for the testing of the temporality of lived experience as ultimate philosophical reference; it is, rather, that Moten prefers to call this gesture—and the unrepresentable space-time it yearns for: life—blackness itself. The very distinction between fact and lived experience is the space of a sociality Moten calls blackness.^[51] It is this social space which the "pathological" discourses of blackness (of which, for Moten, Fanon forms the fulcrum) fail to fully account for, even to perceive.^[52] This failure constitutes Moten's greatest concern in "The Case of Blackness," where his dissatisfaction with the equivalence between blackness and object is transposed onto a dissatisfaction with the equivalence between object and Thing, wherein the Thing is the prelapsarian object, and the nonsubject,^[53] or blackness, resides in the good nowhere of the unlapsable space between object and Thing—the ontic, the break, the passage between lived experience and fact, sound and meaning. Moten, in "Case," thus expresses preference for Fanon the phenomenologist^[54] to the Fanon too invested in facts, detecting even in phenomenologist Fanon the inability to comprehend the truth of his own labor: "I am after a kind of shadow or trace in Fanon—the moment in which phenomenology strains against its own...problematic commitment to... 'a meaning of things'"; too concerned with meanings, Fanon is not enough concerned with "what remains untranslatable as its direction toward the things themselves."^[55]

Part I. The black semiotic

[10] The untranslatability of experience into meaning that Moten prizes and renominates as blackness shares a tightly analogous relation to the Kristevan theory and recoding of the semiotic as maternal. While there is undeniably much to admire in Moten's innovative feminist critique of the black radical tradition's historical masculinism, which, in Moten, seems indistinguishable from a logocentrism in which Hartman appears partially implicated, the presuppositions embedded in his approach to doing so—through an equation of maternity (synechdochally evocative of sexual difference in general) with a particular kind of feminist "*materiality*" inspired by the notion of the semiotic— elicit questions that his own architectonic of improvisatory eloquence and desistance to mean dissuade.

[11] In *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), Kristeva wanted to subvert the patriarchal dimension of language responsible for the management of utilitarian forms, by designating as maternal the semiotic—that undermotivation of language incensed by uncathected energies rather than historical categories, and a real temporal process in the development of the subject from a psychoanalytic point of view.^[56] Kristeva's influence on Moten is made explicit by the author himself, and even promised an eventual elaboration.^[57] The trope of the maternal which infiltrates Moten's writing confesses at least partial inspiration by the Kristevan theory of the semiotic—that amniotic viscosity of language with which poetry and musicality infuse the expediency of everyday speech. In fact, on some level Moten's project may be

described as one of recovering the meaning of the semiotic *for* blackness: "rhythmic, unfettered, irreducible";^[58] "articulated by flow and marks,"^[59] the semiotic lends language texture, and, like the pure ego's indispensable relation to cogitation, gives life to meaning while marking a gap inside of it.^[60] For Moten, "the resistance to enslavement that is the performative essence of blackness ...is a *being maternal* that is indistinguishable from a *being material*"^[61]; and the repression of this poetic-maternal lining propels an important subcurrent of Moten's critique of the deep union between masculinism and logocentrism in the black radical aesthetic tradition. "This model of masculinist radicalism," writes Moten, "is so old that we can't really locate its origin." Like Kristeva's challenge to Husserl's exclusion of the semiotic in his theory of signification, Moten wants to challenge "that mode of semiotic objectification and inquiry that privileges the analytic-interpretive reduction of phonic materiality..."^[62] This objection to the privileging of the analytic-interpretative, or symbolic, is a cardinal protest against the symbolic's fantasmatic (because contradictory) and coercive claim to a construction of the world. The symbolic, as a constitutive element of structure, claims to constitute reality, in a double gesture that simultaneously exculpates its own origin from that constitution. For, though the symbolic-structural constitutes reality, it itself is born of an even deeper substratum—dubiously, structure is and is not of reality, burrows itself into a deeper-than-real substance.^[63] This *is and is not* is also a veiling of the semiotic that lends the symbolic its reach to both the real and the imaginary, the vibrational drone "before" heterogeneous impulse succumbs to a final unicity of order in structure, exposing the fictional form of truth sutured to the form of presence signification demands. Thus is the impress of Moten's interpretive work guided by Aunt Hester's screams, "where shriek turns speech turns song."^[64]

[12] The recourse to the Kristevan semiotic and critique of logocentrism in Moten bear the face of a dissatisfaction that is built into the very concept of structure and of knowledge. The counterforce to knowledge which all structural thinking to some extent must repress,^[65] and often, as Moten points out, in a masculinist and aggressive fashion, has its reasons for existing. I am not interested in de-legitimizing that counterforce or arguing for the perpetuation of its delegitimization; rather, I am interested in the site at which Moten is able to operate it—the historically undervalued field of black feminism. Reviving that meaningless aurality, which Hartman explicitly stifles in order to abstain from participation in the normativity of black female sexual violence,^[66] Moten traces a connection between the screams of that "substitutive mother"^[67] and Frederick Douglass's discourse on music; then, writing on Abbey Lincoln, Max Roach and Oscar Brown Jr.'s free jazz piece "Protest," Moten writes "You cannot help but hear the echo of Aunt Hester's scream as it bears, at the moment of articulation, a sexual overtone."^[68] Spillers has cautioned against the dangers of representing black female sexuality through the "romance of the blues."^[69] Nevertheless, for Moten, Aunt Hester's shrieks elucidate the essence of black performance as free jazz,^[70] violence revealed as excessive of the abjection it procures—a feminine force of creation, surprised by its own forms of futurity. Aunt Hester's voice, "the one who comes before," "the one we keep calling on to arrive again,"^[71] becomes the "material" trace that guides Moten's paradoxical double elaboration of the constitutive memory of transatlantic slavery for black aesthetic practice, and, more originally, a pre-discursive blackness which remains bound to the very possibility of memory itself:

what is borne in work of the black radical aesthetic tradition—and not only at the site of its recitations of terror and violation but also in the critical and metacritical discourse it produces on its own productions—is nothing other than the cries of a servant girl, the material-phonetic substance that is transferable but not interpretable from either inside or outside the circle, the aural content that infuses and transforms (our dominant understandings of) primality, extremity, or extension out from inside or outside.^[72]

[13] Moten wants the difference between meaning and that "not interpretable...aural content"^[73] which he needs in order to connect blackness to improvisation, through a retheorization of Aunt Hester's scream, so that the device of the repression of the maternal is enjoined to a second thematized in the book: "The repression of the knowledge of the hole in the signifier."^[74] Despite the pattern of resemblance which organizes blackness in a synchronic relation to Kristeva's maternal in her theory of the semiotic, Moten's meditations on blackness do not exactly repeat the noxious gesture of ontologizing or subordinating blackness to culture,^[75] especially because the figure of the maternal in his work does not match up with the abstract figure of the Mother criticized by white feminists, corresponding instead to the interdiction to filial relations and alienated natality of the slave for which Moten suggests the source of black radical masculinism.^[76] Rather, in connecting ideality to semiosis, Moten's version of the Kristevan transgression instead illuminates an oversight peculiar to the critiques of that transgression, and demands another modality of attention.^[77] Moten's "interanimation of the maternal and the material...iconically manifest in the female voice"^[78] that is Aunt Hester's scream, returns us to his suspicion of phenomenology's recurrence to meaning, to his critique of Fanon's profligation of *negative* meanings that mire blackness in the nontime of racialization—"a signifier that has no movement in the field of Signification"^[79] as Spillers writes. By foregrounding instead "the way that the scream or cry of the female voice is *irreducible to meaning*"^[80] Moten challenges the "supposed originarity of that primal scene"^[81] that Hartman elides. "Transferable but not interpretable,"^[82] Moten purports to liberate Aunt Hester from reductive readings that reduce badly.

[14] In the first few pages of *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (2009), Christina Sharpe too turns to Hartman's now canonical scene with questions about Aunt Hester's topological traction for the institution of black masculine subjectivity. Juxtaposing the revised versions of Aunt Hester's beating from his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself, a Slave* (1845) to the same description in *My Bondage and Freedom* a decade later, Sharpe notes Douglass's anagrammatization of Hester to Esther, a play on letters lending her figure a passage for identification with white audiences.^[83] Arguing that, in order to succeed, Douglass's narrativization of his freedom must preserve the interminability of Aunt Hester's violation, Sharpe amplifies the redundancy of black female violence by positing a constitutive, if latent and obscure relation between Douglass's accession to subjectivity through narrative and Aunt Hester's paralysis inside of the frozen scene.^[84] Thinking through Hartman's doubt about the possibility and purpose of recuperating the enslaved's pain through effusions of pathos, Sharpe contributes to what is now a tradition of protest with the gendered rift that troubles the scene, a tradition inside which Moten, too, locates himself.^[85] Even if marking an opportunity for

meditations on transmission, the scene bears a peculiarly fraught relation to the "unrememberable"^[86] time of Aunt Hester and the meanings incurred by the spectacularization of her punishment. If Douglass's description of his own passage to freedom depends, as Sharpe points out, upon a certain juxtaposition with the static violation of the captive female that provides a kind of catharsis-in-immobility,^[87] Moten's aggrandization of improvisation remains too, by his own insistence, forever sutured to the trauma that is distanced in the gesture of emptying Hester's scream of content. Even if that content is, strictly speaking, unrepresentable and in the strongest sense *disappeared*—further complicated by its status as literary figure—the infinitely repeatable form of the scream that Moten connects to jazz is bound to that unrepresentability, for which, oppositional therapeutics appears sometimes to offer itself as a more exalted response than what Hartman names redress—the necessary failure of black performance as therapy.^[88]

[15] Hartman is never dogmatic about what counts as violence, nor does she hierarchize models of black suffering; but it would seem that the tolerance for diffusion's ambiguity necessarily disappears violence altogether at the threshold of meaning—where all is dissolved but "meaningless aurality," whose meaning and value Moten nevertheless hopes to preserve and, precisely, as a feminist gesture. In exchanging one form of feminist "materiality" for another, Aunt Hester is thus inadvertently retooled for new theoretical purpose; but as substrate for abstraction, she remains beyond memory—still unthinkable (Spillers).^[89] It is the way in which she remains unthinkable that circumscribes a plausible question about how (poststructuralist) theory distributes unthinkability upon a hierarchical scale of value. Does theory's ongoing fascination with the meaning/nonmeaning break betray an affirmation of the livability and fertility that the space holding the slash presumably bears for all? What does such a presumptive affirmation bury and leave buried?

Part II. Parallelism, or, the space of nothing

[16] The "break" between symbolic and semiotic is not absolute in Moten, never deliberately composed as such, and might be considered a kind of playful figure of differentiation rather than linguistic dogma; yet, even loose metaphoric ambiguity can withstand quick tightening, educing dazzling seductions. In "The Case of Blackness" the break is interleaved with new spatial metaphors: the "carved span [that] moves between a fact and an experience,"^[90] and which Moten takes up more explicitly against the writings of those who fall under the side of Afro-Pessimist "fact."^[91] In "Case," the desired meaning of criminality, as fugitivity from meaning, is secured against the "brutal history of criminalization in public policy"^[92] that obscures it in Afro-Pessimist writings. Good ontic criminality is "a movement of escape, the stealth of the stolen"^[93] vigilantly arranged in Moten's writings as a privileging of movement, mobility, and capacity to affirm which coincides with a priorness to meaning that takes priority. That fulfillment of meaning commands a pathological comprehension of blackness, or the spawning of bad symbolic meanings (analogized in the second part of his article in painter Ad Reinhardt's formulations: "sinfulness, evil... formlessness")^[94] leads Moten to reorient the reader's attention away from the problem of meaning-completion and all it attends (representation, fact, the Heideggerean tropes of grasping,

framing, in addition to all that was gathered under the heading of the "symbolic") and toward the movement that leads up to, works towards, or scintillates between meaning and non-meaning—the kind of phenomenological shimmer that disappoints its hypostatization into sense.

[17] Turning toward Derrida's investigation of Husserlian phenomenology in a reading of Fred Moten's appositionality, and the spatial metaphor appositionality requires and sustains, is not arbitrary—as mentioned, Derrida and his concepts are frequently invoked in Moten's work, particularly in *In the Break*; improvisation, the guiding figure of Moten's meditations on blackness, is at one point described as "deconstruction in its most active or intensive form,"^[95] and Derrida is even curiously honored as "the blackest of philosophers."^[96] Like Moten, Derrida is not simply accepting of the premises of transcendental phenomenology—the force of his theoretical writings emerges precisely from his suspicions which labor against it.^[97] Derrida's ongoing critique in *Voice and Phenomena* functions on the basis of Husserl's distinction between expression and indication. Indicative signs, for Husserl, do not express meaning—only expression is capable of true *Bedeutung*, which "intends an outside ...that of an ideal ob-ject."^[98] Parallel or adjacent to a discerning question about this distinction which runs its course throughout the entire book—and, throughout his entire 1967-8 trilogy^[99] — is a question about what Derrida finds to be Husserl's bizarre use of "parallelism" in general. (The distinction, leading to Derrida's elaboration of differance, also animates Kristeva's theory of the semiotic—though in Kristeva this dimension, based as it is on a notion of drives, takes on a more explicitly psychoanalytic inflection.)^[100]

[18] According to Derrida, Husserl does not want to assimilate experience to language, and therefore needs the support of a concept like transcendental experience which can exclude it. But, although they are also not the same, the transcendental and worldly/empirical are also not exactly *opposed* in any clearly intelligible sense. Early in *Voice & Phenomena* Derrida draws his reader during the course of two enigmatic pages to a peculiar "space of nothing" in Husserl's phenomenology; without it, the entire phenomenological project would be "destroyed at its root."^[101] This invisible distance is first exemplified in the difference between transcendental subjectivity and the natural/human *I* of phenomenology—a distance distinguished by "nothing that might be determined by the natural sense of distinction"; for Husserl "The (transcendental) I is...especially not the metaphysical or formal phantom of the empirical self."^[102] This "parallelism...makes more mysterious the sense of a *mundanity* that is capable of bearing and in some way nurturing *transcendentality*,"^[103] without resulting in their equivalence.^[104]

[19] Derrida's curiosity about the function of parallelism in Husserl might imply that distinction itself harbors some magical mitotic qualities—assuming lives of their own, distinctions generate spatial metaphors that tend to proliferate toward dubious ends. The idea that mundanity "nurtures" transcendentality draws attention to the rhetorical intrigues of the "space of nothing" which is the possibility of something like transcendentality itself. But beyond the ruse of infinite regeneration lies the question of a latent capacity. Like Moten's distinction between fact and experience, the wished-for distinction between indication (exteriority) and expression (interiority) in Husserl that enables Derrida's project of deconstruction is not merely a false problem to be demystified—in its very impenetrability as a

problem it reveals a use-value.^[105] Here is Derrida again on parallelism and the queer space of nothing which separates "transcendental" from "mundane" experience in Husserl:

...despite this perfect coincidence [of the transcendental and mundane], a radical difference remains, which has nothing in common with any other difference. This is a difference which in fact distinguishes nothing, a difference which separates no being, no lived-experience, no determinate signification. This is a difference however which, without altering anything, changes all the signs, and it is a difference in which alone the possibility of a transcendental question holds, that is, the possibility of freedom itself. This is therefore, the fundamental difference without which no other difference in the world would make sense or even have a chance of appearing as *such*.^[106]

[20] This difference separating transcendental from mundane, but also, in parallel, indication and expression, is not just the problem of a false distinction because it is not even commensurable with a horizon accommodating notions of truth and falsity. It is that of an aporetic tension which animates Derrida's obsession, and ongoing skepticism with Husserlian phenomenology, but one upon whose necessity he continues to insist. Though "necessary,"^[107] and displaying an "unreplaceable force,"^[108] this tension—the same one bearing the Heideggerean distinction of the ontic-ontological, Moten's muse in "Case"—is at the same time itself thoroughly gripped by a "metaphysical hold." In other words, the distinction, meant to deconstruct the history of metaphysics, is itself produced by that history, and ought to be questioned in its turn.^[109] Putting under pressure the very ontic-ontological rift that sustains the proliferation of so many other distinctions in his work might lead Moten's reader to wonder why and how the distinction, the fantasmatic space of nothing it supports, should continue to exert so much power—the power, that is, to dissolve the "mundane" facts (of anti-blackness).

[21] When Moten opens his book with an invocation of and question to Saidiya Hartman, he places his text in a prototypical critical position—a move toward an autocritique of black studies. However, this relation, this touching of heterogenous methodologies,^[110] expresses a remarkable tendency toward absorption—a slow dissolution and disappearance of the object: Hartman's problematic of structural anti-blackness. The title of the introduction to *In the Break*, "The Resistance of the Object—Aunt Hester's Scream," and the meditation on ideality that ensues owes its existence to an extra-mythical scene of black female violence, a debt Moten emphasizes, does not disavow or ever intentionally reduce. But Moten's repurposing of Hartman's repetition—the latter an explicit figure for the inadequacy of redress—manages to lose redress as exigency altogether. The temporary decoupling of Aunt Hester from a context of violence which is the condition of possibility for thinking the infinite repeatability (objectivity) of the scene that amounts to an aestheticization of that violence (jazz), appears to contain built into it a presumption. Aestheticization, because sublimating, traces a fantasy of motion, if not a movement toward freedom.^[111] It is not exactly that Moten intentionally wills the dissolution of the object, so much that his poetic-deconstructive improvisational mode cannot attend to all that must be given up along the path of its alluring movement—that is its virtue and exhilarating feel. But, what becomes of paradigmatic and structural analyses of anti-blackness when the very reasons prompting such analyses are shuttled through and displaced onto aporetic tensions and spatial metaphors of nonpassage? Moten warns that

the discourses of criminalization to which Afro-Pessimism attends must not "obscure the already existing ontic-ontological criminality of/as blackness."^[112] This "*special* ontic-ontological fugitivity"^[113] is exalted as a blindspot. The term "obscure" works to provide the sense of a more fundamental layer of thought to which retreat appears less like the philosophical imposition and choice that it is, and more like a moralization of methodology. It is difficult to fathom why black feminism (embodied throughout the book in Aunt Hester's scream), a body of thought which might have something to lose by being fully drawn into the limit-case of the aporia of objectivity, might be claimed as precisely the most appropriate site to be positioned for such subsumption.^[114]

[22] In asserting a quasi-space between fact and experience in "The Case of Blackness"—Moten selects the title word "Case" as a synonym for the "broken bridge" separating fact and lived experience—he also claims a constitutiveness for that quasi-space, one whose sense is never elaborated, because deemed from the outset incapable of elaboration. But there is a concealed capacity of this incapability, one which, when released, may paralyze the forms of thought which operate at the level of its latency.^[115] Moten introduces the hierarchy fact/experience, object/Thing, subject/object, lyrically capsizes the terms, but seems to imply that such inversion is enough to quell the anxiety that prompted articulating the hierarchical structures in the first place. It's not that anything *would* quell the anxiety, but that inversion pacifies just long enough for the structure to temporarily fold into itself—just long enough for an intransigent problem to fade under the trivialization of its mundanity. But the demotion of meaning (in the sense of already-constituted meanings—blackness sunk in negativity; the structurality of the anti-), does not come to explain the conditions of possibility for the existence and constitution of the hierarchy and how it eventually seems to approximate "objective status" (which is something other than validity) in the first place. The deconstruction of objectivity itself is perhaps an always-available path for the capsizing of systems one would like to see destroyed; but can the kind of deconstruction that proceeds on the basis of signification's aporia ever do more than only momentarily dissolve from view problems into its own conceptual impasse?

[23] In the end, it is not quite clear how repressing nonmeaning is *more of a problem* than repressing or abandoning overdetermined meanings, that is, the inherited language through which such repressions are valued or revalued. Inciting his reader "to linger in, rather than simply jump over, the gap between fact and lived experience,"^[116] Moten's reader is still left to wonder why and how value comes to redescend upon the gap, how and why it comes to be valued as black, besides the fact that, on the side of mere "fact," black people are occluded from social (or Moten would prefer political) life^[117] insofar as the political is purportedly what occludes the invisible space of nothing—life?—that nevertheless founds it. The serialization of poetic forms that marks both the originality of Moten's writing style and its sophisticated relation to its content, seems to perform the rejection of fact and a monumentalization of lived experience, whose untranslatability is apparently not foreign enough to value, for it is at least clear that lived experience is to be valued over fact—whatever fact is in its constitutive relation to experience, whatever the object is in its constitutive relation to the subject, whatever meaning is, or can be, in its constitutive relation to sound, whatever the constitutive is in relation to relation.^[118]

[24] As metaphor "the break" signals both suspension and profundity—one that appears as occupying an unremarked depth because it inflates a particular kind of limit-case—the problem of language itself. In objecting to the engulfment of the discourses to which it responds (those that track the totalizing force of violence for the black subject), "the break" in turn responds with a rearrangement and desedimentation that is cast in terms of *deeper* significance. This is, I think, what is at stake in figuring Hartman's choice to withdraw the scene of female violence as the transmission of a repression. In Hartman, Sharpe and Wilderson, the force of repetition in black performance marks the incompleteness and impossibility of redress;^[119] 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.

[25] 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.^[120]

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Notes

1. The fact that Moten works primarily in the poetic genre should not detract from the weight of his work as a theorist, even though his desire to muddle the genre distinction between theory and poetry is perhaps one of the most attractive qualities of his work. There lurks because of this the perpetual threat of overliteralizing the meaning of his writing—a threat, perhaps also a defense, heightened by Moten's outright resistance to meaning-completion. To make the threat of the "literal" a determining factor, however, would inoculate Moten's writing from any response whatsoever, while foreclosing the very possibility of taking his thinking as a theoretician seriously.
2. "We have said that the black man is phobogenic. What is phobia?... 'Phobia is a neurosis characterized by the anxious fear of an object (in the broadest sense of anything outside of the individual)'" (Fanon 132). Hortense J. Spillers ("All the Things You Could Be by Now if Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother: Psychoanalysis and Race"), David Marriot (*On Black Men; Haunted Life*), Jared Sexton (*Amalgamation Schemes*), Frank B. Wilderson III (*Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms; Incognegro*) are among the recent thinkers who take up, in singular ways, Fanon's psychoanalytic inflection of the phobogenic object of blackness.
3. A faulty word for what is being described, because it implies that racialization has not always been intricately bound up with the project of philosophy.
4. As Rei Terada has recently argued in "Hegel and the Prehistory of the Postracial," European philosophy's involvement in the history of racialization often operates through "the construction of criteria for abstract conceptuality" (290); in other words, the place where philosophy seems least likely to be racialized, both by its own and others' accounts, is precisely the point at which the

racial/non-racial distinction collapses, reveals the distinction's unsustainability and spurious reputation.

5. For more on the meaning of paradigmatic in the sense used here see Frank B. Wilderson III's *Red, White, & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, especially the introduction. For Wilderson, a paradigmatic analysis seeks to articulate the constituent elements and assumptive logics undergirding the conditions of possibility for dispossession. Thus, although never explicitly articulated in these words, the notion of the paradigmatic in Wilderson is bound to the very possibility of violence. A paradigmatic analysis of black suffering, argues Wilderson, is doubly strained by the insufficiency of language to carry the weight of racial dispossession, thus lacking a grammar. See also *Incognegro*, "Of Grammar and Ghosts" and "Biko and the Problem of Presence." It is necessary to distinguish the systematicity or structurality of Wilderson's endeavor from the "structural" of the philosophical school of structuralism—which was born of the identification and interest in linguistic structures. In Wilderson, the paradigmatic is bound *in an ungeneralizable way* to anti-blackness.
6. Extracted and elaborated from Edmund Morgan's 1975 thesis in *American Slavery, American Freedom* that the history of chattel slavery and racism against Africans and Native Americans made available equality as liberalism's most deeply cathected category. "The slave is the object or the ground that makes possible the existence of the bourgeois subject" (*Scenes* 62).
7. "Is there a way to subject this unavoidable model of subjection to a radical breakdown?" (*ItB* 6).
8. "The Case of Blackness," accruing audible Heideggerian undertones.
9. *Scenes*, 63.
10. *In the break*, 1.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *ItB*, 203.
13. The tropic value of difference is of course not exhausted by its relation to ideality. In Derrida, disappearance is also the condition of possibility for presence, for the fantasy or desire for presence, and it is thus what sustains and "opens meaning" (*Of Grammatology* 159). Likewise in Moten, the meaning of disappearance is never made transparent to itself or for his reader. It is a figure, rather, for absolute nontransparency and signals an impasse for thought. The structure of this impasse, I will argue, bears a particular kind of potency.
14. *ItB*, 92.
15. *ItB*, 5.
16. See, for example Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s famous anthology *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, and Houston Baker's "Belief, Theory, and Blues: Notes for a Post-Structuralist Criticism of Afro-American Literature." In his introduction to *African American Literary Theory*, Winston Napier notes that Gates and Baker were the first to apply Derridean principles to the study of black literature, but does not take the further step of gesturing toward the way that poststructuralist thought may in the first place be informed by the long history of critical black thought. As Nahum Chandler writes, "It is time that we systematically expose the pervasive operative presumption that general theory or conceptual reflection is formulated elsewhere than in African Diasporic (American) studies, and that it is only applied here" ("Originary Displacement" 251). In his recent *X —The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* (2013), Chandler shows how W.E.B. Dubois's method of inquiry anticipates the operations of deconstruction by over half a century.
17. From Houston Baker's theoretical innovations to Nathaniel Mackey's breathtaking poetry and M.

NourbeSe Philip's philosophy of meaning to Cedric Robinson's historicist rigor and explicit collation of a concept of black radicalism. If it were even possible to taxonomize method in this onerous way, one would have to be more careful in drawing any kind of pre-given distinction between black radicalism and poststructuralist thought; the replete history of how the former in fact informs the latter has yet to be fully undertaken as a study.

18. *Scenes*, 3.
19. I often use the terms structural and paradigmatic interchangeably in this paper. See footnote 3. Structural in the sense intended here should not be conflated with the structuralism of mid-20th century European philosophy, nor should it be conflated with the Hegelianism that portends it (see Terada's "Hegel and the Prehistory". Although neither the historical privileging nor the historical pathologization of structuralism is my concern in this paper, one might say Wilderson's paradigmatic shares with structuralism a pressure to identify the operation of systems, series and relations between their constituent parts—a pressure which is often misrecognized as a desire. It would be more precise to say that anti-blackness as paradigm imposes itself onto thought and does not require—is indeed indifferent to— desire or repulsion to systematicity. For how Afro-pessimism attends to the repression of this very imposition, see Sexton's "Social Life of Social Death," especially p. 34. Structure is by nature perpetually frustrated by whatever escapes it (one of poststructuralism's many obsessions). This emphasis on escape guides much of Moten's inquiry.
20. *Ibid.*, 23.
21. "What if the presumed endowments of man—conscience, sentiment, and reason—rather than assuring liberty or negating slavery acted to yoke slavery and freedom?" (*Scenes* 5).
22. Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death," 36.
23. In Kantian terms a totality is something akin to a regulative principle that imposes itself upon thought, but that which, by its very nature, *cannot be fully thought*, retreats its own wholeness from reason's capacity.
24. *ItB*, 256.
25. *Ibid.*, 253.
26. *Ibid.*, 3.
27. *Ibid.*, 2.
28. Terrain explored in original and distinct terms in both Ronald Judy's *(Dis)Forming the American Canon* and Lindon Barrett's *Racial Blackness and the Discontinuity of Western Modernity*.
29. "The event of captivity and enslavement engenders the necessity of redress, the inevitability of its failure, and the constancy of repetition yielded by this failure" (*Scenes* 77).
30. The conditions of possibility for objectivity which Edmund Husserl made one of the guiding pursuits of phenomenology, and whose ongoing interrogation evolved into the poststructuralist tropes of Derridean *différance*, and the Kristevan semiotic.
31. Echoing his engagement with the philosophical virtues of the object and all that such might entail for theories of blackness, in his critique of Jared Sexton and Huey Copeland in "The Case of Blackness," Moten again submits that "something is left unattended...in [the] move toward equating objecthood with 'non-existence'" (180).
32. *ItB*, 21.
33. *Ibid.*
34. *Ibid.*

35. "The Case of Blackness," 187
36. *ItB*, 22.
37. "Knowledge of Freedom," 306.
38. "Blackness and Nothingness," 753.
39. "The Case of Blackness," 186.
40. "Blackness," 753.
41. It is difficult to accurately track the version of transcendental subjectivity Moten makes the object of his critique—at times it is the Kantian transcendental subject (as in "Knowledge of Freedom"); at times it is the Husserlian figure of the transcendental subject. Though not the same figures, one might reconcile the ambiguity by suggesting that Moten resists the imposition of formalization inherent in both. For the racializing effects of the formalization of the subject, see the work of Denise Ferreira da Silva in *Towards a Global Idea of Race* and "No-Bodies: Law, Raciality, and Violence." For the difference between the status of the transcendental in Kant and Husserlian phenomenology, see Derrida's *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*.
42. "Is it possible to desire the something other than transcendental subjectivity that is called nothing? What if blackness is the name that has been given to the social field and social life of an illicit alternative capacity to desire? Basically, that is precisely what I think blackness is" ("Blackness and Nothingness" 778).
43. Derrida states perhaps most succinctly why Husserl's phenomenology has provided so much traction for modern philosophy in the preface to *The Origin of Geometry in Husserl*; posing problems that would be endemic to philosophy in general, Derrida sees dialectical philosophy as 'superposed' on phenomenology (xxxv).
44. *Ideas I*, 105.
45. "This radiating focus varies with each cogito, shooting forth anew with the new cogito and vanishing with it. Yet the [pure] ego is something identical" (*Ibid.*).
46. *ItB*, 203.
47. Epitomized in Hegel.
48. The phenomenological reduction consists of an analysis of mental experience in which all judgment, "worldliness," and objectivity are suspended: "*What can remain if the entire world, including ourselves with every cogitare, is suspended?*," asks Husserl (*Ideas I* 58). "This aim may be designated as *that of gaining a new region of being, one that has not previously been circumscribed in its distinctiveness* and that, like every authentic region, is a region of *individual being*" (58). The individuality of this individual being, which is other than the I— "a real object like others in the natural world" (58)—is the focus of Husserl's extensive ruminations on the essence of consciousness.
49. *ItB*, 203.
50. "[T]his is how empire makes phenomenology possible, figuring a simplicity structured by regression, return, and reduction refigured as refinement" (*ItB* 203).
51. "The Case of Blackness," 188.
52. This is a point Sexton vigorously contests in "The Social Life of Social Death," calling into question instead the pertinence of the claim (22).
53. nonsubject is not Moten's term but my placeholder for what I interpret from his desire for an apposition to the transcendental subject (a phenomenological gesture that is not phenomenology's).

54. 1960s postwar intellectual life was highly influenced by the philosophical school of phenomenology, and, as Moten reminds us in "Case," Fanon was no exception. While according to Fanonian scholarship, Fanon was influenced primarily by the existential phenomenology of Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (both students of Husserlian phenomenology) Derrida's very early writings focused on Husserl's writings directly, and attempted to make a case for the latter's interest by renewing Husserl's engagement with the aporias of historicity (*The Problem of Genesis xviii*). According to Lewis Gordon, while Sartre agreed with the basic premise of Husserlian phenomenology—that is, the general calling into question of consciousness—his emphasis on the standpoint of the investigator departed from Husserl's ongoing preoccupation with the transcendental ego: "What is involved in my not admitting...where I supposedly *stand*?" writes Gordon of Sartre's revision (*Fanon and the Crisis* 16). For Gordon, then, as for Fanon, Sartre's critique of Husserl "signals the possibility of a theory that could serve as critique of the transcendental subject as a white subject" (15).
55. "Case", 23. The relay over interpretative frameworks for reading Fanon that animates the dialogue between Jared Sexton and Moten in "Raw Life" (Sexton and Copeland 2005), "The Case of Blackness" (Moten 2008), "Ante-Anti-Blackness" (Sexton 2011) and "Blackness and Nothingness" (Moten 2013) is encapsulated in Spillers' important remark about the constitutive inadequacy of selecting a unified framework for reading Fanon: "If we can be certain of anything, though, it is that our reading of the Fanon canon will most likely be inadequate, because the writing is shot through with contradiction" ("All the Things" 387). As Spillers implies, the concept of "proper reading" may place too much emphasis on the calculations of readers and writers; as will become clearer, the position this paper takes is that critical approaches, which cannot be fully covered by the domain of "intentionality," secrete unintended methodological byproducts.
56. In her writings on oppression in *Powers of Horror*, abjection is again connected to the maternal, as that chord of the nascent subject's nonautonomy which must be repelled and rejected in order to accede to the symbolic world of meaning. Ab-jection of the mother, is the first act of the subject.
57. Moten expresses both affiliation and divergence with Kristeva, though it is not clear where precisely he diverges: "Kristeva's work is crucial to what I am attempting here, not only because of her original movement within a conceptual field I must now negotiate, one characterized by a certain understanding of music that remains to be worked, but also because of her understanding of the relations between that conceptual field and sexual difference" (*ItB* 278, fn. 70).
58. *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 29.
59. *Ibid.*, 40.
60. Kristeva associates the word semiotic with the Greek origin that also denotes "trace" (*RPL* 25).
61. *ItB*, 15. Again, this is why Aunt Hester—mute but for the sheer opacity and depth of her vocal emanations of pain, becomes a particularly appropriate figure for the intimacy between "maternity" and "materiality" Moten wishes to create.
62. *Ibid.*, 197.
63. See Gilles Deleuze, "How do WE RECOGNIZE STRUCTURALISM" in *Desert Islands and Other Texts*.
64. *Ibid.*, 22.
65. Terada, 294.
66. *Scenes*, 85.
67. *ItB*, 241.

68. *Ibid.*, 22.
69. It might be well to remember Spillers' frustration with the history of representing black female sexuality, both in historical discourse and in "the people's" oral poetry: "[Black women's] sexual experiences are depicted, but not often by them, and if and when by the subject herself, often in the guise of vocal music, often in the self-contained accent and sheer romance of the blues" (*Interstices* 153).
70. In a tradition that dates back at least to W.E.B. Dubois, who believed Sorrow Songs to be "these weird old songs in which the soul of the black slave spoke to men" (*Souls* 126). Moten outdoes this modest theory of musical expression: "enslavement—and the resistance to enslavement...is the performative essence of blackness" (*ItB* 16).
71. *ItB*, 24.
72. *Ibid.*, 179.
73. *ItB*, 179.
74. *Ibid.*, 173.
75. Within the haze of reactionary ethos against poststructuralist thought, third wave French feminism enjoyed its share of notoriety. In the US as well as in Europe, feminists suspicious of the glorification of motherhood criticized Kristeva for her recovery of an innate precultural female sexuality reconfigured through speculative linguistic categories. In a piece on Kristeva that may as well be exemplary of these criticisms, Judith Butler questions the role of the "maternal" in the recuperation of the semiotic; this regeneration is cast through a spurious analogy with the prediscursive, drive-driven continuity between infant and mother—the echolalias that sound the prehistory of a symbolic "I"—or the impenetrable timbres bellowing from the depths of psychosis. For Butler, Kristeva's insistence on connecting the pre- or extra-discursive with the maternal, and then admitting its subservience to the symbolic, is self-defeating for the presumably subversive feminist politics she means to promote, for, by naturalizing the institution of the maternal as underneath and beyond culture, it revalidates those desires that both build-up and degrade motherhood, meanwhile foreclosing the possibility of interrogating how culture produces such desires. Rather than redeem Kristeva's distinction between symbolic and semiotic, Butler wonders "what cultural configuration of language—of discourse, generates the trope of a pre-discursive libidinal multiplicity, and for what purpose."
76. "Indeed, this model is marked by the ongoing projection of a specific notion of masculinity that emerges as the response to and repudiation and repetition of the violation of black maternity... It is, again, the radicalism of filial severance, the aesthetic and political assertion of motherless children and impossible motherhood, and it can neither be dismissed nor denied" (*ItB* 215). His indebtedness to Hortense Spillers' theorization of "the mother within" in her seminal "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" is clarified here.
77. For instance, the aforementioned feminist critiques of Kristeva, with no apparent shortage of legitimacy, presume already constituted notions of culture, and cultural particularity, leaving the relationship between language and culture itself unexplored, while accusing Kristeva of the same.
78. *ItB*, 216.
79. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," 66.
80. *Ibid.*, my emphasis.
81. *Ibid.*, 4.
82. *Ibid.*, 179.

83. By the time Douglass published *My Bondage*, a narrative circulating about the Jewish Queen Esther was providing a "narrative core" around which Black women could claim their right to protest slavery: "Commemorated as a racially passing woman whose proximity to power through the fact of sex secures the possibility and the right of survival for her people" (11), Sharpe suggests that in renaming Hester, Douglass's text exhibited the necessary contraction of white empathy.
84. "Hester's resistance does not symbolically or otherwise end Captain Anthony's violation and there is no defensive posture that she can maintain that will repel his aggression and allow the narrative of transformative heroism to adhere to her body... (10)."
85. For earlier critiques of gender in Douglass's *Narrative* see Deborah McDowell, "In the First Place: Making Frederick Douglass and the Afro-American Tradition," in William Andrews, ed. *Critical Essays on Frederick Douglass* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1991); George Cunningham "Called into Existence: Desire, Gender, and Voice in Frederick Douglas's Narrative of 1845" *differences* 1.3 (1989): 108-135; Jenny Franchot, "The Punishment of Esther: Frederick Douglass and the Construction of the Feminine," in Eric J. Sundquist, ed., *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1990).
86. In her interview with Frank Wilderson III, Hartman says that *Scenes of Subjection* starts from the premise of the impossibility of representing the slave: "the slave occupies the position of the unthought. So what does it mean to try to bring that position into view without making it a locus of positive value, or without trying to fill in the void?" ("Position of the Unthought" 185)
87. Similarly, Robert F. Reid-Pharr describes Aunt Hester as a "prosthetic" for Douglass: "Douglass gains his 'self' through the 'corporealization,' some might even say bestialization, of Aunt Hester. He is able to transcend his body because he forces Aunt Hester to inhabit hers so fully" (34). Both Sharpe and Reid-Pharr make something of Aunt Hester's lack of speech, lack of personalization in Douglass. Not by way of a moral judgement (for Sharpe, subjectification, making-subject is equally as violent as objectification). Rather, both point to the excess of the black female body upon which the very possibility of subjectivity rests. The disembodiment of male subjectivity in Pharr-Reid, is dependent upon the full embodiment of the black female, and the impossibility of transcending that embodiment. In Douglass's *Narrative* full embodiment is further compounded through the element of sexual desire—Aunt Hester is punished in the first place for partaking in a romantic rendezvous with her slave lover from another plantation. Douglass absorbs Hester's debased subjectivity, transcends it, but only so long as she continues to remain at the stage of that debasement; transcendence depends on the equally full realization of debasement.
88. For Hartman's notion of redress see especially *Scenes*, p. 76-7: "First, redress is a re-membering of the social body that occurs precisely in the recognition and articulation of devastation, captivity, and enslavement" (77). In Sharpe, redress is further complicated by the idea that "redemption" is manipulable, always imposing a "particularly totalizing narrative frame" (*Monstrous* 73) that may be co-opted by particular discursive forces.
89. In attending to the internal differentiation of blackness, Spillers remarks on an intransigent thought—there is no "degree of difference" which corresponds to the idea of black female. The latter is simply unthinkable in language. Pointing to all the irrevocable inadequacies that befall the term black woman, Spillers turns to a different spatial metaphor—"interstice" to describe those lexical gaps for which the term—always inadequately—substitutes itself. The interstice is "that which allows us to speak about and that which enables us to speak at all" ("Interstices—a Small Drama

- of Words," 156).
90. "Case," 105.
 91. *Ibid.*, 216.
 92. *Ibid.*, 187.
 93. *Ibid.*, 187.
 94. "Case," 191.
 95. "Knowledge of Freedom," 255.
 96. *ItB*, 77.
 97. Derrida begins with an undecidable position on Phenomenology: on the one hand, he asserts, by bracketing the *ti esti* of the sign, Husserl engages in the possibility of reversing the direction of metaphysics, wherein truth has always been assumed to precede the sign. On the other hand, the phenomenological reduction is indebted to a concept of consciousness, experience and "life" irreducibly caught up within the classical metaphysics of presence. Does Moten, by exchanging blackness with this place-holder "life," and "experience" avoid the doubleness of this movement? He does not avoid it; it would be more accurate to say he draws attention to it. But is that attention not already built into the history of metaphysical thought that makes the doubleness both necessary and impossible?
 98. *VP*, 27.
 99. Leonard Lawlor, the translator of the 2011 edition of *Voice and Phenomena* writes of the book that it "contains 'the germinal structure' of Derrida's entire thought" (xi).
 100. Kristeva admits most explicitly her proximity to Derrida in a passage in *Revolution in Poetic Language* where she writes, "The functioning of writing [*écriture*], the trace, and the *grammè*, introduced by Derrida in his critique of phenomenology and its linguistic substitutes, points to an essential aspect of the semiotic" (40).
 101. *VP*, 10.
 102. *Ibid.*, 11.
 103. *Ibid.*, 10.
 104. Given the structure of philosophical texts where one philosopher is commenting on another, it is easy to confuse commentary or description for subscription—at times, it is impossible to discern Derrida's own thoughts from Husserl's, to draw a final line between critique and commentary. Here Derrida's prose seems to acuminate enigma by fading the distinction further.
 105. I owe this insight to UCI graduate student Williston R. Chase.
 106. *VP*, 10.
 107. For example, the idea of translatability would not be possible without this problematic distinction between signifier and signified that animates, but is always inadequate, to the very concept "sign."
 108. *Positions*, 10.
 109. Though Moten gestures toward the idea that Fanon himself might complicate the distinction, he does not take the further step of calling into question the bounds of the distinction's conditions of possibility. At the same time, Fanon, and the experience that he both carries and analyzes, places the Heideggerian distinction between being (thing) and Dasein—the being to whom understandings of being are given; the not but nothing other than, human being—in a kind of jeopardy that was already implicit, however much it is held within an interplay between being overlooked and being overseen" ("Case" 186).
 110. Perhaps the term "poststructuralist" is itself part of the culprit here—what I am emphasizing

instead is the way in which the particular recourse to a highly fragile distinction (as in ontic/ontological) may exert certain tendencies.

111. Ibid., 153.
112. "Case," 187.
113. Ibid., emphasis added.
114. When Hortense Spillers makes the black female body the object of a radical problematization of the sign, a different structure of temporality seems to pressure her inquiry. Famously concerning herself with the "bizarre axiological ground" (65) that is the coercive field of signification, Spillers declares skepticism toward the veneer of immanence granted to acts of invention. Anteriority is not just the disinterested tissue of language that passes unfelt and unheard, the underside of nomos; it is, in Spillers' formulation, also the tense of the racial marker whose "mythical time" (66) immures the object sucked inside its referent to a "powerful stillness" (66). Despite its infinite semiotic possibilities and profound capacity for the improvisatory, blackness "remains," for Spillers, "grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, shows movement, as the human subject is 'murdered' over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise." This endless murder, which Hartman subsumes as the *always-being-for*, is not only the semiotic's recurrent frustration into "symbolic substitutions" (67). It is, like Derrida's breaking of Husserl's fantasy of a pre-linguistic realm of sense, there in "the irreducible openness in the inside" (*VP* 74), the world always already absorbed in the possibility of sense itself.
115. This is not to say that once the semiotic/symbolic or experience/fact distinction is itself in operation, anti-blackness disappears; it is only to say that methodology disappears it from view.
116. "The Case of Blackness," 180.
117. "Blackness and Nothingness," 740.
118. Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death."
119. *Scenes*, 78.
120. Derrida; *Aporias* 22.

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