FUGITIVE GESTURES: THE PERSISTENCE OF BLACK MEANING AND BLACK LIFE IN AN ANTI-BLACK WORLD

By

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Abstract


My dissertation, *Fugitive Gestures: The persistence of Black meaning and Black life in an anti-Black world*, develops a phenomenological analysis of contemporary Black lived experience in the US occurring in fugitive spaces—territories independent of white supremacy and anti-Black disciplinary techniques. In contrast to Afropessimists who argue that contemporary Black subjects exist as nonbeing, I demonstrate the presence of contemporary Black meaning and Black being as expressed in Black gestures. First, I develop the concept ‘Black archive’ to describe how contemporary Black subjects live with the conceptual awareness of historical anti-Blackness as it unfolds in the present; are symbolically marked by ‘the hieroglyphics of the flesh’; and, finally, share a collective memory of chattel slavery. The Black archive, thus, historicizes an analysis of the contemporary Black subject in contrast to the un-historicized political ontology on which Afropessimists rely. Next, drawing upon Merleau-Pontian phenomenology, I examine how the racializing gaze—a phenomenological structure of white supremacy—inhibits the Black phenomenal body to distort the Black body image, fragment the Black body schema, and un-synthesize the Black habit body. I argue that in fugitive spaces, by contrast, the Black phenomenal body is no longer inhibited by the racializing gaze of white supremacy. This freedom from the racializing gaze allows Black subjects the freedom to cultivate a robust habit body capable of spontaneous and creative movements, which are immanently meaningful because they emerge from an uninhibited embodied intentionality. I identify Black being and Black meaning as expressed in three examples of Black gesture: i) the Black Nod, ii) Tommie Smith’s and John Carlos’ raised fists during the 1968 Olympics and, iii)
the Black queer ballroom scene. Thus, while Black lived experience is disciplined and inhibited under white supremacy, we can recognize the persistence of Black being and Black meaning as expressed in Black gestures.
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Introduction

Originally, this dissertation was motivated by an interest in Black gestures. Among the questions driving the project were the following: how can gestures be racialized? How are gestures overdetermined or pre-determined ahead of their performance? And how are Black gestures interpreted such that, in themselves, they constitute an immediate threat?

This interest in Black gestures emerged for me in the aftermath of the 2015 murder of Freddie Gray. Following his murder, several news media outlets made reference to Gray’s eye contact with the police officer as a sufficient condition for the police pursuit leading to his death, and thus for his death itself. But the fact that this detail was so quickly and uncritically adopted by many media outlets gave me pause. What was it exactly about Gray’s eye contact that made him a target of police violence? I came to believe that it was Gray’s gesture, his eye contact, which constituted a disturbance to the police responsible for his murder.

Raised in the wake of Blackness, which involves bodily orientations that make our Blackness more or less visible, more or less suspicious, I intuitively felt that Gray may have known the dangers of making eye contact with the police. And, indeed, whether or not Gray

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1 Kim Bellware, a journalist with *HuffPost* reported the following: “Police arrested Gray in a high-crime area of the city when he made eye contact and then ran” (Kim Bellware, “How the Fight To Convict Baltimore Cops in Freddie Gray’s Death Fell Apart,” *HuffPost*, July 31, 2016, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/freddie-gray-trial-problems_n_5798feb1e4b02d5ed3ed67?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8 &guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAAIlRd9iifCx1AvvQ6f1lqKNUvKS3k _myLRR0aBiu7r3KldTWG8e3OQF7SogZ 1JmU0nlVq1nfR5nY49kVxMWr3y2Tk-kAgFNuwFLrlcqE5sxNVQ7wXVexMNWbVY30JXEsl71LzY1Ydg0U8Q_7V-L8pm-5Mc0n-cTEXz); David A. Graham, reporter with *The Atlantic*, wrote: “Authorities can’t say if there was a particularly good reason why police arrested Gray. According to the city, an officer made eye contact with Gray” (David A. Graham, “The Mysterious Death of Freddie Gray,” *The Atlantic*, April 22, 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/04/the-mysterious-death-of-freddie-gray/391119/); and Jonathan Capehart, reporter with *The Washington Post*, wrote: “Remember the reason Gray was pursued in the first place? According to Deputy Commissioner Jerry Rodriguez, ‘A lieutenant begins pursuing Mr. Gray after making eye contact with two individuals” (Jonathan Capehart, “‘After making eye contact,’ Baltimore chases Ferguson,” *The Washington Post*, April 23, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2015/04/23/after-making-eye-contact-baltimore-chases-ferguson/?noredirect=on).
knew of this danger, however, the news media reporting implied through frequent and uncritical mention of Gray’s eye contact that he “should have known.” They described his gesture as inherently provocative: How dare this young Black man look at these officers of the state? But Gray’s eye contact violated not only a social order, but a phenomenological one as well. The motivation of the officers’ violent attack upon Gray was his unwillingness to shrink before a racializing gaze.

But why of all the facts relevant to Gray’s murder, I wondered, was it the fact of eye contact that became salient in the media’s portrayal of the event? And how was his gesture perceived from the police officer’s point of view? In other words, what did Gray’s eye contact mean in this context? Further, while the event of Gray’s murder instigated these initial reflections, it was also evident that the event could not be understood in isolation: his murder was not a stand-alone case. As I dug deeper into police statements and news media coverage of the circumstances surrounding other—too many, far too many—Black persons murdered at the hands of the state, I wondered how many of these narratives relied upon a perceived meaning expressed in the gesture performed by a Black subject. In other words, I began to think more seriously about the frequency with which the apparent meanings expressed in gestures were used to explain why one acted in a violent, sometimes deadly, response. Trayvon Martin’s hoodie, a sartorial gesture, was in and of itself suspicious from the perspective of ‘he who shall not be named,’ the officer that murdered him. Renisha McBride, who knocked on the door of a stranger out of utter desperation for assistance after a car crash, was also perceived, by another who will go unnamed here as so threatening that her presence warranted the use of deadly force. The narratives made available to the public through police and media reporting, it is clear, are pre-packaged and consistently represent the perspective of the murderers. After all, Gray, Martin,
and McBride, and countless others, are no longer alive and, therefore, not able to offer their own account of their encounters. In reflecting upon the various and, yet distinct deadly encounters, I suspected that meanings perceived in isolated movements—gestures—had taken the place of overtly racialized scripts, which have long justified anti-Black violence in the US and beyond.

In part, I offer this autobiographical account of what originally led to my concern with understanding gestures through a socio-historico lens to understand the shift in focus my dissertation has undergone over the past year. I, like many other Black people, have become increasingly exhausted by the ever-increasing representations of Black death. To say that I have become exhausted by these graphic images of anti-Black violence is, for me, a way of saying that the death of Black people is over-represented in the dominant news and social media outlets available to the US and abroad. I was drowning in the various accounts of Black life as already contextualized in terms of Black death. What Saidiya Hartman calls the “terrible spectacle” that is the overrepresentation of Black death, however, was not unique to mainstream media. A similar tendency manifests itself in the areas of academia concerned with Blackness and perhaps most notably in the Afropessimist tradition. Hartman’s work, however, identifies the possibility of a different kind of analysis of Blackness. She famously begins her 1997 *Scenes of Subjection* by refusing to reproduce the violence perpetrated upon Frederick Douglass’ aunt Hester by their white captor in order, she writes, “to call attention to the ease with which such scenes are usually reiterated, the casualness with which they are circulated, and the consequences of this routine display of the slave’s ravaged body.”

But rather than provide an analysis of anti-Black violence as Hartman does, and as I had originally intended, I became drawn to forms of Black life that *persist* despite the constant siege

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on Black life. That is, my focus shifted from an analysis of anti-Black violence to an exploration of the joy, the celebratory nature, and the comradery that structures contemporary Black life. Despite the vulnerability to violence to which Black people are subjected under white supremacy, I can say with confidence that the Black people in my life—myself included—would not wish to be anything other than Black. So, my project, *Fugitive Gestures*, is intended to highlight the meaning of and in Black life. And I seek to do so, moreover, in a manner that neither reduces Black life to anti-Black violence, nor primarily conceives of Black life on and in relation to white supremacy. My specific philosophical concern is with how Black people live, feel, move when they are at-home, that is, among other Black people and not immediately surveilled by white supremacy.

On such a realization, my philosophical commitments and, thus, inquiry shifted from analyzing anti-Black violence to analyzing how Black subjects experience their race while, at the same time, remaining conscious that their race has historically served as a sufficient explanation for Black death. This shift in approach brought me to the concept of “fugitivity,” which, as considered by theorists of Black studies, is irreducible to any one condition and, as such, offers a way to theorize Blackness beyond white supremacy or Black death. I discovered, or, more precisely, I increasingly became aware that the space of fugitivity affords Black subjects the opportunity to experience their race independent of what is available to them under white supremacy. The space of fugitivity is a place that is not permitted, so to speak. Drawing upon Foucault, one could say it is an undisciplined space. Informed by the works of Hartman, I thus re-oriented my labors toward unearthing the fugitive territories available under white supremacy, and the fugitive lives therein.
First, this dissertation does not plan to reveal either those ‘state secrets,’ as it were, concerning Black subjects who enter into the space of fugitivity. Nor does it intend to provide a road map into these fugitive spaces. Rather, this project examines the freedoms afforded Black subjects during their temporary reprieve in fugitive spaces, which exist at a liminal distance from the direct surveillance of white supremacy. Such turn in perspective enables my inquiry to focus on Black being, Black meaning, and Black ways of life.

This dissertation, *Fugitive Gestures: The persistence of Black meaning and Black life in an anti-Black world*, develops a phenomenological analysis of contemporary Black lived experience in the US occurring in fugitive spaces—territories independent of white supremacy and anti-Black disciplinary techniques. In contrast to Afropessimists who argue that contemporary Black subjects exist as nonbeing, I demonstrate the presence of contemporary Black meaning and Black being as expressed in Black gestures.

The dissertation begins with *Chapter I: Dehumanization and Ontological Violence under Chattel Slavery*, which explores the psychological, physical, and ontological forms of violence that constituted US chattel slavery. These violences, I argue, dehumanized enslaved subjects, reducing their ontological presence. Drawing on Frederick Douglass’ 1845 autobiography,

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3 I use the term ‘ontological presence’ throughout this dissertation to broadly refer to the ontological being of subjects. I do so in order to provide an account of Black ontology that is sufficiently general for responding to claims concerning Black being made by theorists working from a variety of traditions. For example, in his 2018 text, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*, Afropessimist Calvin Warren develops an ontometaphysical account of Blackness as nonbeing. Drawing upon Heideggerian ontology and metaphysics, Warren argues that Blackness is a function of onto-metaphysics—a function that makes being possible for non-Black subjects. In another case, Jared Sexton uses Orlando Patterson’s sociological concept ‘social death’ in his 2011 article, “The Social Life of Social Death,” to make what he refers to as the ‘metapolitical’—which I understand to mean political ontology—and ‘metaphysical’ claim that contemporary Black subjects have inherited the status of social death originally constituted during chattel slavery. Unlike Warren who primarily works in the philosophical tradition, Sexton works in multiple disciplines including cultural studies, film studies, and African American Studies. It is perhaps because Sexton is not, strictly speaking, a philosopher that he never clearly defines the metaphysical and/or ontological sense in which he understands the social death of Black subjects. That is, Sexton does not clearly characterize his use of social death as metaphysical, ontological, or existential. Instead, his discussion of Black social death includes a range of conceptual frameworks: political, economic, cultural, and even existential. In addition to this, Sexton’s frequent use of the term ‘being’, along with his rejection of a purely
Narrative of the Life of a Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, I show, both the dimensions of enslaved subjects’ ontological absence and, at once, the fugitive acts through which they restored ontological presence to themselves. Following my account of Douglass, I turn to Hartman’s Scenes of Subjection, to explore enslaved persons’ nonbeing by identifying how their ambiguous position vis-a-vis humanity rendered them vulnerable to commodification.

Explicating Hartman’s argument that enslaved subjects existed as fungible commodities, I articulate a notion of fugitivity as slaves “stealing [themselves] away.” I argue that stealing away, more than the act of undermining white dominance and surveillance, is best understood as the practice of cultivating meaning independent of white supremacy. Finally, I draw on Hortense Spiller’s argument that, following the abolition of chattel slavery, previously enslaved subjects repossessed their bodies, becoming embodied persons no longer reducible to “flesh.” Spiller’s distinction allows me, in turn, to differentiate between the ontological status of slaves and that of contemporary Black subjects, arranging the architecture for the argument I then stage in Chapter III.

Before I engage in that discussion, however, I examine the historically specific phenomenological structure of white supremacy conditioning the contemporary US. Chapter II: An Account of White Supremacy and the Racializing Gaze examines how the racializing gaze

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sociological definition of social death, suggests that he intends to make a claim upon the ontological existence of Black subjects in his characterization of Black subjects as socially dead. The term ‘ontological presence’ is, therefore, specific enough to an ontological framework to analyze Black being and, at the same time, broad enough for a response to differing and ambiguous claims about Black being made by various Afropessimists. See Calvin Warren, Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018) and Jared Sexton, “The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism,” In Tensions Journal 5 (2011): 1-47.

4 Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of a Frederick Douglass, an American Slaver (Boston: The Anti-Slavery Office, 1845).

inhibits the Black subject’s ability to cultivate what I call, using Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a ‘robust habit body’ otherwise enabling spontaneous and creative acts and the free production of meaning. The purpose of this chapter is to prepare for my subsequent discussions in both Chapter III and Chapter IV by sketching the phenomenological structure of white supremacy from which Black subjects flee in the space of fugitivitv. Using Merleau-Ponty’s concept of ‘habit body,’ I build a conceptual framework distinguishing between ‘routinized habituation’ and ‘robust habituation,’ to articulate how non-white subjects under white supremacy are rendered unable to cultivate a robust habit body, the necessary condition for making creative and spontaneous meaning.

In Chapter III: Historicizing Blackness, I explore some of the ways that the history of anti-Black violence conditions contemporary Black subject formation in the US. To show how Black life has always exceeded the trauma and suffering with which it is associated, I reject the view that Black subjects are determined by the history of anti-Black violence and instead contend that they are simply conditioned by it. I make this case, first, by analyzing Saidiya Hartman’s concept of the ‘afterlives of slavery.’ I argue that Hartman’s concept retains an obdurate ambiguity that has allowed subsequent interpreters in the tradition of Afropessimism to deploy it in ways that flatten the historical difference distinguishing chattel slavery from Black life in the contemporary US. I then turn to Sylvia Wynter’s historiography and political ontology of Man in order to demonstrate, again, how Afropessimists—particularly Frank Wilderson III, Jared Sexton, and Calvin Warren—transhistoricize her historically-situated ontological analysis.

As an alternative to the determinism often exhibited in Afropessimist readings of Black subjectivity as the ‘afterlives of slavery,’ I develop the concept of the ‘Black archive’ to describe how the history of anti-Blackness conditions contemporary Black subject formation without
wholly dictating it. I define the Black archive as the assemblage of multiple discursive regimes that are similarly regulated by anti-Black disciplinary and regulatory techniques. As such, the Black archive is that in, through, and as which contemporary Black subjects live. Under this category of analysis, I describe how contemporary Black subjects live with the conceptual awareness of historical anti-Blackness as it unfolds in the present; how they are symbolically marked by ‘the hieroglyphics of the flesh’; and, finally, the ways in which they share a collective memory of chattel slavery. The Black archive, thus, historicizes an analysis of the contemporary Black subject as *conditioned* in contrast to the un-historicized political ontology often found in Afropessimist readings.

Building on this analysis, *Chapter IV: The Crucible of Black Gesture*, turns to chart an account of Black gesture as “fugitive meaning,” that is, as immanent expressions of Black meaning that are not about either white supremacy or anti-Blackness. I begin this chapter with an examination of Vilém Flusser’s theory of gesture, which identifies gestures as deliberate acts performed by subjects seeking to represent and express an underlying symbolic meaning. Gestures, for Flusser, are tools of the body and, as such, cannot be, in Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s terms, “immanently meaningful.” I thus argue that, in following Immanuel Kant in conceiving of subjectivity as consciousness, Flusser occludes the body’s potential to produce meaning. To develop an alternative conception of gesture, I turn instead to Merleau-Ponty’s existential-phenomenological theory of gesture as rooted in embodied intentionality and thus as that which is immanently meaningful. In other words, I show that, because, for Merleau-Ponty, linguistic and bodily gestures emerge from an embodied intentionality, they are meaningful in themselves.
By recovering the meaning and being of Blackness and refusing to treat Black subjects only as effects of white supremacy, this dissertation aspires to open possibilities for philosophical treatments of Blackness and modes of comprehending contemporary Black life.
Chapter One: Dehumanization and Ontological Violence under Chattel Slavery

This chapter concerns the psychological, physical, and ontological forms of violence that constituted US chattel slavery. I consider how the psychological and physical violence used to dehumanize enslaved subjects concomitantly reduced their ontological status to nonbeing. I explore the ontological position of the enslaved subject by, first, identifying acts expressive of the enslaved subject’s humanity as well as their captor’s ironic recognition and denial of this humanity as depicted in Frederick Douglass’ 1845 autobiography, Narrative of the Life of a Frederick Douglass, an American Slave.\(^1\) Next, drawing on Saidiya Hartman’s ‘fungibility’ and Hortense Spiller’s ‘flesh,’ I develop an ontological account of the enslaved subject as nonbeing. In the final section of this chapter, I argue against contemporary theorists, most notably those working in Afropessimism, who claim that the nonbeing of enslaved subjects can be extended to the contemporary Black subject who, it is said, *continues to exist as nonbeing.*\(^2\) I emphasize the historical specificity of Hartman’s and Spiller’s work to argue that, while enslaved subjects existed as nonbeing, a concrete analysis of the ontological status of contemporary Black subjects in the US is still lacking. In fact, as I demonstrate in the final chapter of this dissertation, contemporary Black subjects express meaning through gestures, which is indicative of ontological presence and, therefore, being.

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\(^1\) Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of a Frederick Douglass, an American Slaver* (Boston: The Anti-Slavery Office, 1845). I use the term ‘captive’ throughout this dissertation to refer to white members of dominant society during chattel slavery in order to distinguish dominant white society during chattel slavery from dominant white society in the contemporary US.

\(^2\) Afropessimism here refers to an academic tradition in the US concerning Black studies. This is distinct from Afropessimism which refers to the colonial analysis that the African continent would remain arrested in their development without Western intervention. For more on the distinction between Afropessimism and Afro-Pessimism, see Gloria Wekker, “Afropessimism,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 28, no. 1 (2020): 86-97.
I begin this chapter with Frederick Douglass’ account of learning to read as described in his 1845 autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of a Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. I argue that Douglass’ fugitive act of educating himself led to an existential confrontation with his existence. Through education, Douglass re-opened a future foreclosed to him through his enslavement and, as a result, regained his ontological being. This ontological transformation demonstrates the nonbeing many enslaved subjects were meant to occupy, as well as the potential for fugitive acts to restore one’s ontological presence.

Next, reading the opening passages of Douglass’ 1845 autobiography, I argue that the distribution of knowledge regarding the personal history of enslaved subjects constituted a psychological form of violence. Adopting a Foucauldian analysis of power/knowledge, I argue that, although chattel slavery relied primarily upon the use of unilateral techniques of sovereign power to maintain and reproduce itself, in Douglass’ autobiography we can recognize early forms of biopower qua regulatory techniques at work. Contrasting the strict record-keeping regarding an enslaved subject’s birthplace with the lack of access or lack of records related to their birthdate, I demonstrate that power/knowledge was an important tool for maintaining chattel slavery. By denying Douglass and other enslaved subject’s knowledge of their history, white subjects sought to alienate enslaved people from that history and reinforce their being as different in kind from whites. This, combined with their vulnerability to spectacular forms of punishment, constituted the existence of enslaved subjects as one of nonbeing.

Following my account of Douglass, I turn to Saidiya Hartman’s 1997 text, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*, to further examine the nonbeing of enslaved subjects. Hartman demonstrates that enslaved subjects were made to

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occupy an ambivalent position with regard to humanity. They were not entirely excluded from humanity because their capacity to feel pleasure and pain, their capacity to produce pleasure and pain for dominant white subjects, and their culpability for transgressing the law were used by whites—slave owners and non-slave owners—to assert dominance and further the subjugation of enslaved subjects. According to Hartman, the enslaved subject’s precarious position with regard to humanity rendered them vulnerable to commodification. That is, the ‘not-quite-human’ character of the enslaved subject excluded them from ethical consideration and, therefore, made them eligible for commodification. Thus, Hartman argues that the enslaved subject existed as a fungible commodity—interchangeable and replaceable.

Finally, I draw upon Hortense Spillers’ theory of the captive subject transformed into flesh, as originally developed in her 1987 article, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” to examine the physical violence used by captors to dehumanize and, in turn, de-ontologize enslaved subjects. Spillers argues that the practices and instruments used to wound enslaved subjects transformed them into ‘flesh.’ However, as Spillers argues, after chattel slavery was formally abolished in the US, enslaved subjects re-possessed their bodies and, as a result, the liberated Black subject became an embodied person rather than flesh. I introduce Spillers’ concept ‘flesh’ after my discussion of Hartman’s work, despite the fact that Hartman herself draws upon Spillers, for two reasons. First, Spillers does not return to her concept ‘flesh’ in any rigorous fashion, which proves difficult for establishing a comprehensive exegesis of the term. Despite this, however, this concept has been adopted and used by many contemporary theorists, most notably those working in Afropessimism, to develop claims about the existence of contemporary Black subjects. I provide a brief discussion of Spillers’ concept ‘flesh’ in

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preparation for my critique of Afropessimists’ unhistoricized claims regarding the ontological existence of Black subjects. This leads to my second reason for waiting until the end of this chapter to explicate Spillers’ work. My discussion of Spillers involves a shift from analyzing the ontological presence of enslaved subjects to establishing the historical parameters around which enslaved subjects and contemporary Black subjects in the US, respectively, can be made. Thus, the discussion of Spillers in the chapter marks a point of transition from ontology to historicity. I develop a critique of Afropessimist theorists, including David Marriott, Frank Wilderson III, Calvin Warren, and Jared Sexton who, I will argue, wrongly extend Spillers’ concept of ‘flesh’ to claim that the contemporary Black subject exists as flesh and, therefore, as nonbeing. Given the historicity of Spillers’ account of ‘flesh’, we should say, rather, that contemporary Black subjects are beings whose bodies are symbolically marked by ‘hieroglyphics of the flesh,’ a concept I develop further in chapter III of this dissertation. The original ontological schism that occurred during chattel slavery must, therefore, serve as an archetype and not a description of the contemporary ontological order in the US.

Douglass and Dehumanization: Regaining Ontological Presence

Frederick Douglass’ multiple autobiographies have been a source for many scholars of Black studies to illustrate the physical violence used in the constitution and maintenance of chattel slavery, as well as the effects of these processes on the subject (de-)formation of enslaved people. Saidiya Hartman’s Scenes of Subjection, opens with a reference to the “terrible spectacle” of Aunt Hester’s beating as documented in Douglass’ 1845 autobiography, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass. Hartman describes this event as an “inaugural moment” for Douglass—the moment in which his subjectivity was constituted as ‘slave.’ Similarly, Christina

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5 Hartman, Scenes, 3.
Sharpe’s 2010 text, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects*, opens with a discussion of Aunt Hester’s beating, though unlike Hartman who refuses to reconstruct Douglass’ account, Sharpe quotes Douglass’ description of the ‘terrible spectacle’ at length.\(^6\) This scene helps to frame Sharpe’s project of identifying the “ongoing processes of subjectification during slavery and into post-slavery to which all postmodern subjects are made subject.”\(^7\) While I think both Hartman’s and Sharpe’s readings of Douglass are insightful, I do not go so far as to say that contemporary Black subjects are constituted by the forms of anti-Black violence used during chattel slavery. I will develop my own account of contemporary Black subjectivity in chapter III of this dissertation where I introduce the concept of the ‘Black archive’ as an alternative to Hartman’s ‘afterlives of slavery’ and Sharpe’s ‘living in the wake.’ In contrast to Hartman’s and Sharpe’s reading of Douglass, I focus on how his lack of access to knowledge and the systems of surveillance guarding against his acquisition of knowledge are best understood as a regulatory technique of power intended to dehumanize him.

Let me now develop this account. In his 1845 autobiography, Douglass describes learning to read despite obstacles and warnings against his education. Douglass explains that by gaining access to knowledge previously unavailable to him, his very existence was transformed. When Auld, Douglass’ “owner,” discovers that he is being instructed in reading, he warns both his wife and Douglass of the dangers of the education of enslaved people.\(^8\) Auld claims that educating enslaved subjects is not only illegal, but dangerous, which suggests the threat a knowledgeable


\(^7\) Ibid., 3.

\(^8\) I use quotation marks to refer to “slave owners” because one cannot really own a human being. As I demonstrate throughout this section, enslaved subjects regularly demonstrated their humanity and, thus, were ineligible to be owned as property.
enslaved subject posed to the chattel slavery system’s ability to maintain itself. Auld argues that educating enslaved subjects is both “unlawful, as well as unsafe.”\(^9\) This is because, as Auld explains to his wife, an educated enslaved subject “would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm.”\(^10\) That Douglass could become unmanageable if educated is a warning to Auld’s wife; that he could do himself harm, is a warning to Douglass himself. Auld’s concern that Douglass would become discontented and unhappy with his condition is ironic, given his identification of Douglass as a non-subject. Auld is concerned that Douglass would become a less valuable commodity if educated because he could potentially learn a means of escape, or at the very least, he could become defiant. Auld was also concerned, however, that Douglass might become unhappy, which makes sense only if Auld appreciates Douglass’ ability to care about his existence. If, as existentialist theorists have argued, only a human \([\text{Dasein}]\) has the capacity to reflect upon and, in turn, care about their existence, then Auld’s concern for Douglass is a concern for him as a subject rather than as property.\(^11\) Thus, in one and the same breath, Auld identifies Douglass as both property and human, object and subject. This is precisely how dehumanization functions, for only if one is in a position to claim one’s humanity can one’s humanity be denied.

Refusing to heed Auld’s warning of the dangers he could do to himself if educated, Douglass continues his education in secret. Soon thereafter, however, Douglass proves Auld right. Reading speeches and dialogues related to emancipation, Douglass begins to give language to his as yet undeveloped dreams of freedom. He writes, “these documents enabled me to utter

\[^9\text{Ibid.},	ext{ 29.}\]
\[^{10}\text{Ibid.}\]
my thoughts” and they “gave tongue to interesting thoughts of my own soul, which had frequently flashed through my mind, and died away for want of utterance.”\textsuperscript{12} Through reading, Douglass begins to articulate the language of freedom that has only ever existed for him as an intuition. Clearly, he understood the injustice of Aunt Hester’s beating, for example, even before he had the language of justice. What education affords Douglass is the opportunity to formulate the injustice of chattel slavery as an argument. The institution of chattel slavery becomes, for him, a crime, and the evidence of this crime is so obvious that Douglass finds fault with those who ignore or participate in it.

Through education, Douglass learns the justice of freedom and the injustice of his slavery. And, as Auld predicted, Douglass becomes both unmanageable and discontent. Thoughts of escape and freedom give Douglass a sense of agency over a future which has, until then, already been determined for him. Now able to imagine a future, however, Douglass finds his present condition unbearable. He writes, “I often found myself regretting my own existence, and wishing myself dead; and but for the hope of being free, I have no doubt but that I should have killed myself or done something for which I should have been killed.”\textsuperscript{13} Douglass details his life before learning to read, as if it were a mere report of events for his reader. He describes where he was born and who his various captors are, and he recounts the everyday scenes of violence that constitute chattel slavery. But learning to read forces Douglass to reflect upon his condition and, in turn, to become invested in his existence—even if his investment first takes the form of regretting his existence. Furthermore, Douglass’ account of the existential transformation he underwent through educating himself demonstrates that Auld was not only

\textsuperscript{12} Douglass, \textit{Narrative}, 34-35.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 36.
correct in his judgment that if educated, Douglass would be unhappy; Auld was also correct in his judgment that knowledge made enslaved subjects less docile. Even more, Douglass’s education restored the ontological presence that had been stripped from him as an enslaved subject. In this context, ontological presence is the existential situation of a subjectivity who is in a position to envision a kind of future for themselves. Invested in his future, Douglass was no longer property, but a subject.

Douglass and Biopower

Douglass begins his 1845 autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of a Frederick Douglass*, with a description of what he knows and does not know of his own history.

I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot county, Maryland. I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. They seldom come nearer to it than planting-time, harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time, or fall-times. A want of information concerning my own was a source of unhappiness to me even during childhood. The white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege. I was not allowed to make any inquiries on the part of my master concerning it. He deemed all such inquiries on the part of a slave improper and impertinent, and evidence of a restless spirit. The nearest estimate I can give makes me now between twenty-seven and twenty-eight years of age. I come to this, from hearing my master say, sometime during 1835, I was about seventeen years old.  

The fact that he knows precisely where he was born is not unimportant, in my view. Though we are not told how he came to know the place of his birth, we know that records concerning a slave’s location, even a slave’s birthplace, were important for the effective management of the enslaved.  

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locating slaves was essential for the maintenance of chattel slavery as an institution. Douglass is also clear in the above account that his limited knowledge regarding his own history was purposefully curated by his “owner,” which was a common practice used by other “slave owners.” He describes his lack of knowledge regarding his birthdate as a source of sadness. It appears that his sadness is not simply because he does not know, but also because he is not allowed to know. If his “owner” did have a record of Douglass’ actual birthdate, Douglass would not be given access to it. As he writes, any inquiry the enslaved made to their captors was taken to be indicative of a ‘restless spirit.’ Curiosity is, for the captor, an exercise of humanity, which must be extinguished. This is because the more knowledge one has about their condition, the less docile they become under enslavement. Douglass’ own existential transformation through education is testament to the relation between knowledge and docility. The more he learned about his situation, the less willing he was to accept it. Transforming his intuitions of freedom into language, Douglass came to loathe his captor, was tormented by his captivity, and become consumed with gaining his freedom.\textsuperscript{16}

Reading Douglass’ account of the distribution of knowledge through Michel Foucault’s analysis of power/knowledge, we see that knowledge and power cannot be disarticulated. Foucault himself never analyzed the concrete conditions of chattel slavery, and instead developed the majority of his analysis within the context of Western European history; his work on the Iranian Revolution is the exception to this rule. However, one can easily identify in Douglass’ account of what he does, does not, and cannot know the expressions of Foucauldian regulatory power.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 35-36.
In his 1975 text, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault describes the historical emergence of a new form of power, namely biopower, which he traces back to the beginning of the nineteenth century. Prior to this, the dominant mode of power in Western Europe was monarchical power, which relied upon what he refers to as ‘spectacular punishment’ in order to exert control. Foucault argues that sovereign power was a display of the monarch’s power; public displays of torture, though not directly performed by the monarch her/himself, were symbolic expressions of the monarch’s will. Foucault writes:

> In this liturgy of punishment, there must be an emphatic affirmation of power and of its intrinsic superiority. And this superiority is not simply that of right, but that of the physical strength of the sovereign beating down upon the body of his adversary and mastering it: by breaking the law, the offender touched the very person of the prince.

Under sovereign power, the law and the monarch were one and the same. Therefore, a transgression of the law was, at the same time, a direct transgression against the monarch. The dominance of the monarch could only be guaranteed by the spectacular expression of the monarch’s will before the public and through the dramatic destruction of the offender’s body.

Because the monarch could not be in all places at once, s/he had to express the invincibility of monarchical power in front of the public, who was intended to witness in the spectacle of punishment the very strength of the monarch.

In contrast to sovereign power, biopower constituted what Foucault calls the ‘age of sobriety.’ Under this new form of power, punishment targets the body, though not through its destruction. What was previously a concentrated and unilateral system of domination, transformed into a diffuse network wherein power is “exercised rather than possessed.”

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18 Ibid., 49.

19 Ibid., 26.
therefore in relation to power rather than entirely submitted to it. Specifically, the body becomes the site through which power is expressed. Power invests in the body through disciplinary techniques that govern the body’s movements and regulatory techniques that focus upon the body as a biological organism. Both techniques of power work in and through knowledge of the body. Foucault explains, “power produces knowledge […] and power and knowledge directly imply one another.”20 In the age of sobriety, power and knowledge cannot be disarticulated. Knowledge is both a function and exercise of power and power is expressed and exercised in knowledge.

Before I further develop Foucault’s account of disciplinary and regulatory techniques of power, it is first important to recognize that sovereign power, as described by Foucault, characterizes the system of power governing chattel slavery. Rather, he develops his theory of sovereign power through an analysis actual monarchical power. However, because chattel slavery shares similar techniques of domination and punishment with Foucault’s analysis of the monarch, I extend his theory to examine the system of power governing chattel slaver. The enslaved subject was regularly subjected to physical violence directed at destroying their body, and often, this violence was performed in front of other enslaved subjects in order to warn them against any infractions. Punishment, thus, was used as an expression of the captor’s rule even when this punishment was performed by another. Thus, in the US, biopower had not yet fully replaced sovereign power during the early nineteenth century. However, Foucault is clear in his account of the historical transition from sovereign to biopower that this transition neither occurred all at once, nor did it occur at the same time in all countries. In Discipline and Punish,

20 Ibid., 27.
he explicitly lists the US, along with Austria and Russia, as examples of this transition occurring later and in an elliptical manner.\textsuperscript{21}

Hartman offers a critique of the interpretation of chattel slavery through the lens of biopower. In \textit{Scenes of Subjection}, Hartman argues that Foucault’s theory of biopower cannot account for the “direct and simple forms of domination” that constituted chattel slavery.\textsuperscript{22} In her view, because chattel slavery did not end until the late nineteenth century and because it functioned according to dominant or sovereign power as opposed to the more diffuse networks of biopower, then it would seem that Foucault’s periodization is inaccurate as relates to the US. I take it that Hartman’s critique has more to do with Foucault’s periodization of biopower’s emergence than it does biopower’s inability to account for slavery. However, as I have just argued, even as Foucault dates biopower’s emergence to the early nineteenth century, he adds the qualification that this transformation of power did \textit{not} occur all at once, nor did it occur at the same time in all regions, especially in the US.

This point is important for understanding Hartman’s critique of Foucault’s theory of agency, which she also develops in \textit{Scenes of Subjection}. While I do not consider Hartman’s thesis regarding agency in great detail in this project, it is important to identify how her critique of Foucault’s claims related to biopower lead her to make a similarly mistaken critique, in my view, of his theory of agency. Citing a 1984 interview given by Foucault, “the ethic of care for the self as a practice of freedom,” Hartman argues that Foucault’s concept of power excludes systems of domination from a relation to power: “As Foucault remarks, ‘There cannot be relations of power as opposed to domination unless subjects are free. If one were completely at

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 14-15.

\textsuperscript{22} Hartman, \textit{Scenes}, 55.
the disposition of the other and became his thing [...] there would not be relations of power.”

Hartman adds “as opposed to domination” to this quote in support of her claim. However, in this article, Foucault’s comments concerning domination are made with regard to a larger network of power. Foucault explains:

this analysis of relations of power constitutes a very complex field; it sometimes meets what we can call facts or states of domination, in which the relations of power, instead of being variable and allowing different partners a strategy which alters them, find themselves firmly set and congealed.

For Foucault, domination is one mode of power within the more complex field of power. Domination is characterized by the reified relations between subjects or groups, which prevent levels of interaction and reciprocation that may alter the power relation itself. Take for example the class antagonism between a worker who must sell their labor for money and a member of the bourgeoisie who owns the means of production. While workers may demand safe working conditions, fair pay, etc. they do so within the asymmetrical system of power constitutive of capitalism. However, no subject is simply a worker; we are all immersed within networks of power with varying relations of domination and reciprocity, and our status as worker our bourgeois constitutes one of these networks. And because biopower is characterized, for Foucault, by its diffuse networks as opposed to the single system of domination under sovereign power, then it follows that Hartman’s critique of Foucault is misguided. If chattel slavery did function according to dominant and unilateral power, as I think it did, then it is anachronistic to apply Foucault’s concept of agency expressed under biopower to that context of chattel slavery. Identifying the limits of Hartman’s critique of Foucault helps to frame my own use of his theory

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24 Foucault, “ethic of care,” 114.
of power/knowledge in the context of chattel slavery. For we shall see that under chattel slavery, power relations of reciprocity co-existed with dominant power relations, even though the latter were more pervasive than the former.

Let me now develop this Foucaultian reading of the relation between power and knowledge in chattel slavery. Returning to Foucault, we find in his 1976 text, History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction, an account of disciplinary and regulatory techniques of power. For the purposes of understanding Douglass’ account of what he knows/is not allowed to know, let us consider the regulatory techniques used in the processes of dehumanization during chattel slavery. In History of Sexuality Vol. 1, Foucault describes the aim and scope of regulatory techniques as follows:

The second [technique of biopower…] focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births, mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary. Their supervision was effected through an entire series of regulatory controls: a biopolitics of the population.

The biological functions of a subject’s body were, according to Foucault, a means of investing in the body to ensure its efficient functioning within networks of power. In contrast to sovereign punishment, which primarily focused upon the body in terms of its destruction, biopower focuses on the body as a life-organism. The health of the body, therefore, is taken up in power/knowledge for the purposes of a given institution’s ends. However, we should qualify this by saying that knowledge of the body here is not knowledge a subject has of another’s body. Rather, knowledge and power co-function through increasing fields of knowledge related to the functioning of a subject’s body qua biological organism—e.g. vital statistics, or records of births

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26 Ibid., 139.
and deaths. Foucault argues that during the nineteenth century sex became a political issue and, in turn, a target of biopower. Discourse on sex and sexuality proliferated during this time and knowledge of the body’s sexual capacities became an essential means through which power-knowledge could manage the life of subjects. Foucault writes: “the mechanisms of power are addressed to the body, to life, to what causes it to proliferate, to what reinforces the species, its stamina, its ability to dominate, or its capacity for being used.”27 The concern for the body’s ability to proliferate required increasingly detailed knowledge of the subject’s reproductive life along and increasingly detailed mechanisms of regulating the subject’s reproductive capacities. The psychoanalyst, for example, could assess whether or not a woman was hysterical through an exploration of her unconscious accessed through conversation. If she was deemed hysterical, then she might be regarded as unfit for motherhood and birth control could be offered in order to prevent her from reproducing. Knowledge of her mental state served as means to regulate her body through the regulation of her reproductive capacities.

The relation between the species body and biopower is exemplified in the calculation of the enslaved subject’s ability to yield economic value based on their sex, age, and overall health. Angela Davis describes the process by which the enslaved subject’s biological organism was assessed by their captors in terms of their productivity in order to determine their value as a commodity. In her 1981 book, Women, Race & Class, Davis writes:

Most slaveowners established systems of calculating their slaves’ yield in terms of the average rates of productivity they demanded. Children, thus, were frequently rated as quarter hands. Women, it was generally assumed, were full hands—unless they had been expressly assigned to be ‘breeders’ or ‘sucklers,’ in which case they sometimes ranked as less than full hands.28

27 Ibid., 147.

As a commodity, an enslaved female subject’s capacity to create more property, i.e., have children who would be taken up as property and laborers within chattel slavery, constituted important information about her species body in the interests of capitalism. In this case, we see power’s investment in the body of the enslaved subject, which was not restricted to sovereign power’s focus on destroying the body. To be sure, the destruction of the enslaved subject’s body would win out over the maintenance of their bodily health if the enslaved subject committed some violation as determined by dominant power. Treated as a commodity whose value depended upon their biological functioning—i.e. their ability to provide productive and reproductive labor—enslaved subjects were de-humanized and, in turn, de-ontologized. By restricting an enslaved subject’s value entirely to their biological properties, their captors also excluded the enslaved subject from the category of human. This is because the category human, as I understand Hartman’s use of the term, is not solely a biological or species category; it is also an ethical category. Hence, to be treated only as a species being who is a human, is not the same as to be treated humanely, or as being endowed with rights in virtue of being a member of the species ‘human.’

The classification of enslaved people by biological capacity carried further implications as well. Labeling enslaved female subjects ‘breeders’ or ‘sucklers’ was not simply a reduction of these subjects to their species body, but, as Hortense Spillers argues in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” it was also an act of ungendering them. In the case of chattel slavery, Spillers argues, the transformation undergone by the enslaved subject was not the reduction to their body or even to their species body, but to flesh. Spillers distinguishes between ‘the body’ and ‘flesh.’ The body, for Spillers, is the “territory of cultural and political maneuver.”

subject’s position within the networks of socio-cultural relations such as the status of mother. Spillers’ notion of body is distinct from the flesh because the former is marked by and legible according to socio-cultural discourse. In contrast to the body, Spillers defines ‘flesh’ as “that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography.”

Flesh constitutes the enslaved subject’s existence in terms of their vulnerability to destruction. It is not a description of their position in power, but a description of their very existence. In the processes of wounding the enslaved subject, Spillers argues, the body is not simply annihilated, but transformed into flesh: “If we mean ‘flesh’ as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship’s hole, fallen, or ‘escaped’ overboard.”

In some cases, such as when the enslaved subject was ripped apart as Spillers describes, their body was annihilated in spectacular punishment. Flesh concerns the body, but only as a mechanism through which dominant power can exercise its strength. In Spillers’ interpretation of Foucault, the subject body is produced in and through discourse; in her view, this does not apply to the enslaved subject because the enslaved subject is not a body and, therefore, stands outside of discourse. Because, as I have discussed, dominant power relations under chattel slavery existed along other relations of power, I think Spiller’s interpretation of the enslaved subject’s relation to discourse is too narrow. In other words, the enslaved subject’s status as flesh and, thus, position outside of culture, is an accurate analysis of the enslaved subject view within the relation of domination. However, as Spillers herself demonstrates, enslaved subjects developed alternative cultural relations amongst themselves, which did not

30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 67.
32 For more on the flesh and the body in Foucault, see C. Riley Snorton, Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 39.
reflect the culture and power relations of dominant society. For example, Spillers argues kinship loses its meaning for enslaved subjects though “African peoples in the New World did […] maintain the powerful ties of sympathy that bind blood-relations in a network of feeling, of continuity.”

33 So, kinship relations among enslaved subjects were not recognized among dominant culture, but it does not follow that enslaved subjects themselves did not recognize their cultural position as parent or child.

In my view, the distinction between body and flesh tracks the transition between biopower and sovereign power. That is, the enslaved subject was subject to violent practices aimed at wounding the body. In this manner, the health of the enslaved subject’s body was not invested in, but rather constantly open to destruction. Enslaved subjects were at times compelled to witness these punishments. In these instances, the enslaved subjects who were made to act as spectators to this annihilation witnessed not simply the strength of the power to which they were beholden, but also their own ontological transmutation into flesh. This is because the enslaved were not merely commodities whose value guaranteed their survival, but they were also utterly fungible, a concept I explore in the next section. The fungible existence of the enslaved, their replaceability, along with their vulnerability to a form of violence that could rip their bodies apart, meant that they witnessed in the violence enacted upon other enslaved subjects their own vulnerability to such violence.

Both male and female enslaved subjects were subject to spectacular violence and captivity, which transformed them into flesh. However, Spillers argues that enslaved female subjects endured a unique mode of violence that led to their ungendering. That is, enslaved female subjects were reduced to a commodity, vulnerable to physical violence, and regarded as a

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33 Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby,” 74.
tool for breeding. Exploring Douglass’ description of children who were torn away from their mothers in an effort to disrupt the bonds made in kinship, Spillers argues that the enslaved subject was used for her capacity to make children and, at the same time, stripped of her position as mother: “In the system that Douglass articulates, genetic reproduction becomes, then, not an elaboration of the life-principle in its cultural overlap, but an extension of the boundaries of proliferating properties.”34 The enslaved fetus was already assigned the status of property, even though its existence depended upon the “life principle” of reproduction. In dominant (i.e. non-enslaved) society, this life principle assigned women the position of mothers and men that of fathers. However, because the enslaved subject is not a human life within dominant society—a socio-cultural subject—the enslaved female subject could not occupy the position of mother, nor could the enslaved male subject occupy the position of father. What makes the ungendering of the enslaved female subject unique, according to Spillers, is the identifiable and direct connection she had with the enslaved fetus inside her; during chattel slavery the father of an enslaved child or fetus was generally ambiguous or unknown to both enslaved subjects and their captors. Douglass even remarks that he suspects his mother’s “owner” may be his father, though, for him it matters little who his father actually was. It matters little, because the bonds of kinship were unavailable to enslaved subjects even when they were able to identify their genetic kin relations. Even if Douglass could confirm that his mother’s captor was his genetic father, it would necessarily follow that his genetic father would function as his cultural father. In other words, Douglass’ genetic father would not care for, protect, love him because kinship was disallowed under slavery, especially if an enslaved subject’s genetic father was white.

34 Ibid., 75.
Before turning to Hartman’s account of fungibility, I want to briefly return to Douglass’ account of what he knows and does not know in the context of Foucault’s theory of regulatory power. Douglass is allowed to know his birthplace, perhaps because it serves as a reminder to him that his location matters for power’s ability to function effectively. However, he is not allowed to know his birthdate, and he is made aware that white people know their birthdates, because denying him this knowledge is, again, effective for power’s functioning. For, lacking the origin of his history, Douglass is denied access to the position of subject. He would have no date during which he could mark the beginning of another year in his life. His age in general terms, not his precise birthdate, matters under chattel slavery because it determines his value as a commodity. That is, whether he was born during planting-time or harvest-time is sufficient for his captor’s ability to calculate his worth. Anything beyond that would simply aid to stir his ‘restless spirit’ and render him unmanageable by his captor as well as unhappy with his own condition. To know that you are the kind of being who is not allowed information about yourself; learning that others like you are similarly denied this knowledge; and perhaps most importantly, learning that others who are not like you are allowed this knowledge, is a psychological technique of dehumanization. Limiting and regulating Douglass’ access to his own history was, therefore, a means of dehumanizing him and, in turn, securing his status as a commodity for another. Stated otherwise, what Douglass describes in the opening lines of his 1845 autobiography is an asymmetrical ontological order wherein slaves constitute a different kind of being than whites.

_Hartman on Fungibility_

Hartman takes the question of what kind of being the enslaved subject constituted as the point of departure for _Scenes of Subjection_. According to Hartman, enslaved subjects occupied a
paradoxical position in relation to humanity, which is expressed in various ontological position
related to property, pleasure, and possession. On the one hand, the humanity of enslaved subjects
was denied by whites in order to dismiss any ethical obligations they might have to their
captives. On the other hand, the humanity of enslaved subjects was recognized and used by
whites in service of their domination, oppression, and subjection. Hartman is most explicit about
the ambivalent status of the enslaved in her discussion of Black pain: “The black is both
insensate and content, indifferent to pain and induced to work by threats of corporeal
punishment. These contradictions are partly explained by the ambiguous and precarious status of
the black in the ‘great chain of being’.” Here she qualifies this account of the enslaved person’s
alleged indifference and sensitivity to pain as ‘only part’ of the explanation for the severity of
physical violence to which enslaved subjects were submitted. This is because, as I will
demonstrate shortly, white subjects also submitted enslaved subjects to pain in order to
experience pleasure for themselves. Where exactly Black subjects are positioned in relation to
the human has, thus, been an open and unanswered question since Africans were forcibly
introduced to the US through captivity.

According to Hartman, it is precisely because the humanity of enslaved subjects was not
only recognized, but also used as a tool of domination, that liberal appeals to humanist values
such as empathy and consent necessarily prove insufficient for Black liberation. Hartman
critiques liberal political theories operating in and since the period of US slavery that rely upon

35 May decolonial theorists have argued that colonialism and slavery were justified in the Americas according to
teological and ethical grounds, which excluded non-Europeans from the category of human. Because Native
Americans were not Christians, they were not eligible for ethical consideration and were, thereby, excluded from the
category ‘human.’ Later, enslaved Africans were similarly excluded from ethical consideration and the category
‘human’ because they were regarded as closer to non-human animals than to European humans. See Walter
Mignolo, “Introduction: Coloniality of power and de-colonial thinking,” Cultural Studies 21, no. 2-3 (2007): 155-

36 Hartman, Scenes, 51.
humanist language to make claims about freedom. What these traditions fail to recognize, Hartman argues, is that the liberalist conception of freedom is not freedom from coerced labor, but freedom from chattel slavery; the liberal notion of freedom is conceivable only in relation to slavery, and thus free citizens are only possible in contrast to enslaved subjects. However, as Hartman explains, Emancipation freed enslaved subjects from chattel slavery, but Black subjects remained unfree because of coerced labor. Hartman argues that liberal political theory conceived of freedom as universal and, thus, attainable by all subjects. In contrast to this, she argues that universal freedom is contradictory to the liberal notion of freedom because it implies, as she says, “certain notions of the subject and subjection.” In other words, Hartman argues that, at least since chattel slavery in the US, the notion of freedom is conceived of in relation to subjection, which means that the free subject in the US context is only conceptually possible in relation to the unfree subject. Given this, Hartman argues that both Emancipation and Reconstruction failed to achieve freedom for Black subjects because they relied upon humanism and liberalism, which does not recognize that freedom inextricably linked Blackness with bondage, subjugation, and domination. During Emancipation, freedom was defined as ‘freedom from’ slavery. However, because the US depended upon forced labor to sustain the socio-political ideals according to which white people had come to define themselves, this conceptualization of emancipation soon had to be revised in order to allow for coercive labor. During the US industrial revolution, Hartman explains, “the totalizing vision of managing labor had one eye directed toward slavery and the other toward freedom.” Thus, calls for the abolition of free labor qua were quickly followed with concerns for the health of the US.

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38 Hartman, Scenes, 138.
economy. Abolitionists restricted their conception of freedom to the liberalist framework of freedom as ‘freedom from’ bondage; they thus advocated for a form of freedom that still left freed Black subjects vulnerable to coerced labor. While this coerced labor would remain distinct from chattel slavery, it would similarly target Black subject at a disproportionate rate.

This above critique of the liberalist and humanist misconception of freedom is one that Hartman argues remains true for contemporary political theory in the US. It calls into question whether or not anyone—especially Black subjects—can achieve freedom qua full liberation in the US. Hartman argues that we are left with the question “whether the rights of man and citizen are realizable or whether the appellation ‘human’ can be borne equally by all.”39 Ultimately, Hartman answers this question in the negative. Chattel slavery constituted a fundamental fracture between Blackness and human, which, according to Hartman, still conditions liberated contemporary Black subject formation in the US.

Recognizing that Black subjects occupy an ambivalent position in relation to the human, Hartman analyzes the ontological status of enslaved subjects. That is, if enslaved subjects were not-quite human, then what were they? As it turns out, the ambivalent position of enslaved subjects ran throughout their relation to all other ontological positions with the network of power constitutive of chattel slavery. Just as enslaved subjects were recognized by whites as paradoxically having and not having humanity, so too did they vacillate between object and person, agents with an independent will and a possession to be owned, socially dead and responsible for transgressing the law.40


40 Hartman adopts the concept of ‘social death’ from sociologist Orlando Patterson. As I will discuss at the end of this chapter, the concept of ‘social death’ has become controversial within Black studies given its use in contexts for
Situating her analysis within the networks of dominant power governing chattel slavery, Hartman defines the ontological position of the enslaved as a fungible commodity: “the fungibility of the commodity makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others’ feelings, ideas, desires, values.” As fungible, the enslaved position can be occupied by any white subjects. White subjects could imagine themselves in the position of the enslaved subject and derive pleasure from this transference or feel empathy at the imagination of their own suffering. Hartman describes slave abolitionist John Rankin’s 1837 *Letters on American Slavery* to demonstrate this point. In these letters, Rankin describes the brutality to which enslaved subjects are regularly submitted in graphic detail. Still concerned that these scenes would not affectively move his reader, Rankin asks them to imagine that he and his family were similarly subjected to such torture. By substituting himself in place of the enslaved subject, Hartman argues, Rankin demonstrates the fundamentally fungible character of the enslaved. Furthermore, Hartman explains that Rankin must occupy the position of the enslaved in his reader’s imagination if he hopes to engender their feelings of empathy for the enslaved subject:

Rankin must volunteer himself and his family for abasement. [...] the effort to counteract the commonplace callousness to black suffering requires that the white body be positioned in the place of the black body in order to make this suffering visible and intelligible. 

Thus, the enslaved is not merely fungible qua exchangeability with other enslaved subjects, but also fungible *qua* position of interchangeability for a “masochistic fantasy” from which white

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which Patterson did not originally intend its use. Because Hartman uses the concept ‘social death’ in the context described concerning enslaved subjects, I see no tension between Patterson’s concept and Hartman’s use of it. See Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

41 Ibid., 21.

42 Ibid., 19.
subjects may derive pleasure. It is precisely because enslaved subjects occupy an ambivalent position with respect to humanity, for dominant subjects, that they cannot themselves be the occasion for empathy. Therefore, white subjects must imagine themselves in place of enslaved subjects in order to extend their empathy, thus treating the enslaved as a “vessel for the uses, thoughts, and feelings of others.” Because humanity implies empathy, according to Hartman, white subjects had to channel their empathy for enslaved subjects through their own suffering so as to avoid attributing humanity to the enslaved themselves. Treating the enslaved body as a mirror that depicts an image of themselves as the victim of violence, the white subject reifies the enslaved as an interchangeable and fungible commodity in their very efforts to humanize the enslaved subject. Hartman argues that the white subject’s use of approximation to illustrate the enslaved subject’s suffering allowed them to circumvent the proximity of the ethical relation constitutive of humanity.

The enslaved subject was a fungible commodity, though their commodification did not reduce them to mere property. This is because the enslaved subject was also made responsible for their infractions, a fact which presupposed their legal personhood, even if their level of personhood was only minimally conceived. The enslaved subject was a person before the law, though they lacked the potential to consent and, thereby, express their agency. Hartman writes: “the law’s recognition of slave humanity nullified the captive’s ability to give consent or act as an agent and, at the same time, acknowledged the intentionality and agency of the enslaved.”

43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid., 35.
46 Ibid., 80.
The enslaved subject could break the law even though the law could not be used to protect them. They could, for example, be charged with “stealing themselves”, taking away the property of their captors by literally taking themselves away through escape. However, lacking the potential to consent, an enslaved subject could not be raped, at least not with regard to the crime of rape. Thus, the commodification of enslaved subjects made them both legal property and legal person. They were property for their captors and persons before the law.

Hartman argues that after Emancipation the free Black subject was not and is not freed from their fungibility. Black subjects were no longer property to be possessed by another, but, Hartman argues, Black subjects remained interchangeable and exchangeable from the perspective of dominant society. Hartman claims that immediately following Emancipation, the techniques of violence that secured the enslaved subject’s position as property were replaced with:

The liberty of contract that spawned debt-peonage, the bestowal of rights that engendered indebtedness and obligation and licensed naked forms of domination and coercion, and the cultivation of a work ethic that promoted self-discipline and induced internal forms of policing.47

After abolition, the domination of Black subjects no longer took the form of strict captivity, but of various techniques of socio-political oppression including coerced labor and debt-peonage. This was made possible only after first formally attributing legal personhood to Black subjects in the eyes of the law; legal personhood here refers to the liberty of contract, right to indebtedness, and the obligation to uphold the law. As subjects with rights, Black persons could not be forced into chattel slavery, but they could be coerced to labor if they transgressed the law. In her 2003 book, Are Prisons Obsolete?, Angela Davis explains that ‘Black Codes’ (1865-1968) replaced

47 Ibid., 120.
the ‘Slave Codes’ (1661-1865) under chattel slavery and constituted a set of laws that only applied to freed Black subjects. Davis writes: “The new Black Codes proscribed a range of actions—such as vagrancy, absence from work, breach of job contracts, the possession of firearms, and insulting gestures or acts—that were criminalized when the person charged was black.”48 The right to bear arms was written in the Constitution but denied to Black subjects after slavery. Thus, a number of actions granted as rights to white subjects were criminalized when performed by Black subjects. While the US law has changed since Emancipation and even more since the end of Jim Crow, both Hartman and Davis contend that the historical criminalization of Blackness has continued for contemporary Black subjects in the US. Davis identifies this continuation of Black criminalization in the expansion of the US prison system, which she argues, has always disproportionately targeted Black subjects. Hartman, however, makes an even greater claim that it was not just Black criminalization that continued after slavery until and including today, but the fungibility of Blackness itself that has continued. That is, Hartman argues that the character of interchangeability and exchangeability that figured the enslaved subject remains a condition of contemporary Black subjectivity. According to Hartman, this is not only because freedom is only conceivable in relation to Black subjugation, but also because chattel slavery constituted a breach so significant that full redress is impossible.

The breach, for Hartman, is the gap created through “violent domination, dishonor, natal alienation, and chattel status” between the enslaved and historical continuity.49 The natal alienation of enslaved subjects makes it impossible to establish genealogical continuity for both the enslaved subject and the contemporary Black subject. Hartman explains that “the uncertainty

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of descent, the negation of paternity, the interdiction regarding the master-father’s name, and the ambiguous legacy of inheritance and dispossession” prevented enslaved subjects from identifying the origin of their genealogical lines of descent. There is no redress for this breach, according to Hartman, because there is no way to fully restore the history lost to enslaved subjects. She writes: “The limited means of redress available to the enslaved cannot compensate for the enormity of this loss.”50 The loss of ancestral origins, of social life, of freedom, of tradition, and of humanity cannot be fully redressed unless such ancestry, social life, freedom, tradition, and humanity are restored to the enslaved subject and, in turn, the contemporary descendants of those who were enslaved. However, as Hartman explains, ancestry cannot be restored for enslaved subjects because their kin relations were denied, undocumented, and erased; nor can African traditions be restored for enslaved subjects because these subjects were cut off from these traditions through displacement and captivity. Because contemporary Black subjects are descendants of these enslaved subjects, their ancestry and traditions similarly lack an origin and historical continuity. So long as the liberalist notion of freedom is conceptually tied to the notion of subjugation, Hartman argues, contemporary Black subjects will continue to lack full freedom. Without historical origins or historical continuity, both of which are impossible according to Hartman, contemporary Black subjects will continue to exist as fungible and in an ambivalent relation to humanity. The breach that rendered enslaved subjects fungible commodities cannot be redressed, which means that this breach persists. While contemporary Black subjects in the US have achieved some amount of historical continuity, Hartman argues that their inability to establish historical origins guarantees that the breach brought about by

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50 Ibid., 77.
chattel slavery will continue to endure. And so long as the breach remains, Hartman explains, contemporary Black subjects will continue to exist as fungible commodities.\(^{51}\)

**Spillers’ ‘Flesh’ and Afropessimism’s Ontology**

Hortense Spillers’ concept of the ‘flesh’ preceded and, in fact, influenced Hartman’s analysis in *Scenes of Subjection*. However, I want to return to Spillers’ work after first engaging Hartman’s for two reasons. First, while Spillers’ argument concerning ‘flesh’ and the ‘hieroglyphics of the body’ have proven influential for a number of contemporary theorists of Black studies, she never returns to these concepts to further develop either their meaning or the larger implications they may have for how we analyze contemporary Black subjectivity.\(^{52}\) To be clear, Spillers uses her analysis of the flesh to analyze how the violence done to enslaved Black women led to their ungendering, which continues to condition contemporary Black women’s subjectivity, though in a different manner.\(^{53}\) Spillers’ ontological discussion of the enslaved subject reduced to flesh clarifies that this process happened differently for men and women. However, she claims that it did happen to *all* Black subjects submitted to chattel slavery. Despite

\(^{51}\) In “Devouring Flesh: Notes Toward an Analytics of Seeing,” Tyrone S. Palmer argues that contemporary visual technology has expanded the opportunities for white subjects to make use of Blackness’ interchangeability. Though the visibility of Black suffering is not unique to our historical context, Palmer argues, what is unique is “the near impossibility of avoiding images of Black flesh bleeding, Black flesh torn apart, bullet-ridden, falling, lifeless, dying” (Tyrone S. Palmer, “Devouring Flesh: Notes Toward an Analytics of Seeing,” *Propter Nos* 1, no. 1 (2016): 39-44.


\(^{53}\) See Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*. 
their similar character as flesh, Spillers’ primary focus in “Mamas Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” is with the ungendering unique to enslaved female subjects.

Many Afropessimists have relied upon Spillers’ concept ‘flesh’ to advance their claim that contemporary Black subjects exist as nonbeing. Afropessimism, a recent American discipline in Black studies, is defined by the position that contemporary Black subjects exist as socially dead and, as a result, they exist as nonbeing. Though Afropessimism is a relatively new tradition, it has become the subject of critique for many theorists of Black studies working in a variety of disciplines. Sociologist Sirma Bilge, for example, has criticized the most prominent theorists of Afropessimism, namely Frank Wilderson III and Jared Sexton, for using Spillers’ work simply in order to pay lip service to Black feminism. Others, such as cultural theorist Fred Moten, have criticized Afro-Pessimism for over-extending Spillers’ own claims and treating the concept of ‘flesh’ as a transhistorical condition of Black life. For now, I will remain agnostic in response to this first criticism; however, I do think theorists should be careful to do these concepts justice, whether it be Spillers’ ‘flesh’ or Hartman’s ‘fungibility.’ My concern here is not about authorial intent, but rather about the need to understand a concept adequately as well

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54 The ambiguity and disagreements about which theorists are and are not Afropessimists makes it difficult to identify the exact time during which Afropessimism officially emerged. Many Afropessimists make use of Spiller’s 1987 article, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” though Spillers herself denies being an Afropessimist. Similarly, Hartman’s 1997 Scenes of Subjection is frequently drawn on by self-declared Afropessimists in the service of arguments concerning the nonbeing of Black subjects; however, Hartman has not publicly stated whether or not she identifies as an Afropessimist. Wilderson, one of the most well-known Afropessimists and one who explicitly situates his work within this tradition, first began publishing work on the social death of Black subjects in 2008. If Afropessimism is primarily characterized by the concepts that circulate in this discourse, then one might trace its origin back to Spillers’ 1987 work. However, if one primarily characterizes Afropessimism as restricted to theorists who explicitly identify as an Afropessimist, then one would cite as its origin Wilderson’s 2008 text, Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid. See Frank Wilderson III, Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).


as to grasp its conceptual limits. Because Spillers’ work, in addition to Wynter’s, Hartman’s, and Sharpe’s, has been used by Afropessimists and others working in Black studies to make claims about the possibilities for contemporary Black life, I worry that we willfully misinterpret these authors in order to make claims for which we lack a concrete analysis. In my reading of Spillers, the captive body was reduced to flesh and the ‘liberated’ body has inherited this history in the symbolic register as ‘hieroglyphics of the flesh’—the symbolic markings of ‘flesh’. Thus, contemporary Black subjects are no longer flesh, though we bear the symbolic markings of this fleshy history.

This brings me to the second reason for waiting until the end of this chapter to fully develop Spillers’ concept ‘flesh’ into a conversation where she has already been referenced by both myself and the authors with whom I engage. I want to be careful to restrict my analysis of ontology and dehumanization to the practices used during slavery, in order to avoid flattening out the historical differences between slavery and the contemporary US. This is by no means to suggest that anti-Blackness no longer occurs as physical, psychical, or symbolic dehumanization. One only need reflect upon the uproar of “All Lives Matter” in response to subjects’ declaring that their Black lives mattered. However, there are important differences between the regulatory and disciplinary techniques of anti-Blackness in the service of contemporary white supremacy in the US, on the one hand, and those used in the service of chattel slavery, on the other. By too quickly eliding these differences—a charge made by critics of Afropessimism about Lewis Gordon, Gloria Wekker, among others, and one with which I agree—we run the risk of

57 I place ‘liberated’ in quotes here in keeping with Spillers’ argument that the extent to which contemporary Black subjects are liberated must be questioned given the ruling episteme that continues to govern symbolic value today. Spillers writes: “Even though this captive flesh/body has been ‘liberated,’ and no one need pretend that even the quotation marks do not matter, dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation.” (Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 68). I explore Spillers claims regarding the ruling episteme later in this section.
developing an ideal political theory that cannot address the concrete conditions of different historical, cultural, and geographical contexts. Thus, I restrict my claims regarding the ontological transmutation of the enslaved subject into flesh to the historical context of chattel slavery. What I draw from Spillers’ work is the link she provides between practices traditionally framed by the fields of philosophy and political theory as dehumanizing and the concomitant ontological shifts in the theories of the Human.\(^{58}\)

Reduced to flesh, Spillers argues, the enslaved subject existed in a liminal position in relation to culture. Captives were not thrown entirely outside of culture; rather, they became the bridge between the outside and inside of culture. Spillers writes:

> [the] lacerations, woundings, fissures, tears, scars, openings, ruptures, lesions, rendings, punctures of the flesh create the distance between what I would designate a cultural vestibulary and the culture, whose state apparatus, including judges, attorneys, ‘owners,’ ‘soul drivers,’ ‘overseers,’ and ‘men of God,’ apparently colludes with a protocol of ‘search and destroy.’\(^{59}\)

Spillers’ concept of ‘cultural vestibulary’ is only briefly introduced in this article, and similar to her concept ‘flesh’ she never returns to the notion of ‘cultural vestibulary’ in order to fully explicate its meaning. However, we can interpret ‘cultural vestibulary’ from the above context to mean that the captive subject, who existed as a cultural vestibulary, constituted the access to culture. The captive subject, thus, existed in relation to culture, but in a relation that prevented them from accessing culture. Just as captive subjects could not possess themselves, neither could they access that for which they constituted the access point. In other words, captive subjects could never enter culture because they were the condition for culture itself. After chattel slavery, Spillers explains, Black subjects re-possessed their bodies, but they did not escape their position

\(^{58}\) I will return to Spillers’ work in chapter III of this dissertation to consider how the hieroglyphics of the flesh condition contemporary Black subject formation as an embodiment of the Black archive.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 67.
as ‘cultural vestibulary’. Thus, we should say that contemporary Black subjects are no longer flesh, though what it means to exist as a cultural vestibulary in the context of twenty-first century remain an open question.

Enslaved subjects were transformed into flesh through the instruments used to wound, and the disciplinary practices of wounding, the body of the captive Black subject during slavery. Insofar as Black people today are ‘liberated,’ we are no longer (legally) vulnerable to these same practices and instruments of wounding, which means we are no longer vulnerable to a reduction to flesh. Thus, it would not be true to say of contemporary Black subjects that we are flesh. As ‘liberated,’ the contemporary Black subject has re-acquired her body. However, according to Spillers, the contemporary Black body contains the hieroglyphics of captivity’s fleshy history. In his text *Habeas Viscus*, Alexander Weheliye explains that the body re-gained by the Black subject was a body marked by the history of Black wounds qua hieroglyphics of the flesh:

> What Spillers refers to as the ‘hieroglyphics of the flesh’ created by these instruments [irons, whips, chains, etc.] is transmitted to succeeding generations of black subjects who have been ‘liberated’ and granted body in the aftermath of de jure enslavement. The hieroglyphics of the flesh do not vanish once affixed to proper personhood (the body); rather, they endure as a pesky potential vital to the maneuverings of ‘cultural seeing by skin color.’

In the contemporary US, Black life is no longer lived as flesh, but as embodied personhood marked by the history of wounds and wounding that once produced flesh. This, in my view, is the point from which we may derive a contemporary analysis of Black subject formation. That is, we can explore the ontological position of the cultural vestibulary constitutive of Blackness and we may analyze how the histories of wounding are symbolically represented in the contemporary Black body without extending Spiller’s concept of flesh beyond the context of chattel slavery. In

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this regard, I would consider Spiller’s theory regarding flesh to be an archetype for analyzing contemporary Black subjectivity and their ontology under white supremacy in the US.

However, despite the historical specificity of Spiller’s concept of ‘flesh,’ as well as Orlando Patterson’s account of ‘social death,’ Wilderson, Sexton, Marriott, and others have treated these concepts as transhistorical.61 In other words, these theorists have extended analyses of dehumanization and the enslaved subject’s nonexistence from x to argue that contemporary Black subjects exist as nonbeing. In his 2016 article, “Corpsing; Or, The Matter of Black Life,” for example, David Marriott defines social death and social death theory as follows:

the essence of the theory of black social death is taken to be a rule of life that prescribes to blacks that they live under the command of death (as citizens, parents, sibling, and subjects); consequently those who object this rule are said to live under a law of symbolic death and are regarded as subjects who are already dead.62

That Marriott attributes the positions of citizens, parents, siblings, and subjects to Black subject in his analysis of their social death is already an elision of the enslaved subject with the contemporary Black subject in the US. As Spillers has argued, enslaved subjects could not occupy the position of parent in the cultural order governing chattel slavery. Enslaved female subjects could ‘produce’ children, but these children existed as property before they were born. The ungendered flesh of enslaved female subjects prevented them from occupying the position of mother, which is what, in part, characterized their social death. Marriott thus extends the


symbolic order of chattel slavery into a context wherein Black women are regarded as mothers, even if their position as such continues to be pathologized in the US as Spillers argues.

In a 2018 interview with The Harvard Gazette, Orlando Patterson specifically critiques Afropessimist theorists for describing the contemporary Black subject as socially dead, when his own analysis limits the application of the concept of social death to enslaved subjects during US chattel slavery. Patterson defines social death in his 1985 text, Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study, in terms of the ‘natal alienation’ of enslaved subjects. He writes: “it was the slave’s isolation, his strangeness that made him most valuable to the master; but it was this very strangeness that most threatened the community […] this is the social death of the slave.” Here the ‘strangeness’ of the enslaved subject is reflected in Hartman’s analysis of the ambivalent humanity of the enslaved. Because enslaved subjects were not-quite-human, or rather, not fully human, they were ‘strange’ enough—to use Patterson’s term—to be used as property. Familiarity would, in this context, be expressed through their humanity. Enslaved subjects, unable fully to express their humanity under chattel slavery, were not only cut off from ethics, but also, as Patterson explains, excluded from the community.

In his 2018 interview, Patterson argues that contemporary Black Americans are largely segregated in the private sphere, though this is not the same as being socially dead. Patterson’s concept of ‘social death’ is distinctly sociological; it refers to the isolation of enslaved subjects from the public sphere. He explains, “I don’t think we’re in a situation of social death, because one of the elements of social death is that you’re not recognized as an integral member of the

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64 Orlando Patterson, Social Death, 38.
civic community, the public sphere, and we certainly are.”

Through a liberal political analysis, Patterson argues that Black Americans have been integrated into the public sphere, which for him is proof that they are not alienated from society as socially dead. Furthermore, he argues that the racial segregation that continues to persist is in the private sphere; according to Patterson, contemporary Black Americans ‘self-segregate’ in their private lives.

While I am sympathetic to Patterson’s critique that Afropessimism has failed to distinguish between the concrete conditions during slavery and those of today, I am less concerned with how concepts travel beyond the limits intended by an author. It is clear that theorists in Afropessimism reject the liberal conceptualization of freedom as ‘freedom to join public society.’ Even Hartman, who does not identify as an Afropessimist, although others have identified her as such, argues that Black liberation is more than a political matter. For Afropessimists, the ontological existence of Black subjects would not be fundamentally altered if allowed to work in the military, for example. Thus, at least in the context of Patterson’s ‘social death,’ I think one could rightly use the concept to describe contemporary Black subjects, though this would require an analysis of the distinct socio-political conditions of the contemporary US. I am not concerned here with authorial intention, but rather contextual and historical accuracy.

While I recognize the potential to used Patterson’s concept ‘social death’ in contexts for which he did not intend, this is not true of Spillers’ concept ‘flesh.’ ‘Social death’ refers to the socio-political exclusion of enslaved subjects, but Spillers’ concept ‘flesh’ refers to their ontological existence. Afropessimists require a new analysis of contemporary Black existence in order to make claims about the ontology of Black subjects today, since these are no longer subject to the violence of chattel slavery that transformed the enslaved subject into flesh. In other

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65 Patterson, “Kerner Report.”
words, an analysis of contemporary concrete conditions must precede claims about Black existence and not the other way around. In my view, such an analysis would demonstrate that contemporary Black subjects produce meaning, which, in turn, demonstrates their ontological being rather than the nonbeing that Afropessimists claim for them.

In the next chapter, I will explore the lived experience of contemporary Black subjects when they are before the racializing gaze, which I identify as a phenomenological structure of white supremacy. I examine how the racializing gaze inhibits the Black phenomenal body under white supremacy. In his 1952 text, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon famously argues that the Black and/or colonized subject “has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man.”

66 However, this is only true within the Manichean anti-Black world of white supremacy. As this dissertation contends, Black subjects exist as ontologically present and freely create meaning in fugitive spaces, places where they are not directly surveilled by white supremacy and anti-Black techniques of power.

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Chapter Two: An Account of White Supremacy and the Racializing Gaze

This chapter examines the phenomenological structures of white supremacy that condition the contemporary US. Drawing upon Merleau-Ponty’s existentialist phenomenology, I examine how a racializing gaze affects the lived experience of Black subjects. I argue that a racializing gaze inhibits the Black subject’s ability to cultivate what I refer to as a ‘robust habit body’, which would allow for spontaneous and creative acts. As a result, Black subjects are closed off from freely producing meaning under white supremacy. However, as I demonstrate in the final chapter of this dissertation, Black gestures are indications of meaning produced by Black subjects despite guards against such meaning production under white supremacy. In the space of fugitivity, Black subjects gain access to a robust habit body, which allows them to freely produce meaning independent of white supremacy. The focus of this chapter, however, is identifying the various ways in which the Black phenomenal body is inhibited under white supremacy in order to establish the lived experience from which Black subjects flee into the space of fugitivity.

The first section of this chapter outlines the key features of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological theory as developed in his 1945 text, *Phenomenology of Perception*, and his 1963, *The Structure of Behavior*. In this process, I define the following concepts: ‘body image,’ ‘body schema,’ ‘habit body,’ ‘sedimentation,’ ‘routinized habituation,’ and ‘robust habituation.’ I introduce a distinction between habitual acts and habituated acts in order to distinguish between two kinds of habituation by differently characterizing Merleau-Ponty’s concept of ‘habit body’ as ‘routinized habituation’ and ‘robust habituation.’ Implicit to Merleau-Ponty’s theory of

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habituation is a distinction between routinized and unroutinized acts. Walking, for example, would be considered a routinized movement, according to Merleau-Ponty, because it traditionally involves the mere repetition of movements one has previously performed. As an able-bodied adult, I can walk without a concerted effort because I have walked many times throughout my life and have, therefore, become habituated to the movements. I refer to routinized acts such as walking as ‘routinized habituation’. In contrast to routinized habituation, Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of habituation includes unroutinized acts, such as dancing. What characterizes these acts is their potential to include new movements that are creatively and spontaneously performed. Dance can involve a mere repetition of the same movements, but a good dance is one that does not follow a script. I refer to these unroutinized acts as ‘robust habituation.’ The distinction between ‘routinized habituation’ and ‘robust habituation’ is important for my purposes because it allows me to clearly differentiate between the Black lived experience as it unfolds before the racializing gaze and in contrast to Black lived experience as it occurs in fugitive space. I will argue that when the Black subject is before the racializing gaze, she is restricted to routinized habituation and closed off from acts of robust habituation. In order to advance this claim, I make a further distinction between the Black phenomenal body that is before the racializing gaze and the Black phenomenal body in fugitivity. Accordingly, I refer to the phenomenal body corresponding with ‘routinized habituation’ as the ‘routinized habit body’ and the phenomenal body corresponding with ‘robust habituation’ as ‘robust habit body.’ This section is intended to prepare the reader for claims made in sections II of this chapter, regarding the effects on the Black subject’s phenomenal body produced by the racializing gaze.

In section II, I draw upon Linda Martín Alcoff’s 2006 text, Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self, as well as Alia Al-Saji’s 2010 article, “The racialization of Muslim veils: A
philosophical analysis” to elucidate the perceptual habits underlying the racializing gaze. I next turn to Helen Ngo’s analysis concerning the effects of the racializing gaze for the lived experience of non-white subjects. In her 2017 book, *The Habits of Racism: A Phenomenology of Racism and Racialized Embodiment*, Ngo argues that the contemporary non-white subject experiences her phenomenal body as i) a distorted body image, ii) a discontinuous body schema, and, as a result, iii) an un-synthesized habit body. Because the non-white subject is unable to cultivate a habituated habit body, as Ngo argues, she is unable to move in spontaneous and creative manners. I will argue that the Black subject’s inability to cultivate a robust habit body impedes Black subjects from producing independent meaning under white supremacy.

*Merleau-Ponty’s Theory of Perception*

In his 1945 text, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty critiques both empiricism and intellectualism for presupposing the existence of an objective world and for reducing our perception of that world to either representation, as in the case of empiricism, or structures of consciousness, as in the case of intellectualism. Merleau-Ponty groups together empiricism and intellectualism based on their shared understanding of the objective world as self-enclosed, external to the subject, and explainable according to laws governing objects within the world. These traditions assume that events in the world be explained according to universal and objective laws—hence the term ‘objective world’—which vary depending upon the discipline in question. As Merleau-Ponty explains, empiricism might define perception according to “the

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physical and chemical properties of the stimuli able to act upon our sense organs.”⁴ In this framework, objects of perception have sensations that correspond to various stimuli in my organism, which reproduce in me the appearance of the object. When I perceive a wooden chair, for example, the sensations of shape, texture, color, etc. independently act upon my organism and are combined together in a coordinated manner to stimulate my retina to create my perception of the chair as a coherent unity. In general, empiricism assumes “that the world confides messages to the sense organs that thus must be carried, then decoded in such a way as to reproduce in us the original text. From this it follows that there is, in principle, a point-by-point correspondence and constant connection between the stimulus and the elementary perception.”⁵ Empiricism treats the subject of perception as a passive recipient of information about the world gained through various stimulations upon the subject’s organism. Perception is thus understood as the act of decoding sensations and the re-presenting these sensations in a coordinated unity as a perceptual object.

Merleau-Ponty is also critical of empiricism and intellectualism because, he argues, their respective theories of sensation are constructed according to reflections upon previous perceptions without first accounting for ‘original perception.’ ‘Original perception’ here refers to the experience of perception, which is prior to a reflection upon perception. For Merleau-Ponty, reflection presupposes a distinction between perception given in our *experience* and perception as an *object* that can be studied independently of our experience. I understand Merleau-Ponty’s concept of ‘original perception’ to be similar to Edmund Husserl’s notion of life-world, which Husserl develops at length in his late work such as, *The Crisis of European Sciences and*
Husserl critiqued the natural sciences throughout his career for claiming an ‘objective’ position from which they can study the world. In opposition to this, Husserl argued that science, as is true of all forms of human knowledge, is relative to one’s life-world:

the propositions, the theories, the whole edifice of doctrine in the objective sciences are structures attained through certain activities of scientists bound together in their collaborative work […] And we see further that all these theoretical results have the character of validities for the life-world, adding themselves as such to its own composition and belonging to it even before that as a horizon of possible accomplishments for developing science. The concrete life-world, then, is the grounding soil [der gründende Boden] of the ‘scientifically true’ world and at the same time encompasses it in its own universal concreteness.³⁷

Merleau-Ponty, like Husserl before him, adopts the phenomenological position that our experience of the perceptual world cannot be understood adequately if we assume that this world exists independent of our experience it. I introduce Husserl here in order to contextualize Merleau-Ponty’s theory of ‘originary perception.’ Originary perception refers to the subjective experience of perception, which empiricism and intellectualism abstract away from in their respective theories of sensation.

Merleau-Ponty first introduces his concept of ‘originary perception’ in his 1942, The Structure of Behavior. In this text, he argues that in original perception one does not perceive “a mosaic of sensations”⁸ brought together by some external or internal force to act upon one’s organism and represent a unified object of perception; “there are melodic unities, significant wholes experienced in an indivisible manner.”⁹ He holds that empiricism and intellectualism do

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⁷ Ibid. 131.

⁸ Merleau-Ponty, The Structure, 166.

⁹ Ibid.
not have an account of sens [meaning and significance] revealed in original experience of perception.\textsuperscript{10} Instead they seek to explain the significance of perception and sensation according to what is given in reflection, which, according to Merleau-Ponty, wrongly assumes the possibility for consciousness to distance itself from the world and experience. In contrast to this, Merleau-Ponty states: “We are caught up in the world and we do not succeed in detaching ourselves from it in order to shift to the consciousness of the world.”\textsuperscript{11} Therefore, a phenomenology of perception must analyze how the world appears to us in experience. That is to say, our experience of the world is what Merleau-Ponty calls ‘original perception,’ and this, as opposed to reflections we have about previous perceptual experiences, is the necessary point of departure for an accurate theory of human perception. Given this, Merleau-Ponty critiques both empiricism and intellectualism for their shared understanding of an objective world as well as their disregard for original perception. In both Phenomenology of Perception and The Structure of Behavior, Merleau-Ponty provides detailed engagements with empiricism and intellectualism separately, in order to establish the particular failings of both traditions.

I first outline Merleau-Ponty’s grounds for rejecting empiricism, before turning to his critique and rejection of intellectualism. According to Merleau-Ponty, empiricist theories of perception are incorrect for four reasons. First, empiricism assumes that the sensations of

\textsuperscript{10} In Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology, M.C. Dillon explains that Merleau-Ponty plays on the ambiguity of the French word sens, which can be translated into English as ‘significant’ or ‘meaningful.’ Dillon points out that Merleau-Ponty uses sens to mean ‘meaningful’ when referring to the meaningfulness of the perceptual world; and he uses sens to mean ‘significant’ or ‘signification’ when referring to the meaningfulness of language. See M.C. Dillon, Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 215. However, when I discuss Merleau-Ponty’s notion of embodied intentionality, I will use the terms ‘meaning,’ ‘meaningful,’ ‘significant,’ and ‘significance’ as synonymous. This is required because, as I will argue later in this dissertation, Merleau-Ponty’s notion of embodied intentionality concerns the bodily expression of meaning developed in communion with the perceptual world. That is, embodied intentionality is related to both the perceptual world and gestures, which are the origin of linguistic signification.

\textsuperscript{11} Merleau-Ponty, Perception, 5.
perception are the *most basic unit of experience*; they are regarded as the building blocks of perception. Merleau-Ponty refers to this position as the ‘constancy hypothesis’ and cites Gestalt psychologist Köhler Wolfgang as a proponent of this hypothesis.\(^{12}\) For example, red is understood as a stimulus that acts upon my retina and reproduces the appearance of red. However, as Merleau-Ponty explains, there are exceptions to the rule of this hypothesis that sensation is the most basic unit of experience: “When red and green presented together give a resulting gray, it is conceded that the central combination of my stimuli may immediately give rise to a sensation different from what the objective stimuli would require.”\(^{13}\) The gray I perceive when presented with red and green together is not a mixture of individual sensations, but an entirely new sensation. So, if sensation is defined by empiricism as the “immediate effect of an external stimulus,” and if the appearance of gray is the result of the objective stimuli red and green, as opposed to a gray stimulus, then, at least in this case, perception is not a direct correspondence between objective stimuli and my sensation. Here, the point for Merleau-Ponty is that empiricism does not have a coherent account of sensation. There is no one-to-one correspondence between stimuli and how things appear to me through sensation. Red and green stimuli produce the sensation of gray, rather than the sensation of red and green. Thus, for Merleau-Ponty the attempt to base a theory of perception on this ill-conceived notion of sensation is bound to fail because there are exceptions to the rule of direct correspondence that occur in experience. Empiricism either attempts to extend its explanatory laws of perception to account for these experiences or disregards these experiences as exceptional. According to


\(^{13}\) Ibid., 8.
Merleau-Ponty, a theory of perception must be able to account for these exceptional instances because, quite simply, they do occur in experience. Later in this section I explore Merleau-Ponty’s claim that the very notion of sensation must be reimagined in order to sufficiently account for normal and abnormal perceptions.

The second critique of empiricism developed by Merleau-Ponty is intimately tied to the first. Empiricism wrongly conceives of sensation as an *indivisible unit of experience*. In fact, we do not perceive sensations as indivisible units of experience, but as physiognomies. Empiricism wants to explain how we perceive the world, which presupposes the possibility for stepping back from the world of experience and treating it as an object of knowledge. Instead, Merleau-Ponty focuses upon the original moment of perception. In this un-reflected act of perception, we do not experience various sensations, we experience physiognomies—entire wholes: faces, trees, houses. When exploring Merleau-Ponty’s theory of embodied intentionality later in this section, we will see that in original perception, the world is experienced as a milieu of ‘melodic unities’ that we interact with, make use of, and only later reflect upon.

Third, Merleau-Ponty rejects the empiricist assumption that the one who perceives is merely a *passive organism* that exists as an object among other objects. Empiricism assumes that the sensible—the sensations or qualities of an object—act upon the sensing subject who receives and represents the sensible in the intellect. John Locke’s theory of sensation represents this particular

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14 Merleau-Ponty adopts the term physiognomy from gestalt psychology. However, he critiques gestalt psychology for its assumption that physiognomies are only known through reflection. That is, gestalt psychology assumes that physiognomies are the product of the internal laws of consciousness, either through the work of memory or pre-existing reason. In contrast to this, Merleau-Ponty argues that physiognomies appear to us in original acts of perception, before consciousness reflects upon perceptual experience. As a result, physiognomies are *already meaningful* wholes, for Merleau-Ponty; they are not *made meaningful* by acts of conscious reflection. See Merleau-Ponty, *Perception*, 24-29, 54-65, and 131-135; for more on Merleau-Ponty’s concept of physiognomy as distinct from this concept in gestalt psychology see Thomas F. Cloonan, “Face Value: The Phenomenology of Physiognomy,” *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 36, no. 2 (2005): 219-245.
form of empiricism. For Locke, the subject’s perceptive organs, e.g., retina, are stimulated and, therefore, acted upon by a perceptual object. Our ideas regarding perception are, therefore, not innate to our consciousness, but the result of various stimuli we receive through perception. This view assumes a clear delineation between the sensing subject and the sensible object. Merleau-Ponty rejects this Lockean division between subject and object as this division does not occur in our original moment of perception:

The sensing being \([\text{le sentant}]\) and the sensible are not opposite each other like two external terms, and sensation does not consist of the sensible invading the sensing being. My gaze subtends color, the movement of my hand subtends the form of the object, or rather my gaze pairs off with the color and my hand with the hard and the soft. In this exchange between the subject of sensation and the sensible, it cannot be said that one acts while the other suffers the action, nor that one gives sense to the other. Without the exploration of my gaze or my hand, and prior to my body synchronizing with it, the sensible is nothing but a vague solicitation.\(^{15}\)

The sensible does not act upon the retina to unilaterally produce a representation of an object. Rather, my eye *gazes* upon the object. Both sides of sensation—the sensible and the sensing subject—are active. My eye acts upon the sensible which itself acts upon my eye. My gaze completes the object because the object is not self-enclosed; it does not exist entirely independent of my gaze. This critique of empiricism will become clearer later in this section when I explore Merleau-Ponty’s theory of embodied intentionality; but, it is important to understand at this point that my gaze of the perceptual object is active precisely because my gaze emerges from an embodied and intentional subject. However, I do not act upon the perceptual object in a manner that transforms the appearance of the object. Rather, I have an *attitude* about the object; this attitude is active as a mode of my directedness—my intentionality—which involves both my consciousness and my body. Thus, perception requires something of me. It requires that I am more than a mere perceiver *qua* receiver. I am a perceiver who has feelings

\(^{15}\) Merleau-Ponty, *Perception*, 221-22.
about the world, who inhabits the world, and whose body synchronizes with the world and the perceptual objects therein.

Merleau-Ponty’s fourth major critique of empiricism is that it misses the importance of the subject’s spatiality in the act of perception. The subject’s gaze has a spatio-temporal location. It emerges from a body that is embedded in the world. By attributing all activity to the sensible, empiricism not only neglects the activity of the subject, but it also disregards the subject almost entirely. More precisely, empiricism cannot account for a subject’s consciousness as it operates within and in relation to the world. In contrast, intellectualism over-corrects to the side of consciousness. Merleau-Ponty praises intellectualism for recognizing that the subject is active in the process of perception. However, according to Merleau-Ponty, intellectualism merely inverts the empiricist model and restricts all activity to consciousness.

Kantian transcendental idealism is representative of the kind of philosophy Merleau-Ponty refers to as intellectualism. According to Kant, we do not perceive phenomena as ‘things-in-themselves,’ but according to the categories and form of intuitions belonging to the subject. A Kantian account of perception explains perception according to the structures of the intellect. Consciousness perceives itself in the objects of perceptual experience: “If consciousness finds the geometrical circle in the circular physiognomy of the plate, this is because consciousness already put it there.”\(^{16}\) My perception of the circle in the plate is shaped by the structures of my intellect; in this case, my intellect perceives the plate according to the synthetic a priori judgements of geometry belonging to the intellect. Rather than assume that objects act upon us, as empiricism asserts, intellectualism assumes that the subject acts upon the object of perception. According to Merleau-Ponty, this tradition understands the intellect as replacing the object with

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 29.
its own structures of understanding. So, while empiricism argues that the sensible object reproduced itself in the sensing subject, intellectualism does just the opposite: it argues that the sensing subject reproduces itself in the sensible object.

For Merleau-Ponty, intellectualism may take into account the activity of the subject in the act of perception, but similarly to empiricism, is does not delve into the ‘thickness’ of that subject’s unique spatiality and temporality. The intellect perceives according to pure forms of intuition of space and time, but these forms of intuition remain abstract. In this model, I do not perceive an object according to my space and my time. That is, I do not carry with me the history of my existence that brought me to this space and this time, such that the object before me becomes perceptible. Merleau-Ponty explains:

when I contemplate an object with no other worry than to see it exist and to display before me its riches, it ceases to be an allusion to a general type and I realize that each perception—and not merely perceptions of scenes that I discover for the first time—begins anew for itself the birth of intelligence.\(^\text{17}\)

According to Merleau-Ponty, the subject of perception, for Kant, is placed in a vacuum. Its spatio-temporal history is not explicitly accounted for in the act of perception. For this reason, we are left with an abstract conception of a consciousness that must re-constitute the world and perceptual objects again and again. Kant’s attempt to account for self-identity through his concepts of apperception and the unity of consciousness remain undeveloped in his own work, according to Merleau-Ponty.\(^\text{18}\) However, even if we chose to develop these Kantian concepts of self-identity, we would still be left with an abstract self-identity. This is because, according to Merleau-Ponty, the Kantian subject, and in fact all subjects conceived of by intellectualism, fail to consider the existential component of perception. For Kant, the transcendental synthetic unity

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 45-46.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 63.
of apperception guarantees my identity over time and across different perceptual experiences. But nothing in Kant’s theory of perceptual experience guarantees that I am invested in or care about the world. Though Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly define self-identity, he does argue that a sense of self is achieved through the synthesis of our past, present, and potential investments in and care about the world. Importantly, this synthesis is never complete, which is perhaps the reason Merleau-Ponty avoids the language of self-identity in favor of ‘unity of experience’ and ‘sense of self.’ It is through a philosophical description of original perception, as opposed to reflections upon our perceptions, that we discover ourselves as synthesized subjects who are always already invested in the world.

Hence, empiricism neglects the activity of the sensing subject in perception, and intellectualism neglects the activity of the sensible in perception. For Merleau-Ponty, perception is not an exclusive alternative between the senses and the sensible. Rather, the act of perception is “a communication or a communion” between the sensing subject and the sensible object; neither the sensible nor the sensing subject are self-enclosed. The subject and the object come together in order to co-constitute the world of perception: “the miracle of the real world is that in it sense and existence are one, and […] we see sense take its place in existence once and for all.”

Sensing is not an activity of the subject, it is the very existence of the subject. In other words, the notion of sense requires re-conceptualization, not as a concept related to experience, but as experience itself. Sense does not stand apart from the sensible. Rather for Merleau-Ponty the sensing subject and the sensible object are brought together in experience. In his 1988 text, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, Martin C. Dillon provides a clear summary of Merleau-Ponty’s efforts to reconceive and unite the phenomena of sense and the sensible:

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19 Ibid., 338.
If there is a relation of reversibility between perceiver and perceived—between the body as sensing and the body as sense, between my body and yours, between the phenomenal body and other worldly phenomena—then the ontological wedges traditionally driven to split these pairs and force the members of the sundered couples into mutually exclusive domains of being must be withdrawn, and the language of subject-object disjunction replaced with that of communion and reciprocity. The fundamental relatedness of seer and seen must be made conceivable.20

Sense, subject, and the phenomenal body—a concept I discuss later in this section—do not exist independently of the sensible or the phenomenal object. As Dillon explains in the above quote, there is no ontological wedge between the two spheres in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty rejects a subject-object dualism and instead focuses on existence, which for him already includes the communion of sense and sensibles that constitute the world and experience. This is precisely why Merleau-Ponty’s account of perception is an existential philosophy. Perception always already entails our existence. The two cannot be disarticulated.

This new account of sense as existence also requires that we re-understand the subject of existence. The subject is both consciousness and embodiment, and the two cannot be conceived independent of one another without abstracting from real perceptual experience. Merleau-Ponty’s theory of embodied intentionality speaks precisely to this point. Traditional phenomenologies of intentionality, as represented in early Husserlian phenomenology for example, situate intentionality within conscious experience at the expense of embodiment.21


21 In his later work, Husserl’s description of intentionality incorporates elements of both consciousness and the body. While Husserl does not characterize his own concept of intentionality as an embodied intentionality, it would not be entirely accurate to characterize his later understanding of intentionality as strictly belonging to the consciousness at the expense of the body. Thus, the distinction between Merleau-Ponty’s embodied intentionality and Husserl’s intentionality is not as significant as much of the secondary literature would suggest. In fact, Merleau-Ponty’s theory of embodied experience emerged for him only after reading Husserl’s *Ideas II*. See Edmund Husserl, *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis: Lectures on Transcendental Logic*, trans. A.J. Steinbock (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001) and Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: Second Book Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989).
Drawing upon Husserl’s theories of intentionality, Merleau-Ponty develops an alternative theory of intentionality, one that stitches together the body and consciousness to develop a theory of meaning and signification.

Before elaborating upon Merleau-Ponty’s theory of embodied intentionality, we must define his two key terms related to the body: body image and body schema. The subject’s body is importantly not simply an object among other objects for Merleau-Ponty. The subject has an awareness of their body that is distinct from the awareness a subject has of other bodies or other objects. Body image characterizes the experience a subject has with their own body. Specifically, body image refers to the position and perspective from which the subject necessarily experiences and perceives the world. The subject cannot step back from their body to gain other viewpoints of it as one could view, for example, a mug. Merleau-Ponty writes: “I observe external objects with my body, I handle them, inspect them, and walk around them. But when it comes to my body, I never observe it itself.”

I can manipulate objects in the world in order to acquire different perspectival positions. In contrast, my body is the source of my gaze. I cannot perceive my body in its entirety because my body is itself the possibility for my perspective. Not even a mirror can resolve this issue. Merleau-Ponty explains that the mirror’s image “refers me back to an original of the body that is not out there among things, but on my side, prior to every act of seeing.”

My body is my own; it is not for me an object out in space among other objects. My body is always perceived by me from ‘my side.’ That is, the gaze made possible by my body is restricted to viewing my body from the position of my gaze.

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23 Ibid., 94.
While my body image concerns my own perception of my body—my ability to reflect upon my body—my body schema concerns how my body can potentially move. Specifically, my body schema concerns my motor and perceptual capacities. What is within my reach, what I can grasp, what I can move over or move around is all conditioned by my body schema. Referring to the differences between normal and pathological cases of body schemas, Merleau-Ponty defines his concept of body schema accordingly: “the normal subject has his body not only as a system of current positions, but also, and consequently, as an open system of an infinity of equivalent positions in different orientations. What we call the ‘body schema’ is precisely this system of equivalences, this immediately given invariant by which different motor tasks are instantly transposable.”  

Here we see that the body schema entails not just where the body is located in space, but how the body potentially moves through space. My immediate understanding of how my body can move, and my proprioceptive awareness of my body as it moves through space, is my body schema. The body’s spatiality is what Merleau-Ponty refers to as a ‘situational spatiality.’  

When I move one part of my body, I am aware of the other parts that trail behind in my movement.

If I stand in front of my desk and lean on it with both hands, only my hands are accentuated and my whole body trails behind them like a comet’s tail. I am not unaware of the location of my shoulders or my waist; rather, this awareness is enveloped in my awareness of my hands and my entire stance is read, so to speak, in how my hands lean upon the desk.  

The body schema is my proprioceptive awareness of how my body moves as a whole without direct attention paid to each part of my body in the movement. Because of this proprioception, I

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24 Ibid., 142.

25 Ibid., 102.

26 Ibid.
need not calculate the movement of my shoulders or waist if I want to move my hands. At least, this is true of the so-called ‘normal subject.’ This is because my body is not simply a place in space; my body entails a unique spatiality. According to Merleau-Ponty, “the body’s parts relate to each other in a peculiar way: they are not laid out side by side, but rather envelop each other.” Unlike objects that exist in space, I experience the spatiality of my body as a whole. My arm is not next to my torso in the way that my arm is next to my computer. My arm is an extension of my entire body; it is a part of a whole that is irreducible to individual coordinates of each limb. Merleau-Ponty’s account of body schema lays the foundation for his theory of embodied intentionality.

Merleau-Ponty’s theory of intentionality draws upon previous phenomenologies, most explicit in his references to Husserl, though he makes two new and important distinctions: 1) intentionality is necessarily embodied and therefore situated in space and time, and 2) intentionality that can involve a directedness that does not necessarily include aboutness. I address these one by one. With respect to the first distinction, in the Preface to Phenomenology of Perception, Merleau-Ponty adopts and alters Husserl’s ‘operative intentionality,’ which Merleau-Ponty defines as “the intentionality that establishes the natural and pre-predicative unity of the world and our life, the intentionality that appears in our desires, our evaluations, and our landscape more clearly than it does in objective knowledge.” Intentionality here describes our encounter with the world as it is given to us in perception. It concerns meaning as it is produced in the embodied subject’s experience of the world within which it is already situated. It concerns how the world appears to us through perception and motor engagement. Merleau-Ponty’s

27 Ibid., 100.
28 Ibid., lxxxii.
concept of ‘embodied intentionality’ is an extension of Husserl’s operative intentionality. For Merleau-Ponty, embodied intentionality concerns the embodied subject as she is perceptually and motorically directed toward the world in experience. In her 1999 article, “Merleau-Ponty’s Notion of Pre-Reflective Intentionality,” Martina Reuter explains that the body is the “agent” of intentionality: “this intentionality is essentially intentionality of the body-subject. […] intentionality is the body-subject’s concrete, spatial and pre-reflective directedness towards the lived world.”  

Merleau-Ponty’s embodied intentionality is, therefore, distinct from early Husserl’s operative intentionality because he includes the body in his definition of intentionality. Recall that the second major distinction between Merleau-Ponty’s theory of intentionality and Husserl’s operative intentionality is his emphasis on the directedness of intentionality without regard to the aboutness of intentional content. Merleau-Ponty’s embodied intentionality is one of directedness that is not restricted by the aboutness of phenomena. What do we mean by this emphasis on the directedness of embodied intentionality instead of on its aboutness? And what is aboutness? It is the idea of the content of consciousness that raises the issue of the aboutness of a consciousness. For example, if one stressed the aboutness of a consciousness, one could focus on the reference a consciousness makes to a practical object as a positing of that object. But Merleau-Ponty prefers to stress the directness of such a consciousness, and in fact to draw our attention to the directedness of originary perception, with its pre-reflective status. In this case, his concern is with a directedness of being-in-the-world that may not even have an intentional content that is posited. That is, consciousness’s being directed is a prerequisite for an


30 Ibid., 75.
intentional act with content, but that directedness itself is not an aboutness such as would be found in a positing of an object.

Reuter explains that, according to Merleau-Ponty, “consciousness should not be understood as explicit positing of its objects, but as a more ambiguous reference to a practical object; as being-in-the-world. […] Being directed is a necessary condition for an intentional act, while this act may or may not have a distinguishable intentional content.” In our earlier discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s reconceptualization of sensation, we saw that he rejected empiricism and intellectualism for, among other reasons, their assumption of an objective world and their respective neglect of original perception. Reuter describes this directed intentionality as “a pre-reflective intentional act in the sense that it is directed without allowing for a reflective understanding of either the manner in which it is directed or the objects towards which the unspecific awareness is directed.” The object of consciousness need not be considered, for Merleau-Ponty, in order to attend to the directedness of intentionality. This is not to suggest that Merleau-Ponty’s theory of embodied intentionality cannot allow for the structure of aboutness—Husserl’s noesis-noema structure. I understand Merleau-Ponty as allowing for a distinction between intentionality as directedness and intentionality as aboutness in order to investigate directedness, not to dismiss or reject aboutness. This allows Merleau-Ponty to understand how embodied intentionality is pre-reflectively directed toward the world.

Merleau-Ponty’s re-conceptualization of intentionality as embodied intentionality ultimately allows him to argue that bodily gestures can be both immanently meaningful and pre-reflective, as I will discuss in chapter IV of this dissertation. Because the body is the site of

31 Ibid., 76.
32 Ibid.
intentionality, it is also, at least in part, the source of meaning. Reuter explains that “meaning is produced in the encounter between the subject and the already given world.”

Merleau-Ponty’s subject is embodied and it encounters the perceptual world as one that it already inhabits and as one that is already given. Because the body is our “anchorage in the world,” it is the position from which signification and meaning emerge for me. The body is not, by itself, the source of meaning. It is not like a transcendental ego that bestows meaning onto an objective world. Rather, in the body-subject’s communion with the world, meaning springs forth. Meaning is born in the relation between the embodied subject and the world. We do not discover meaning within or bestow meaning onto a world that exists independently of us. Our embodiment—our physical comportment—is a site of signification as meaning; we perceive things in the world as meaningful according to the signification things have for us.

For Merleau-Ponty, meaning is not an abstract concept, but a mode of expressiveness and signification that occurs in and through my embodied perceptual encounters with the world. Examining the case of Schneider, a patient with a cerebellar injury, Merleau-Ponty develops a distinction between abstract and concrete movements of the body, in order to demonstrate 1) that the body is a source of significant expression, and 2) how the body is significantly expressive. According to Dillon, Merleau-Ponty’s account of embodied intentionality is built upon abstract, as opposed to merely concrete, movements of the body. Abstract movements are defined by Merleau-Ponty as “movements that are not directed at any actual situation.”

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33 Ibid., 70.
35 See Dillon, *Ontology*, 146 for more on how Merleau-Ponty’s account of embodied intentionality differs from a Husserlian or Kantian account of the transcendental ego in relation to the production of meaning.
case of Schneider, Merleau-Ponty lists “moving his arms and legs upon command, or extending and flexing a finger” as examples of abstract movement. These movements are contrasted with concrete movements, which Merleau-Ponty describes as habitual movements. Movement such as blowing one’s nose or lighting a match are considered concrete movements, according to Merleau-Ponty. Dillon explains that the significance of a movement for Merleau-Ponty is not determined according to whether it is abstract or concrete, but according to whether the movement is practical as opposed to merely concrete. A practical movement, as I will demonstrate shortly, is characterized by the subject’s purposive engagement with the world in their bodily movement. For Merleau-Ponty, only abstract movements entail the purposiveness of practical movements, which is why they are significant expressions of an embodied intentionality that is itself the source of and the means by which signification is expressed. By first examining why empiricism and intellectualism both fail to adequately account for the differences between abstract and concrete movements, we shall see how Merleau-Ponty understands bodily movements as significant.

According to Merleau-Ponty, empiricism lacks the necessary tools to accurately identify meaning and meaning-production because they regard concrete, as opposed to abstract, movements as meaningful. How the subject walks, grabs an object, turns their head, etc. are strictly concrete actions for empiricism. The meaning of a concrete movement is physiologically and/or causally determined. I walked from my living room to my kitchen because I desired a glass of water. There is a direct correlation between cause, my desire for water, and effect, my walking across the room. The meaning of my action is simply the fulfillment of my desire. This

37 Ibid.

38 I discuss Merleau-Ponty’s theory of habit body in further detail beginning on page 69.
means for empiricism meaning and causes are functionally equivalent. However, Merleau-Ponty argues, empiricism’s causal and physiological explanations of movement miss the significance in the movements of subjects, like Schneider, who suffer from a cerebellar injury.

Merleau-Ponty discusses an experiment performed by gestalt psychologist Adhémar Gelb and neuroscientist and psychiatrist Kurt Goldstein, which includes an unnamed subject who, like Schneider, suffers from ‘psychic blindness’ resulting from a cerebellar injury. When asked to touch his nose, the subject is only able to do so by grabbing his nose. This is an example of a concrete movement, according to Merleau-Ponty, because the subject achieves his goal. The subject acts with a purpose: he is instructed to touch his nose. However, because the subject grabs, rather than lightly touches his nose, he demonstrates a lack of full control over his motor skills, which makes his action an abstract movement. Merleau-Ponty’s distinction between abstract and concrete movements rests on his critique of empiricist and intellectualist analysis of these movements. An empiricist analysis, according to Merleau-Ponty, would explain the subject’s action—grabbing rather than touching or pointing—as a breakdown in his physiological structures. On this view, the movement is significant only insofar as it demonstrates an abnormal physiology. For empiricism, then, the concrete movement of the abnormal subject lacks meaning. However, because this analysis is limited to the subject’s concrete movements, without consideration of his failure to perform an abstract movement, it overlooks the significance of the movement. By contrast, Merleau-Ponty describes this patient as having performed a concrete movement—grasping—rather than an abstract movement—pointing. It is not simply that the patient failed to point rather than grab, but that his inability to point is indicative of his specific being-in-the-world. In other words, the patient’s movements are analyzed by empiricism in strictly concrete terms, neglecting the purposiveness of his action in
relation to the world, which would be revealed if his practical movements were considered. His actions are performed with a purpose, though they are not purposeful in a manner that is intentional in the phenomenological sense. The purposefulness of practical movement is the subjects’ “I can,” of Merleau-Ponty’s embodied intentionality. When the subject grabs rather than points to his nose, he is implicitly demonstrating the “I cannot” of his intentionality. His body schema has been impaired, which affects his field of possible actions, his “I cans.” What empiricism misses, according to Merleau-Ponty, is the significance expressed in the subject’s inability to perform a purposive movement as an expression of his embodied intentionality. The “I cannot” of the subject itself is significant—it is an immanent expression of the subject’s being-in-the-world, which I later consider in my discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s concepts ‘habituation’ and ‘habit body.’

In contrast to an empiricist analysis of the psychically blind subject, intellectualism provides an inadequate account of a subject’s actions because it regards only abstract, as opposed to concrete, movements as significant. Evaluating the subject’s movements, an intellectualist would conclude that the subject lacks an intentional structure. Intentionality, in this context, is understood as a meaning-bestowing act of consciousness. Dillon provides the intellectualist analysis of the abnormal subject: “lacking the necessary condition, the intentional sense-giving presupposed by abstract movement, the patient can only respond to stimuli insofar as they trigger conditioned reflexes in a practical and concrete domain.”

In intellectualism, only abstract movements are significant because only these movements, in contrast to concrete movements, involve intentionality. The subject lacks the ability to project meaning into the context of his movement, which means he lacks intentionality.

39 Dillon, Ontology, 134.
After identifying what is missed in an empiricist and intellectualist assessment of the abnormal subject’s movements, Merleau-Ponty formulates an alternative account of significant movements drawing on his own notion of embodied intentionality. The abnormal subject has an intentionality, according to Merleau-Ponty, precisely because the subject has a practical as opposed to merely concrete engagement with the world. Dillon explains:

In performing his concrete movements, the diseased subject displays a purposiveness in the rhythm, coordination, and flow of the various actions constituting the whole gesture [i.e., touching his nose]. He is, indeed, limited to the concrete and practical, but the practical is practical only by virtue of its teleological structure or purposiveness, and purposiveness is incompatible with the absence of intentionality.40

Concretely, the subject fails to fulfill the aim of their action since that subject grabs instead of touches their nose. Practically, however, the subject acts with purpose. Here purpose is not a goal, but an engagement with the world, which constitutes the origin of meaning for Merleau-Ponty. Any act the subject performed in response to the request to touch his nose is demonstrative of his purpose since it reveals his particular being-in-the-world. The abnormal subject’s purposiveness is expressed as an “I cannot” in his efforts to perform a practical action. Thus, the subject has intentionality, but this intentionality is different in degree from ‘normal’ subjects. That is, subjects have differing intentional structures, which differ depending upon their body schema. We can understand how the differences in degree of embodied intentionality occur through an analysis of Merleau-Ponty’s theory of habit and habituation.

Returning to Merleau-Ponty’s theory of body schema, we see that habituation involves the sedimentation of the subject’s acquired habits. Dillon defines the process of sedimentation as follows:

“movements which are initially deliberate choices of thematized possibilities may subsequently become automatic. The gesture, for example, of lifting an eyebrow, originally

40 Ibid.
a difficult, forced, and artificial affection, may become sedimented in one’s repertoire of expressions; it is then performed easily and automatically thereby taking on the natural grace of familiar acquisition.”

Merleau-Ponty refers to the process by which our perceptual and motor habits become ingrained in our body schema, such that they may be automatically called upon as ‘sedimentation.’ However, my past perceptions are not set in stone. Sedimentation of perception is not, for Merleau-Ponty, “an inert mass at the foundation of our consciousness.” As I will further explain in the context of Merleau-Ponty’s theory of habituation, sedimentation is the retention and synthesis of our perceptual and motor engagements with the world. Eric Matthews explains sedimentation in his 2002 text, The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, as follows: “Our past is not something that we merely contemplate as a spectacle, but something that is ‘sedimented,’ through our bodies, in the background to the selves that we are now. The longer established a behaviour or response is, the more it gains a kind of ‘favoured status’ in our sense of ourselves, and the harder therefore it is to change.” Sedimentation is the synthesis of past motor and perceptual experiences that have become ingrained in our body schema, and which can be called upon depending on the level to which the experience has been ingrained. The expression “it’s like riding a bike” speaks to this point. The more frequently I engage in an activity, for example riding a bike, the more sedimented that experience becomes. The experience of riding a bike is so deeply ingrained in my body schema that I can call upon it with ease even when I have not actually ridden a bike in years. In contrast, if I have only gone skiing once when I was child, that experience remains within my body schema—it is part of my perceptual and motor history—but

41 Ibid., 137.
42 Ibid., 131.
it cannot be called upon without great effort. Essentially, sedimentation entails the accumulation of our perceptual and motor experiences, though it allows for varying levels of familiarity. Some experiences are more sedimented in our body schemas than others.

Merleau-Ponty’s concept of ‘body schema’ includes more than the reservoir or medium through which perceptual and motor experiences becomes synthesized. In addition to this, Matthews explains that ‘body schema’ is “not merely an experience of my body, but rather an experience of my body in the world.”44 Importantly, I experience my body in the world as temporally continuous. I carry my past perceptual and motor experiences with me into my present, though some of these past experiences become less sedimented within my body schema, which is to say, some past experiences are lost to me at present. My past experiences are sedimented within my body schema, which influences both my future possible movements as well as what may appear to me at present as significant. For example, I have never been especially interested in cars. As a result, I could not say the make or model of cars that I had never personally owned, which have been only a few. A few years ago, however, I began to notice tan Toyota Camrys even though I have never owned one. This was the result of a shift in my field of perception that occurred after a friend passed away; my friend owned an old, tan Toyota Camry. It was not until after he died that I unconsciously found myself noticing the make and model of his car. Tan Toyota Camrys became significant to me because they reminded me of my friend. The experience of his loss has been sedimented into my body schema, which means that I literally see the world differently. I now notice things that, before his passing, would have otherwise gone unnoticed by me. The body schema is “that fundamental function that

44 Ibid., 142.
simultaneously delimits [my] field of vision and [my] field of action.”

My body schema conditions, with great flexibility, my potential movements and my field of signification. My perception of the world is structured by the perception of my field of significations. My field of signification is conditioned by my body schema, which is shaped in and through habituation. Exploring the nature of perception, according to Merleau-Ponty will make clear how habit, habituation, and signification are related since perception is altered in habit and habit acquisition leading to the expansion of one’s field of signification.

Perception is an active process, one that involves my body’s motor capacities and my perceptual perspective. My perception of blue, for example, involves the stimulation of my retina; this stimulation is an example of what Merleau-Ponty refers to as ‘motor capacities’ because it is a function of the body. And I neither perceive blue as a self-enclosed object, nor as an abstracted bit of sensuous data. Recall that the sense and the sensible coincide in perception, blue is paradoxically present before the subject and yet incomplete without the subject’s gaze:

“Blue is what solicits a certain way of looking from me.”

Merleau-Ponty explains:

[A] sensible that is about to be sensed poses to my body a sort of confused problem. I must find the attitude that will provide it with the means to become determinate and to become blue; I must find the response to a poorly formulated question. And yet, I only do this in response to its solicitation. My attitude is never sufficient to make me truly see blue or truly touch a hard surface. The sensible gives back to me what I had lent to it, but I received it from the sensible in the first place.

The difficulty of Merleau-Ponty’s theory of perception is that it requires us to think beyond traditional ontological and linguistic structures. Because he rejects the subject-object dualism, we

46 Merleau-Ponty, Perception, 218.
47 Ibid., 222.
have to conceive of perception anew. Blue solicits my gaze, but it does not fully exist independent of my gaze. I am aware of blue’s partial existence at the edges of my perception before I direct my gaze at it. The original moment of perception occurs as ‘a poorly formulated question’ because the object of the question and the one who asks the question coincide. Merleau-Ponty often invokes the language of ‘haunting’ when describing this original perceptual experience: “They [perceptual objects] are not presented directly to perception, they circumvent it and haunt it through a preconscious operation whose results appear to us as ready-made.”

Perceptual objects are available to the perceptual subject, though neither the object nor subject is self-enclosed. The perceptual objects haunt us as poorly formulated questions because they surround us, though we are not fully aware of them until the act of perception. In the process of sedimentation, the poorly formulated question of original perception becomes increasingly clear. For instance, the first time I came across a poppy plant, it appeared to me simply as a weed. The poppy plant was visible to me, but its significance was as a weed rather than a flower. Recently, a friend filled her front yard with various seeds of wild plants, including poppy seeds. As I watched her yard grow into a meadow over the span of a few weeks, my field of signification expanded: I no longer saw the poppy plant as a weed, but a flower that blossoms into a brilliant orange. My attitude toward the plant had altered along with my field of signification. Not only could I recognize a poppy flower, but the plant itself no longer retained the significance as weed. The shift in my attitude is, for Merleau-Ponty, an alteration or a ‘dilation of my being-in-the-world.’ At times, Merleau-Ponty uses the notion of ‘attunement’ to express his use of ‘attitude’:

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48 Ibid., 292.

49 Ibid., 145.
“A stimulation is not perceived when it reaches a sensory organ that is not ‘attuned’ to it”\textsuperscript{50} I cannot hear sounds that my ears are not attuned to, just as I saw the poppy plant as a weed before becoming attuned to its significance as a flower. This process of ‘attunement,’ of adopting the attitude necessary for new significance to emerge within my perceptual experience, is precisely what is meant by Merleau-Ponty’s concept of ‘habituation.’

Because my perceptual experiences are, at the same time, motor experiences, we must add to the above example concerning the poppy plant, the manner in which my body is altered through habituation. In other words, habituation is not simply a matter of learning to \textit{look} at something with a different perspective. It is also a matter of learning to \textit{move} in new and different manners. Thus, we must consider how the historical sedimentation that accrues in habit affects the phenomenal body. The process of learning to move differently entails the cultivation of what Merleau-Ponty calls ‘habit body.’ And, as I will discuss further, the degree to which motor experiences become sedimented into our body schema determines whether we cultivate what I refer to as a ‘routinized habit body’ or a ‘robust habit body.’ To understand the difference between these two types of habit body, it will help to consider the following two examples. Identifying how my habit body is expressed through routinized movements in contrast to my habit body as expressed through more robust movements, will then allow us a concrete point of entry into Merleau-Ponty’s more theoretically dense work related to habit, habitual acts, and habituation.

The habit body is expressed in one’s every day, routinized movements, which one often performs pre-cognitively. For instance, I know that I cannot reach the back of the cupboard without having something to stand on. I know this because I have tried and failed to reach back

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 77.
there. I do not have to try and fail to reach every time I approach the cupboard. I am guided by my previous efforts because the experiences have sedimented within my body schema. This retention of past perceptual and motor experiences is the process of acquiring routinized habits. My body schema is altered in this process because I retain what Merleau-Ponty refers to as the ‘habit memory’ of my previous efforts. I will discuss the concept of ‘habit memory’ shortly, but first, I continue this example in order to provide a concrete distinction between habitual acts and habituation. Habitual acts involve a mere repetition of previous experiences or actions. They are neither creative nor are they spontaneous. As I will explain, habitual acts are essentially passive movements of the body. They are passive because I can perform them without much, if any, real cognitive work. This process of habitual action is made possible through the cultivation of what I call the ‘routinized habit body.’

In contrast to this more passive mode of habit acquisition, Merleau-Ponty develops the notion of habituation, which is active because it requires a that a subject remain open to its own creative and spontaneous actions. Before learning the martial art Muay Thai, for example, I would not have noticed things that now appear to me as significant or available for certain styles of movement. Now, however, when I walk past a tree, my mind is drawn toward thoughts of where a low kick would fall on the tree in contrast to a teep, a defensive kick. My body schema has been altered after having practiced Muay Thai for years. This is the process of habituation, which is performed by what I refer to as the ‘robust habit body.’ There is nothing routine in my performance of Muay Thai. I can choose to perform the same series of jabs and, thus, depend upon the ‘routinized habit body’ cultivated in the process of learning the martial art. However, I can also choose to try out new routines and new movements; I have become open to creative and spontaneous movements related to Muay Thai because the habits related to this performance are
deeply ingrained within my body schema. Thus, the difference I draw our attention to here is between habitual acts performed by the ‘routinized habit body’ and habituated acts performed by the ‘robust habit body.’ Merleau-Ponty refers to both routinized and robust habit bodies as habituated. However, given the distinction he makes between routinized habits as compared to creative and spontaneous habits, I provide the distinction between the two habit bodies required for each movement. This will be especially important for the second section of this chapter, which concerns the processes of habituation available for the Black subject under white supremacy.

Keeping in mind the above distinction between habitual and habituated actions, we can now examine how sedimentation conditions what Merleau-Ponty calls ‘habit memory.’ The process of sedimentation, which establishes our familiarity with the world, is ongoing. Whenever we perceive or move in the world, we add to or detract from our sedimented history of experiences. We are never entirely closed off from perceptual or motor experiences accruing within our body schema; this is true, at least, so long as we are alive and have an intact body schema. Habit acquisition is more or less robust depending upon how fixed, how sedimented, certain experiences are within our body schemas. Furthermore, just as habits can become ‘fixed’ in our body schema, so too can they be lost or forgotten. The ability to fix or lose habits is, as Edward S. Casey explains in his 1985 essay, “Habitual Body and Memory in Merleau-Ponty,” the paradox of habituation as both active and passive:

[I]f habit memory is a main means of effecting sedimentation, and thus of giving a depth that is not objectively determinable, it cannot be through the working of the strictly habitual in the sense of the routinized: a routine is nothing but an inert pattern of behavior. The working of such memory must be accomplished by an active habituating. And this is precisely what the body effects, thanks to its sedimentary powers. […] the habituation which such inhabitation accomplishes involves a delicate dialectic between the implied
passivity of enclosure (for space and time undeniably act to contain us) and the activity of getting to know our way around in a given circumstance.  

According to Casey, Merleau-Ponty’s theory of habituation implies a distinction between bodily passivity and bodily activity. For Merleau-Ponty, space and time produce a bodily passivity and, in contrast, navigating a circumstance implies bodily activity. In the above quote, Casey draws upon Bergson’s concept of ‘habit memory’ in order to flesh out a distinction between Bergson’s concepts of habit memory and image memory and Merleau-Ponty’s theory of habit. Casey describes Bergson’s habit memory as a prelude to Merleau-Ponty’s theory of the habitual body. While Bergson indicated that habit is situated in the body, he does not explain just how habit and the body are related. Merleau-Ponty fulfills this claim, according to Casey, by expressing the temporal and spatial transformations the body schema undergoes in the process of habituation.

To begin to understand these transformations, recall that Merleau-Ponty’s theory of embodied intentionality rejects the subject-object dualism of empiricism and intellectualism. The body is not an object in the world, but a thing that inhabits the world; “we must not say that our body is in space, nor for that matter in time. It inhabits space and time.” To conceive of the embodied subject as in space or in time would presuppose a division between subject and world, sense and sensible. As we have already demonstrated above, Merleau-Ponty rejects such a division in his conception of original perception. Again, we find ourselves at the limit of traditional ontological and linguistic concepts. Saying that the subject inhabits space and time is, in my view, a reiteration of the previously established point regarding the communion of subject and world. Space and time are completed by the subject who is also completed by space and

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52 Merleau-Ponty, _Perception_, 140.
time, just as blue was completed by the gaze of the subject who was herself completed by the act of gazing. The key point is that the temporality of the body is not contained in the body, nor does the body simply exist in time.

When Merleau-Ponty says that perceptual and motor experiences are sedimented in the body over time, I do not take him to mean that the temporal history of these experiences are contained within the body as a kind of body memory. To put it simply, sedimentation is not a matter of body memory. To suppose that it is, would be to conceive of memory, Casey suggests, in terms of “the brain as a storage place for engrammatic traces; or muscle as a concourse of repeated patterns.” Nor does the subject intellectually remember past experiences, if by that we mean cognitively recalling some past experiences. Rather, a subject’s body schema is altered in sedimentation. This alteration of the body schema in sedimentation characterizes Merleau-Ponty’s unique notion of ‘habit memory,’ also referred to as the ‘habit body.’ Habit memory, like perception, is an activity. Merleau-Ponty writes: “To remember is not to bring back before the gaze of consciousness a self-subsistent picture of the past, it is to plunge into the horizon of the past and gradually to unfold tightly packed perspectives until the experiences that it [the horizon] summarizes are as if lived anew in their own temporal place.” Memory involves living previous perceptions within the present. I can ride a bike with ease, not because I recollect in

54 Merleau-Ponty, Perception, 23, my emphasis.
55 Because perception is itself the source of meaning, according to Merleau-Ponty, I can only determine the truth or falsity of my perception within my perceptual field. That is, I can misperceive something, such as occurs in a hallucination or illusion. This means that what I perceive is conditional on many factors, not that it is unchanging. Because Merleau-Ponty rejects the internal laws of consciousness as described by rationalism, he must also reject the possibility for verifiability that such laws would provide. Instead, Merleau-Ponty argues that we must put our “confidence in the world” (Merleau-Ponty, Perception, 311). If something appears to us as strange or unreal in our perception, we must re-evaluate our perception, change our position in relation to the object, or draw upon our background perceptual experiences in order to make sense of what now appears before us. This process is not verification, in the rationalist sense, but one of establishing precision in our perceptions: “I say that I perceive
an ideal manner previous experiences of bike riding. Nor is my ability to ride a bike somehow built into my body, functioning as a kind of reflex. I ride can ride a bike because I have become habituated to the experience; I am at home with the structure of the experience. Habituation operates as a unique kind of memory for Merleau-Ponty, though, as Casey described in the quote above, it is memory that operates according to a dialectic of active-passivity.

Habituation alters our existence in the world because the acquisition of habits affects the very spatiality of my body. My familiarity with an instrument, for example, entails a habituated coordination with the world. Merleau-Ponty describes a woman walking through a door mindful of the need to bend slightly to avoid catching the feather in her hat. Perhaps when she first wore the hat, she had to consciously think about adjusting her movements. She had to think about how the space she inhabited was altered. However, after becoming habituated to wearing the feathered hat, the woman’s body schema expanded to anticipate these adjustments without having to stop and think before entering every door. In his 2017 article, “Process, habit, and flow: a phenomenological approach to material agency,” Tailer Ransom describes this process of habituation as “an embodied pattern that is both part of the way that the motoricity [sic] of the body […] becomes coordinated with and responsive to an ecological situation. A habit is the ability to take up residence in the world, as well as envelop things into the voluminosity of the body.” The more habituated one becomes to an act over time, the more at ease one becomes in the execution of that act. In the case of the woman who wears a feathered hat, we should say that correctly when my body has a precise hold on the spectacle, but this does not mean that my hold is every complete” (Ibid.).

56 Ibid., 154.

the feather becomes an appendage of her body and requires no greater consideration than, for example, having to account for her shoulder-width when entering a door. The feather is ‘enveloped’ in the body schema, as Ransom describes, such that it is already accounted for in her movements. This explains why Merleau-Ponty describes habit as “dilating our being in the world, or of altering our existence through incorporating new instruments.” Our body schema expands and alters according to the instruments, tools, places, etc. to which we have become habituated.

Returning to the larger context in which this dissertation is situated, namely white supremacy and racialized embodiment, I will extend Merleau-Ponty’s analysis to consider how the racializing gaze effects the Black subject’s lived experience under white supremacy. In so doing, I described how, under white supremacy, the Black subject experiences her body image as distorted, her body schema as fragmented, and her ability to cultivate a habit body as restricted to the routinized habit body. As a result, I will argue, the Black subject is not only closed off from the creative and spontaneous movements available to a subject who has acquired a robust habit body, but she is also unable express meaning freely because her embodied intentionality is inhibited under white supremacy. The flight into fugitivity is, therefore, a flight toward the uninhibited Black phenomenal body capable of creative, spontaneous, and free expressions of meaning.

The Racializing Gaze and the Phenomenal Black Body

The section begins with an outline of Linda Martín Alcoff’s account concerning race as self-evidently visible developed in her Visible Identities. Here, Alcoff argues that in the contemporary US, we have a naturalized assumption that race is identifiable primarily through

58 Merleau-Ponty, Perception, 145.
visible features of one’s body. The notion that races are self-evidently manifest through visible markers of the body is important for understanding why, as I will argue, the racializing gaze constitutes a fundamental phenomenological structure of white supremacy. This is based, in part, on Alcoff’s claim that the dominant racial ideology of the contemporary US is conditioned by what she refers to as an ‘uninterrogated white common sense.’ Combining this account of racial ideology with a Merleau-Pontian phenomenology, Alcoff argues that ideology is not simply imposed upon subjects but learned through habituated practices of perceiving race. Alcoff develops a preliminary account of the racializing gaze as a habituated practice of perceiving race from the perspective of dominant racial ideology. In order to expand Alcoff’s preliminary phenomenology of the racializing gaze, I next turn to Helen Ngo’s phenomenological analysis of the racializing gaze and its effects on the non-white phenomenal body as developed in her text, *The Habits of Racism.* Ngo reads Fanon’s account of the Black lived experience through a Merleau-Pontian phenomenological framework to identify the multiple ways in which the Black phenomenal body is inhibited. Because, as Merleau-Ponty argues, meaning is inherently expressive of embodied intentionality, I argue that Black subjects are prevented from cultivating creative and spontaneous meaning insofar as their phenomenal bodies are inhibited under white supremacy. In order to advance this claim, I distinguish between a ‘routinized habit body’ and a ‘robust habit body.’ Such a distinction is necessary in order to track the changes in the phenomenal body that coincide with the changes between Merleau-Ponty’s notions ‘routinized habituation’ and ‘creative and spontaneous habituation’. Routinized habituation, such as driving a car, does not entail sophisticated movements of a habit body. After much practice, one becomes habituated to driving such that driving requires little to no conscious thought. In contrast, what I refer to as ‘robust habituation’, such as playing an instrument, may include such
things as riffing, which does entail sophisticated movements of a habit body. In the remaining chapters of this dissertation, I argue that Black subjects flee into the space of fugitivity in order to cultivate a robust habit body, which allows them to produce creative and spontaneous meanings.

In *Visible Identities*, Alcoff describes vision as the primary sense through which contemporary racial and gender identification are constituted and verified in the US. Adopting what she refers to as a ‘contextualist approach’ to race, Alcoff defines race accordingly:

Race is socially constructed, historically malleable, culturally contextual, and reproduced through learned perceptual practices. Whether or not it is valid to use racial concepts and whether or not their use will have positive or negative political effects depends on the context. Thus, according to Alcoff, race is socially constructed and differently understood according to one’s historical and cultural context. Because of this, our racial concepts—our means of understanding and verifying racial identification—also differ according to our historical and cultural context. For example, I would not identify as a ‘negro’ in 2021, though this would have been a socially and culturally acceptable term of racial identification before and during Jim Crow. Instead, I identify as ‘Black,’ and am often identified by others as either ‘Black’ or ‘African American.’ The terms we use in racial identification are not constant; as I will discuss, they are conditioned by further background assumptions and ideologies within our respective historical and cultural context. The historical malleability of the contextualist definition of race is important, for Alcoff’s purposes, because it does not treat race as a metaphysically substantive

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59 Alcoff, *Visible Identities*, 182.
identity.\(^6^0\) That is, racial identity is not a Kantian ‘thing-in-itself’; rather, it is a social identity that is interpreted according to one’s historical, cultural, and, in turn, socio-political context.

In her analysis of the socio-political structures of the contemporary US, Alcoff considers the dominant racial ideology and naturalized common sense particular to our historical and cultural context. Alcoff draws on Gramsci’s concept of ‘common sense’ which, as she explains “is made up of that which seems obviously true and enjoys consensus or near consensus [although it] is ‘culturally constituted’.”\(^6^1\) Common sense is thus a form of naturalized cultural knowing wherein certain things appear self-evident according to our cultural context. Alcoff describes our common sense as including our “tacit knowledge about racial identity,” which we un-reflectively draw upon in our everyday experiences because it “seems obviously true and enjoys consensus or near consensus.”\(^6^2\) In the contemporary US, we simply see race; we do not have to reflect upon the associations we make between racial identities and the perceived visible bodily features. We simply see race, according to Alcoff, because the visibility of racial social identities is part of our ‘common sense.’ Thus, in our naturalized ways of seeing race, what Husserl would call our ‘natural attitude,’ we simply regard racial identification as self-evidently visible, or visibly verifiable. However, because race is not a metaphysical substance that remains constant and unchanging, then our racial common sense cannot be formed through a process of pure perception. That is, racial identity does not itself require that we perceive it as visibly self-

\(^6^0\) Alcoff rejects an eliminativist account of race, which treats race as a mythical category in the service of white supremacy, as well as an essentialist account of race, which treats race as a fixed and homogenous feature of racial communities. However, given her consistent referencing of race as “real,” we can also assume that, in her critiques of eliminatavism and essentialism, she is also rejecting a metaphysical account of race. See Alcoff, *Visible Identities*, 181-186.

\(^6^1\) Ibid., 185.

\(^6^2\) Ibid.
evident; therefore, the apparent truth of race must come from elsewhere. Alcoff identifies this ‘elsewhere’—the source of our common sense—as grounded in the dominant ideology governing the contemporary socio-political and cultural contexts in the US.

Alcoff draws from Stuart Hall, among others, to characterize our contemporary racial ideology. In his 1985 article, “Signification, representation, ideology: Althusser and the post-structuralist debates,” Stuart Hall extends an Althusserian analysis of interpellation and ideology to the context of race in the UK. Althusser uses the concept ‘ideology’ to refer to the interests of dominant society that come to structure society as a whole. Following, Althusser, Hall defines ideology as the “work of fixing meaning through establishing, by selection and combination, a chain of equivalence.” Hall explains that meaning is ‘fixed’ by the state according to political discourses and social practices of our society. Fixing meaning, in this context, is the reification of meaning such that we experience our social and political practices as natural, rather than historically and culturally constituted. As a result, Hall explains, we “experience ideology as it emanates freely and spontaneously from within us, as if we were its free subjects, ‘working by ourselves.’ Actually, we are spoken by and spoken for in ideological discourses which await us even at our birth, into which we are born and find our place.” We are born into a culture/society with structures of power relations and socio-political discourses that precede our arrival. Through interpellation, we are “summoned” to our “place” within these networks. For example, I was born into my nuclear biological family wherein I occupy the position of daughter.


64 Ibid., 93.

65 Ibid., 109.

66 Ibid., 110.
and sister; but I was also born into a gendered, racialized, and class position according to my historical, cultural, and socio-political context. The positions precede my birth and are fixed for me upon my birth. However, Hall does not go so far as to claim that my position within these networks of power is reified such that I cannot alter my position. It is possible, to varying degrees, for me to change my socio-political and/or cultural position through either resistance or adherence to the socio-political practices and networks of power, which assigned me my position at birth.67 There are important nuances to be made within an Althusserian theory of ideology as related to race, work that Alcoff pursues in Visible Identities. However, for our purposes, we need not fully replicate either Alcoff’s or Stuart Hall’s account of racial ideology in its entirety. The important point is that we do not determine our own socio-political, historical, or cultural position. We find ourselves already embedded within the socio-political world, just, in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, we found ourselves already embedded within the world of perception.

The point for our present purposes is that our commonsense beliefs regarding race are ideologically constituted by dominant interests of what Alcoff calls “an uninterrogated white common sense.”68 We are not bound by this uninterrogated common sense, but, as the dominant ideology of our culture, we are born into it. In the US, we are simply assigned the belief that race is self-evidently visible just as we are assigned our various socio-political positions. Alcoff writes: “The realm of the visible, or what is taken as self-evidently visible […] is how the ideology of social identities naturalized their [i.e., social identities’] specific designation.”69 Our perception of race is naturalized in the sense that we automatically see race when we see the

67 Ibid., 101-104.
68 Alcoff, Visible Identities,186.
69 Ibid., 126.
body. Our automatic recognition of race is not merely an identification of a difference in skin
tones, but also a range of beliefs and opinions about the kind of person one is by virtue of their
racial identity. We can learn to identify races through different means, as we have in the past, but
in the contemporary US, we simply accept that race is self-evidently visibly identifiable. The
visibility of race is given as self-evident within the contemporary US because this association—
between racial identity and visible bodily features—is ideologically fixed as common sense and,
thereby, as naturalized perception.

Alcoff adopts Gadamer’s theory of the life-world and horizon to investigate the
background assumptions containing the values and meanings we come to associate with race.
Gadamer’s concept of horizon allows Alcoff to consider not just that we see race, but how we
see race. Unlike Husserl’s account of life-world, Gadamer emphasizes the historicity of our
respective-life worlds, which condition what does and does not emerge as meaningful for us.
Alcoff defines Gadamer’s life-world accordingly: “the life-world is simply the lived or
experienced world, a world that is intrinsically meaningful but whose meanings can change as
they are interpreted within the lives of historically situated persons.”70 Because race is defined by
Alcoff as historically malleable, then it follows that the apparent truths regarding race must
themselves be historically situated. Furthermore, we, as subjects, are historically situated, and
therefore, our own histories as subjects also condition how we see race. The interpretive horizon,
is therefore, the historical, cultural, and socio-political position from which subjects perceive
race:

The horizon is a substantive perspectival location from which the interpreter looks out at
the world, a perspective that is always present but that is open and dynamic, with a temporal

70 Ibid., 95.
as well as physical dimension, moving into the future and into new spaces as the subject moves.\textsuperscript{71}

When we see race, we see it from a specific perspectival location. People see race from their perspectives, which includes “background, framing assumptions” about meanings and truths associated with race.\textsuperscript{72} Combining this account of the interpretive horizon with Merleau-Ponty’s theory of habituation, Alcoff considers how subjects become habituated to perceiving race according to the background, framing assumptions of a dominant ideology constituted by an uninterrogated white common sense. Though Alcoff does not use the term ‘racializing gaze,’ she does explicitly align her phenomenological account with theorists, such as Fanon and Lewis Gordon, who do us the language of the racializing gaze. Thus, I will refer to the habituated perspective of dominant racial ideology in the contemporary US as the ‘racializing gaze.’ By focusing on the racializing gaze, we can explore racist ideology and common sense as they unfold in lived experience.

As I discussed in section I of this chapter, according to Merleau-Ponty, our motor and perceptual experiences become sedimented within our body schema, which conditions what does and does not emerge as meaningful for us. Analyzing the motor and perceptual habits sedimented in/as the racializing gaze, we may consider the pre-reflective and reflective ways of seeing that include more than our cultural background assumptions. We can see that it is not only perspectival position that is important for this analysis, but subject position, as well. That is, the ‘racializing gaze’ is not only a perspectival position informed by background assumptions and histories; it is also, as Alia Al-Saji explains, a subject position wherein one’s manner of being-in-
the-world includes meanings that are associated with and projected onto others who also inhabit the world. In her article, “The racialization of Muslim veils: A philosophical analysis,” Al-Saji describes the interpretive horizon and phenomenology as mutually implicated in racial and racialized perception:

Vision is not a mere neutral recording of the visible. As Merleau-Ponty notes, we learn to see. This means that vision not only makes visible, it does so differently according to sedimented habits of seeing—according to the tacit ways the body relates to and moves in the world, allowing certain aspects of that world to be foregrounded.73

Al-Saji extends Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception to consider the socio-historico structures of seeing race and/or racialized subjects. Whereas Merleau-Ponty restricted his analysis to habits that are prime facie value-neutral, such as playing an organ, Al-Saji explores how the perceptions of racialized subjects are habituated—learned—according to the values and meanings that constitute one’s perceptual field of signification. In other words, Al-Saji is concerned with the process by which one learns to see race through habituated perception. Thus, one learns to see Black subjects as dangerous or threatening when one allows these ways of seeing to become sedimented and, eventually, habituated into one’s body schema. Al-Saji’s analysis of sedimented perception is a phenomenological parallel to Alcoff’s notion of uninterrogated common sense. The racializing gaze is a habituated perception of non-white subjects according to the background assumptions and past perceptions, which, I argue, are conditioned by white supremacy and anti-Blackness.

My interest in this section is not in how the racializing gaze is habituated, but with what effects the racializing gaze has for the Black subject who is on the receiving end of this gaze. Here, Helen Ngo’s analysis of the effects the racializing gaze has for the lived experience of non-

73 Al-Saji, “The racialization of Muslim veils,” 884-885, my emphasis; for more on the connections between the phenomenological and horizonal structure of the racializing gaze see Ngo, Habit, 31-33.
white subjects is especially insightful. Extending Alcoff’s account of the visibility of race, as well as Al-Saji’s analysis of the habituated perception underlying the racializing gaze, Ngo examines how the non-white phenomenal body is altered by the presence of the racializing gaze in lived experience. In this vein, Ngo explains that the Black body image becomes *distorted* by the multiple perspectives she is forced to internalize before the racializing gaze; additionally, the Black body schema is experienced as *fragmented* in lived experience because of the racializing gaze; and finally, the Black subject is unable to cultivate what I call a ‘*robust habit body*’ under white supremacy. As I will explain below that the inhibited Black phenomenal body is not only the result of the racializing gaze, but a phenomenological structure of white supremacy itself. That is, the racializing gaze is not, in my view, restricted to individual subject(s) or even groups of subjects; rather, the racializing gaze is a phenomenological structure of white supremacy. It is a phenomenological perspective habitable by subjects because this gaze is fundamental to the maintenance and reproduction of white supremacy.

Reading Fanon’s account of the Black lived experience under twentieth century French colonial rule through a Merleau-Pontian phenomenological framework, Ngo explains that both overdetermination and pre-determination prevent Black subjects from experiencing their body image as a stable perspective—a perspective from which one’s body is experienced as ‘one’s own.’ Unlike the uninhibited body schema described by Merleau-Ponty, Ngo describes the Black subject as unable to experience her body as her own: “My body is not, in that moment [before the racializing gaze], on the ‘margins of my perception’ as Merleau-Ponty writes […], but visually foregrounded, both for myself and for others.” One’s Black body is overdetermined because there are multiple racial scripts co-constituting how Blackness is perceived from the

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74 Ngo, *Habits*, 63.
perspective of the racializing gaze. Black racial identity represents lack of civilization, criminality, a threat; all of these racial scripts condition the perception from the racializing gaze such that Blackness is multiply determined as inferior. Additionally, Black racial identity is pre-determined. The racial scripts related to Blackness pre-exist any individual Black person. The Black subject is perceived as already uncivilized, criminal, and a threat before she speaks or acts in front of the racializing gaze. Overdetermination and pre-determination presents the Black subject with a third person perspective, as a view of her racialized body from the outside. Ngo explains that this perspective is then internalized by the Black subject, thereby distorting her body image perspective. Her body image is increased and distorted such that she inhabits multiple perspectives of her body. Ngo writes, “as a racialized body, one stands in multiple relations to and perspectives upon the self, in a way that disrupts the spatial cohesion of the body schema.”75 The racializing gaze produces multiple perspectives for and of the Black subject, which are internalized as one’s own perspective: her racialized body as overdetermined, her racialized body as pre-determined, her perspectival position—the ‘my own’ view from the body—and the perspective of her body from the position of the other. In non-racialized perception, the perspective of one’s body as ‘my own’ is dominant—it is the perspective that orients and secures all other perspectives. One may become aware of another’s perspective of one’s body or self, but the perspective of the other remains distinct from one’s own perspective. Rather than internalize the perspective of the other in non-racialized perception, the subjects of perception engage in a reciprocal exchange of perspective. I will discuss the reciprocity of intersubjectivity for Merleau-Ponty in chapter IV of this dissertation in the context of gestures. For now, however, we should say that the distorted body image of racialized perception is

75 Ibid., 66.
characterized by the internalization of multiple perspective emerging from others rather than reciprocated. This is because the content of the other perspective makes claims upon one’s own body image—the racializing gaze knows the Black subject according to overdetermined and pre-determined racialized scripts. The subject of the racializing gaze knows the Black subject just as well, perhaps even better, than the Black subject knows herself. Thus, in racialized perception, the Black subject not only internalizes, rather than reciprocates, multiple perspectives, but she also loses the primacy of her own perspective. The ‘my owness’ of the body image becomes ‘my own’ and ‘other’ perspectives before the racializing gaze.

Because of this distorted body image, Ngo explains, the Black subject begins to experience her body as a phenomenal object among other objects. The Black subject is made hyper-visible for another whose gaze makes her own body visible to her as an object. Objects can be viewed from multiple perspectives; it is simply part of the phenomenal structure of objects that they admit of multiple viewing points. We can walk around a tree to gain different perspective of it to discover new things about the tree before us. However, the body image is described by Merleau-Ponty as fixed. It is an inescapable position whence we view the world. As I discussed in the previous section, it is Merleau-Ponty’s position that we cannot gain other viewpoints of our bodies because we are fastened to our body as our perspective. However, because the perspective of the racializing gaze is internalized by the Black subject, she becomes unfastened to her body image. Her own perspective is no longer the primary position from which she perceives the world, but the position in which she perceives and is perceived by others according to racializing scripts. The racializing gaze does not perceive the Black subject as another subject with whom it may engage in a reciprocal exchange of perspectives. It views the Black subject as a phenomenal object. Thus, when the Black subject internalizes the perspective
of the racializing gaze, she internalizes the perspective of herself as a phenomenal object. The body image of the Black subject is extended from ‘my own’ perspective to include the multiple viewpoints of her body as it is perceived from outside. Her awareness of her body as the point from which she perceives the world is unfixed, and as a result, she experiences her body from the perspective of another who stands before her. According to Ngo, by internalizing the racializing gaze, the Black subject “edges toward the threshold” of the phenomenal object, which, unlike the phenomenal body, admits of varying perspectives. Thus, the racializing gaze distorts the body image of the Black subject in two ways: her perspective of her body as her own is no longer fixed, and, as a result, she edges toward the status of the phenomenal object.

The displacement of one’s body image results in a fragmented and, therefore, unsynthesized body schema. We see the relation between an unfixed and distorted body image and the corresponding fracturing of the Black body schema in Fanon’s often cited account of his racialized encounter on a train. In chapter five of *Black Skin, White Masks*, “L’expérience Vécue du Noir,” Fanon describes his consciousness as tripled in response to the interpolating call of the white child on the train who cries “Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!” Fanon writes:

I could no longer laugh, because I already knew that there were legends, stories, history, and above all historicity […]. Then, assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema. In the train it was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person. In the train I was given not one but two, three places. […] I existed triply: I occupied space. I moved

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76 Ibid., 64.

toward the other…and the evanescent other, hostile but not opaque, transparent, not there, disappeared. Nausea… 78

I think it important that Fanon refers to his body schema as “the corporeal schema.” It suggests that his body image is already displaced before, or perhaps during, the moment his body schema crumbled into three perspectives. Otherwise, we would expect Fanon to refer to ‘my’ corporeal schema. Fanon’s perspective is expanded to include the perspective of himself as from outside. He is not merely aware that he is perceived by another, but he incorporates this other perspective as part of his own. Ngo writes: “Fanon is not just seen; he experiences himself being seen, anticipated himself being seen, and finally, sees himself being seen.” 79 These multiple perspectives distort the body image, as previously discussed, and also fragment the body schema by creating a spatial distance between oneself and one’s body. In non-racialized perception, the body image secures the coordinated and synthesized motility of the body schema. The subject experiences her body as her own—there is no distance between one’s body and one’s perspective—and the primacy of one’s own perspective enables a synthesis of experience. Synthesis, in this context, means coordinated movements and perception in experience. For example, in non-racialized perception, I may approach my desk. I may focus upon the various movements of my body in the act of approaching my desk, but in everyday experience, these movements are performed with such ease that I do not have to think about them. My whole body is coordinated in its movements and my movements are harmoniously performed.

In contrast to the coordinate body schema involved in non-racialized perception, racialized perception creates a distance between one’s own perspective and one’s body leading to

78 Ibid., my emphasis.

79 Ngo, Habits, 65.
an uncoordinated and, thereby, unsynthesized and fragmented, set of movements. That I can see my body as an object before me, means that I experience my body as at a distance from me. And it is this distance, Ngo explains, that renders the Black body schema fragmented. Ngo writes: “Insofar as the body schema is that which coordinates and supports intentional (or conscious) bodily activity, the experience of racism and racialization intrudes into this coordination, straining the fluidity of the experience of the body.”

The Black subject is aware of herself from her own perspective and the perspective of others. Her movements are, therefore, not merely performed in an effort to, for example, approach a desk; her movements are also performed with the effort to disrupt, comply, or even disregard the perspective of the other. The Black subject cannot simply approach a desk with ease when before the racializing gaze. The racializing gaze is internalized and strains the otherwise fluid movements of the Black subject. If she moves too quickly, her racialized body may pose a threat. If she sways her hips a bit too much, her racialized body may be perceived as hyper-sexualized. In this sense, her movements, just as her perspective, are not simply her own. They are guided by her desire to move from here to there and they are performed with the weight of the racialized perspective and its racializing scripts in mind. As a result, her movements are fragmented into a series of isolated acts, which must be individually managed in order to manage the racializing gaze itself. Thus, in racialized experience the Black subject does not experience her body as a unified and coordinated totality.

The racializing gaze makes the Black subject feel self-conscious of her race; it is experienced as hyper-visible and full of meanings that she must navigate. Aware of the overdetermined and pre-determined racial scripts that precede her, the Black subject’s movements in the world are inhibited by what Ngo calls the ‘work’ of managing the racializing

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80 Ibid., 66.
gaze.\textsuperscript{81} When the Black subject goes out in public, when she is vulnerable to the racializing gaze, she becomes hyper-aware of her movements as racialized. The Black subject is, therefore, already on guard for a racializing encounter and, therefore, adopts what Alcoff calls a ‘defensive posture’:

For a non-white [subject] called back from a normative postural image to a racialized ‘epidermal schema’, as Fanon put it, the habit-body one falls into at such moments, I would suggest, is protective, defensive. Double layers of self-awareness must interrogate the likely meanings that will be attributed to every utterance, gesture, action one takes. The available options of interaction seem closed down to two: combative resistance without hope of persuasion, or an attempt to return to the category of non-threatening other, perhaps through the place of the not-really-other.\textsuperscript{82}

The means by which the Black subject can experience her body schema as coordinated under white supremacy are either through adopting the defensive habit body or a conciliatory and non-threatening habit body. In either case, the Black body schema is discontinuous because the Black subject is hyper-aware that her every movement means more than she intends in each moment.

Because, under white supremacy, the Black body image is distorted and the Black body schema is discontinuous, the Black habit body is, as Alcoff explains in the above quote, inhibited. It is useful here to distinguish between what I call a ‘routinized habit body’ and a ‘robust habit body.’ While Merleau-Ponty identifies two kinds of habituation, he does not identify the corresponding kinds of habit body. The first kind of habituated movement includes everyday habituated act we engage in without deliberate consideration. For example, when I drive to campus, a route I take several times a week, I already know in what direction I will drive, approximately how long it will take to arrive, the average speed of my route, etc. In the act driving, I am so habituated to this route that I often “zone out” and find myself accelerating, braking,

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 58.

changing lanes without necessarily being aware of each act. In the process of learning to drive, my phenomenal body altered; I cultivated a phenomenal body that can extend to fit the dimensions of my car, just as the woman with the feathered cap extends her phenomenal body to include the dimensions of the feather. As a result, I accelerate, brake, and change lanes without having to pause and deliberate about each movement. In addition to routinized habituation, there is a creative and spontaneous form of habituation. This latter kind of habituation is what Merleau-Ponty describes in his example of the skilled organist. According to Merleau-Ponty, a skilled organist does not merely repeat notes already familiar to them. Rather, the skilled organist communes with the instrument to produce new and expressive music. Merleau-Ponty writes: “There is no place here for a ‘memory’ of the location of the stops, and the organist does not play within objective space. In fact, his rehearsal gestures are gestures of consecration: they put forth affective vectors, they discover emotional sources, and they create an expressive space.”\(^8^3\) The skilled organist does not play music from memory, which would assume that the musical notes already exist in the organist’s mind and are merely repeated in the act of playing the instrument. Habituated to the instrument, the organist produces no significance through playing their instrument. New affective expressions are produced; unfamiliar emotional sources are discovered; and the field of expression available for the musician and their instrument is expanded. Familiarity with the instrument in this case is more than past exposure or routine movements. This more sophisticated kind of habituation involves a familiarity that makes use of the instrument and the organist’s skills to spontaneously and creatively produce new sounds and, in turn, new significance. I refer to the phenomenal body involved in this more sophisticated form of habituation as ‘robust habit body.’ And it is the robust habit body, which I will argue, that is inhibited under white supremacy.

\(^8^3\) Merleau-Ponty, *Perception*, 147.
Exploring the habit body of the Black subject before the racializing gaze, Ngo describes the Black habit body as uninhabited. This has two consequences: the Black subject is uneasy in lived experience and she is constantly engaged in the ‘work’ of interrupting, anticipating, and managing the racializing gaze. Analyzing Fanon’s encounter on the train, Ngo writes: “The racialized body here is not the habitual one—at ease or at rest in its holding of itself—but the one disturbed, destabilized, unsettled.”

Aware of existing as fragmented, the Black subject does not feel at home under white supremacy. She is always “on guard,” in a defensive posture, or in retreat from the racializing gaze. Drawing upon the distinction I made above between the ‘routinized habit body’ and the ‘robust habit body,’ we can understand Ngo’s claim that the Black phenomenal body is not habitual in the sense that it is restricted to the routinized habit body and unable to cultivate the robust habit body. Because both a synthesized body image and synthesized body schema are necessary for the cultivation of a robust habit body, the Black subject cannot achieve the kind of spontaneous and free movements involved in the sophisticated kind of habituation in the presence or anticipation of the racializing gaze.

However, to say that the Black body is not habituated under white supremacy is not to say that the Black body does not accrue habits. Rather, the Black body is habituated as a routinized habit body under white supremacy. Ngo explores the everyday routinized gestures and movements Black subjects engage in, without having to be aware of such movements, in order to interrupt, anticipate, and/or manage the racializing gaze. The linguistic practice of code-switching is an example of the Black routinized habit body under white supremacy. For example, code switching would include the practice of switching from AAVE to ‘SAE that Black subjects regularly adopt when switching from the private to the public sphere, or the casual to the

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84 Ngo, Habits, 61.
professional sphere. Ngo describes the routinized habit movements performed by Black subjects as intended, consciously or unconsciously, to manage or interrupt the racializing gaze. If, in the example of code switching, the pre-determined script of the racializing gaze, i.e., the position of anti-Blackness, anticipates that the Black subject “can’t speak proper English,” then such a script is unfulfilled or disrupted by the Black subject who, in fact, proves capable of stringing together coherent and grammatically correct statements. While these routines are habituated for the Black subject, they are not constitutive of a robust habit body. In fact, the Black subject is closed off from cultivating a ‘robust habit body’ because her movements are overdetermined and pre-determined, which means that everything she does is either perceived by the racializing gaze as pre-ordained and always already defined.

According to Al-Saji, pre-determined scripts related to non-white subjects also lead to an experience of one’s movements as restricted. In her 2013 article, “Too Late: Racialized Time and the Closure of the Past,” Al-Saji examines Fanon’s description of racializing encounters structured by pre-determined scripts to describe the racialized subject’s inhibited habit-body. 85 Al-Saji writes: “The past is no longer lived at a distance, as past, but is experienced as a fixed and overdetermining dimension of the present.” 86 However Fanon responds to the frightened child on the train, he is destined to fulfill a pre-determined and, therefore, pre-ordained script as determined by the racializing gaze. If he laughs, he will be considered mad. If he tries to comfort the child, he will be considered a “respectable Black man.” If he retreats to another cabin, he will have recognized his position as inferior to the white child. And thus, exhaust the possibilities for

86 Ibid., 5.
“action.” Thus, there is no spontaneity or creativity afforded Fanon before the racializing gaze. He is closed off from what I have been calling the ‘robust habit body.’

I agree with Al-Saji’s claim that racialized subjects experience their habit body as inhibited before the racializing gaze and in the ways she details. However, since they do not situate this claim within the context of white supremacy, Al-Saji, Ngo, and Alcoff fail to recognize expressions of Black meaning that we do find in the world. For when Black subjects enter the space of fugitivity, they acquire a robust habit body capable of producing meaning. To suggest that racialized subjects are restricted to the routinized habit body without qualification, implies that these subjects are permanently cut off from an immanently expressive embodied intentionality. Or, at the very least, it suggests that the lived experience of the racialized subject is fundamentally reduced to the routinized habit body. This is true within the Manichean world of anti-Blackness with which Fanon is concerned. However, this world of anti-Blackness characterizes white supremacy and does not represent the fullness of Black lived experience.

In chapter IV of this dissertation, I develop my account of fugitivity to describe the loopholes Black subjects move into when they move out of white supremacy. In so doing, I shift our focus away from the Black lived experience under white supremacy to Black lived experience as it unfolds away from the surveillance of the racializing gaze. In fugitivity, we see the released musculature of Black subjects who express meaning through an uninhibited embodied intentionality. Additionally, in chapter IV, I will explore concrete examples of Black gestures to demonstrate that Black meaning has been produced by Black subjects. That is, Black gestures are evidence that Black meaning-making is not only possible but has already occurred and continues to occur in the space of fugitivity. Furthermore, these Black gestures are expressed
when Black subjects are within white supremacy, which demonstrates that the Black lived experience under white supremacy also includes Black meaning.
Chapter Three: Historicizing Blackness

This chapter examines the history of anti-Black violence as it conditions contemporary Black subject formation in the US. I say only that contemporary Black subjects are *conditioned* by this history, and not that we are *determined* by this history to indicate that Black subjectivity—Black life—has always included more than trauma and suffering. I begin by explicating Saidiya Hartman’s concept of the ‘afterlives of slavery’ in order to establish that this concept is only ambiguously defined. This ambiguity allows theorists to make use of Hartman’s concept in a way that flattens the historical differences between chattel slavery and the contemporary US situation/context. Next, I outline Sylvia Wynter’s historiography and political ontology of Man in order to later consider how some advocates of Afropessimism use Wynter’s political ontology, to make claims concerning the contemporary Black subject. As a result, these theorists of Afropessimism—in particularly Frank Wilderson III, Jared Sexton, and Calvin Warren—analyze the ontological status of the contemporary Black subject according to an anachronistic political ontology. Finally, I develop my concept of the ‘Black archive’ as an alternative to Hartman’s ‘afterlives of slavery,’ so as to characterize how the history of anti-Blackness conditions contemporary Black subject formation. By “the Black archive,” I intend an assemblage of multiple discursive regimes that are similarly regulated by anti-Black disciplinary and regulatory techniques. I explain that contemporary Black subjects live in, through, and as the Black archive.

*Hartman’s ‘Afterlives of Slavery’*

In chapter I of this dissertation, I examined philosophical accounts of the history of the dehumanization of enslaved subjects in the US during chattel slavery. My intention in that chapter was to identify both the history of anti-blackness in the US and the historical origin of
what Calvin Warren has called “Black nonbeing,” and what others, including Jared Sexton and Frank Wilderson III, following the work of Sylvia Wynter, have referred to as Blackness’ exclusion from humanity—or exclusion from what Wynter calls ‘Man.’ In this chapter, my interest lies in identifying the historical discontinuity between enslaved existence under chattel slavery and contemporary Black life in the US. I argue that often times theorists working in Afropessimism too quickly collapse the historical conditions of slavery with the conditions of contemporary anti-Blackness in an effort to analyze the ontology of the contemporary Black subject. Reading Frank Wilderson III’s and Jared Sexton’s interpretations and uses of Saidiya Hartman’s concept of the ‘afterlives of slavery,’ I examine their identification of enslaved suffering with contemporary anti-Blackness in the US; such an identification fails to produce an adequate characterization of the contemporary conditions of white supremacy and anti-Blackness in the US. Both Wilderson and Sexton claim to develop a political ontology of slavery and its afterlives. However, through a kind of sleight-of-hand, they extend that ontology in assertions about the metaphysical ontology of contemporary Black existence. In other words, Wilderson and Sexton identify the enslaved subject of chattel slavery with the contemporary Black subject in the US through the concept of a ‘fungible commodity;’ they hold that both subjects are such ‘fungible commodities.’ However, these theorists fail to analyze the political ontology of the contemporary US and, instead, merely extend the historical specificity of the enslaved subject as

fungible commodity to characterize the contemporary Black subject as nonbeing. In contrast to these analyses, I develop a ‘Black archive’ in order to examine the historical lines of descent that begin in chattel slavery and which, I describes as conditioning without determining the contemporary Black subject in the US.

In her 1997 work, *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman explains that the enslaved subject was neither mere property, nor merely exploited in their labor but, rather, was rendered a “fungible commodity.” As fungible, enslaved subjects lacked individuality; they were interchangeable. Of course, they were exchangeable with other enslaved subjects, but this was not all that this fungibility entailed. For this interchangeability meant in addition that enslaved subjects occupied a position that white subjects themselves could psychically occupy and could employ to reflect upon their own desires and humanity. According to Hartman, post-Abolition the Black subject was free from slavery, but not free from the position of a fungible commodity. For Hartman, the physical and psychological pain endured by the enslaved subject remains “a still-unfolding narrative of captivity, dispossession, and domination that engenders the black subject in the Americas.” Here, Hartman’s use of ‘engendering’ and “still-unfolding,” suggests that she characterizes the contemporary Black subject as conditioned by captivity, dispossession, and domination. Notably, she does not specify in what way the Black subject remains captive or dispossessed or dominated, nor does she explain what she means by ‘narrative.’ Does narrative mean ‘history’ in the sense that contemporary Black subjects are haunted by the history of chattel slavery? Does narrative mean ‘discourse’ in the Foucauldian sense, which would suggest that contemporary Black subject formation occurs in and through the discursive regimes and

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3 Ibid., 51.
disciplinary techniques of captivity, dispossession, and domination? Hartman’s ambiguous use of ‘engendering’ and ‘narrative’ leave her claims regarding the relationship between the enslaved subject and the contemporary Black subject open to interpretations, some of which might collapse these historically situated subjects. That is, if Hartman claims that contemporary Black subjects are engendered by the still-unfolding narratives of chattel slavery, then one may interpret her work as identifying the enslaved subject with the contemporary Black subject in the US.

We find a slight qualification to the above claim in Hartman’s 2007 text, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. Here, Hartman introduces her now famous concept ‘the afterlife of slavery’ which she characterizes accordingly:

> If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. I, too, am the afterlife of slavery.  

The afterlife of slavery is not, for Hartman, merely a historical narrative that contemporary subjects can reflect upon. Nor is it merely a memory of the violence endured by enslaved subject under chattel slavery. Rather, it is the devaluation of Black life that originated in chattel slavery and continues to mark contemporary Black life as non-valuable in comparison to white subjects. During chattel slavery, the racial calculus of enslaved subjects determined their value as a fungible commodity. Today, Hartman explains, this racial calculus determines Black subjects through a framework wherein Blacks are disproportionately vulnerable to death, poverty, and incarceration. But what does it mean for Hartman to claim that *she too* is the afterlife of slavery?

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As a successful academic, we know that Hartman is educated, presumably she is not poor, and, so far as I am aware, she is not incarcerated. Is she the afterlife of slavery because she is a descendent of slaves; because her Blackness itself renders her vulnerable to skewed life chances; or because, despite her success, her value is determined according to a racial calculus that positions her as valueless or less valuable than white subjects? Again, Hartman’s claims regarding the afterlives of slavery, like her claims concerning the still unfolding narratives of slavery, are only ambiguously stated.

I believe the ambiguity of Hartman’s claims regarding enslaved subjects and contemporary Black subjects allows other theorists to make use of her concepts in a variety of ways, some of which are extreme in their lack of historical specificity. That is, *Scenes of Subjection* is a book concerning the commodification and fungibility of enslaved subjects. It is, in my view, importantly situated within the context of chattel slavery and the years following Emancipation. However, Hartman does imply that the political ontology governing chattel slavery persists in the contemporary US. I propose that Hartman’s account of the afterlives of slavery requires historical nuance in order to distinguish between the effects of the racial calculus and political arithmetic for enslaved subjects as compared to contemporary Black US subjects. In other words, the racial calculus that determined enslaved subjects as fungible commodities may still endure in the contemporary setting, but it is importantly different from the context of chattel slavery. The skewed life chances of contemporary Black subjects in the US is not an *identical* condition to the enslaved that determined African and African American life during chattel slavery. The afterlife of slavery is different in kind than the life of slavery.

Afropessimists have failed to do the work required for theorizing the historical continuity and discontinuity between enslaved subjects and contemporary Black subjects in the
US. Instead, theorists including Wilderson, Sexton, Warren, and other theorists of Afropessimism adopt Hartman’s concepts and treat them as transhistorical; they extend Hartman’s claims from the context of chattel slavery to the contemporary context without alteration. In so doing, Afropessimists map the political ontology of chattel slavery onto the socio-political context of the contemporary US and, as a result, they analyze the contemporary Black subject according to a previous historical context.

Before examining Afropessimist theories concerning contemporary Black subjects, I want to define the term ‘political ontology.’ In his 2011 article, “Political Ontology,” Colin Hay lists key questions that concern ontology: “what is it to exist, whether (and, if so, why) there exists something rather than nothing, and whether (and, if so, why) there exists one logically contingent actual world.” In general, ontology is the study of existence, the nature of being, and the metaphysical structure of the world/reality. Political ontology is narrower than ontology in scope; it is the study of specifically political being. Hay explains, “political ontology […] relates to political being, to what is politically, to what exists politically, and to the units that comprise political reality.” Questions asked in/of political ontology or in an ontology of politics, are: What characterizes something as political as opposed to, for example, cultural?; what is the polis?; what kind of being constitutes the political subject? Following this understanding of political ontology, we could characterize Hartman’s concept of ‘fungible commodity’ as an ontopolitical claim about the enslaved subject’s position in relation to white subjects during chattel slavery.

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6 Ibid.
slavery. That is, Hartman’s analysis concerns the ontological structure of and the ontological beings of chattel slavery.

But what, then, is the role of political ontology in Afropessimism? For Jared Sexton, for instance, Afropessimism is distinctly characterized by its focus on the political ontology of anti-Blackness. In his 2016 article “Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word,” Sexton describes Afropessimism as a critical supplement to ethnic studies because it concerns political ontology:

Afro-Pessimism […] critically supplements the paradigm of critical ethnic studies […] by moving conceptually from the empirical to the structural or, more precisely, from the experiential to the political ontological, especially insofar as the question of differential racialization—or the complexity of racial hierarchy—makes recourse to a comparative history and social science.7

For Sexton, the shift from the experiential to the political ontological that is characteristic of Afropessimism is a modification of a critical ethnic studies approach to understanding anti-Blackness. For the focus of critical ethnic studies, in Sexton’s view, is upon anti-Blackness as it is expressed in institutions, lived experience, and aesthetics. Afropessimism, by contrast, shifts the focus to an analysis of the underlying ontological structures that brought anti-Blackness into being. The key question for Sexton, therefore, is about the historical origin of anti-Blackness and the nonbeing of Blackness. As Sexton and others working in Afropessimism assert, Black liberation is only possible by first identifying the political ontology of the modern world and then, overthrowing this ontological order. In this vein, Sexton identifies Hartman’s argument that enslaved subjects existed as fungible commodities as the historical origin of anti-Blackness and the nonbeing of contemporary Black subjects. He reads out the fundamental ambiguity of Hartman’s claims by shifting to the register of political ontology and thereby occluding the

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historical specificity of her thought. Still, political ontology itself need not be transhistorical, as we will find in the work of Sylvia Wynter.

**Wynter’s Political Ontology and Historiography of Man**

Afropessimists identify the period of chattel slavery (1619-1865) as the era during which Black subjects were excluded from the category Human—socially, politically, ontologically—by white Europeans and, later, white Americans. This claim follows Sylvia Wynter’s historiography of modernity and the humanist invention of what she refers to as ‘Man 1’. In her 2003 article, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” Wynter draws upon Foucault’s account of the ‘invention of Man’ as developed in *Order of Things*, to consider how Man and its Other developed in the Americas.\(^8\) That is, Wynter theorizes the converse of Foucault’s ‘Man’ to consider the processes by which Man was defined twice over—as ‘Man1’ and ‘Man2,’ in Wynter’s terminology—in the Americas beginning in 1492. Accordingly, Wynter explains that during the Renaissance the concept of Man underwent a redescription, from Man as fallen flesh to Man as a political subject. She writes:

> In order for the world of the laity, including that of the then ascendant modern European state, to escape their subordination to the world of the Church, it had been enabled to do so...

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\(^8\) Wynter, “Unsettling,” 263; In her interview with David Scott, Wynter explains her project in relation to Foucault: “there was, on the one hand, Man, as invented in the sixteenth century by Europe, as Foucault notes, and then, on the other hand, Man’s human Others, as also invented by Europeans at the same time” (David Scott, “The Re-enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter,” *Small Axe* 8 (2000): 174). However, given her historiography of Man as developed in her article “1492,” in addition to the decolonial theorists from which she draws in support of her own claims, I think it more accurate to date her account of Man 1 in the Americas as occurring in the fifteenth rather than sixteenth century. This is because ‘Man 1’ is not identical with Foucault’s working concept of ‘Man’ in *The Order of Things*. Foucault develops his concept of ‘Man’ within the closed geo-historical context of Europe during the Renaissance. Wynter, however, extends this context to examine the invention of ‘Man’ that took place during the colonial encounter between European settlers and American Natives. Thus, while Wynter draws on Foucault’s concept of ‘Man,’ her historicization of its invention will differ from Foucault’s according to their different geo-historical contexts. See Sylvia Wynter, “1492: A New World Order,” in *Race, Discourse, and the Origin*, ed. Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex Nettleford (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995); Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970).
only on the basis of what Michel Foucault identifies as the ‘invention of Man’: that is, by
the Renaissance humanists’ epochal redescription of the human outside the terms of the
then theocentric, ‘sinful by nature’ conception/‘descriptive statement’ of the human, on
whose basis the hegemony of the Church/clergy over the lay world of Latin-Christian
Europe had been supernaturally legitimated. […] this redescription was effected by the lay
world’s invention of Man as the political subject of the state.⁹

Christianity represented the human as ‘Fallen Flesh’ because of ‘Adamic Original Sin.’ The
means of salvation for the European Christian was dictated by the church, which, Wynter argues,
required the subordination of the laity to the church. That is, Christianity defined the human as
always already fallen, always already corrupted by original sin, and humans’ only hope of
salvation was to repent for a fallen nature for which they were not responsible. This was equally
ture of the poor European as it was of the monarch. While the monarch had power over her/his
subjects, both were ultimately beholden to the dictates of the Church for their salvation, which
made the Church itself a hegemonic institution. In this regard, Man was supernaturally pre-
determined by both God, Man’s creator, and the Church. Thus, Man could not define himself
because s/he was already defined by a cosmological order as ‘natural man,’ as I shall now
explain.

Wynter sees these developments as predicated on the prior rupture, occurring during the
Renaissance, between Man and the Church, by which Man re-defined himself from ‘Fallen
Flesh’ to political subject. The Renaissance succeeded in diminishing the hegemony of the
Church in two ways. First, Copernicus’s heliocentrism, which argued that the Earth moved
around the sun, challenged the Christian cosmology that characterized the Earth as the
immovable center of the universe. As Wynter explains, Copernicus’ discovery challenged the
Church’s position that knowledge of the world made by God was unknowable to humans.
Furthermore, by identifying the world as a moving body in the universe, Copernicus heretically

⁹ Wynter, “Unsettling,” 263.
contradicted the Church’s position that the Earth “had to be at the center of the universe […] and, in addition, to be not only nonmoving as it is sensed by us to be, but to be so because divinely condemned to be nonmoving in the wake of the Fall.”\textsuperscript{10} The stability of the Earth, which was said to exist at the center of the universe, was fundamental evidence for Christianity that God’s perfection was witnessed in a perfect and harmonious universe. The motionlessness of the Earth was also evidence for the Church of mankind’s “condemned enslavement to the negative Adamic legacy.”\textsuperscript{11} Copernicus’ act of de-centralizing the Earth and, in turn, rendering the Earth itself movable, called into question the monopoly on truth claimed by the Church, at least with regard to the cosmos. This caused an opening for other intellectuals to devise new ways of learning about the world—the Earth and the universe—which did not unquestioningly adopt the cosmological truths given by the Church. The Renaissance, therefore, established a new production of knowledge, one no longer beholden to the Church.

The second important rupture between Man and the Church created during the Renaissance, was a re-conceptualization of Man’s nature from theocentric to secularist humanist grounds. Wynter explains that Copernicus’ heliocentric discovery led others, specifically Pico della Mirandola, to re-write the fallen nature of Man. According to Wynter, Mirandola rejected the Christian doctrine that Man was fallen flesh and, instead, he argued that God created Man so there would be someone to admire his own creation of the universe:

God, having completed his Creation and wanting someone to admire His works, had created Man on a model unique to him, then placed him at the center/midpoint of the hierarchy of this creation, commanding him to ‘make of himself’ what he willed to be—to decide for himself whether to fall to the level of the beasts by giving into his passions, or, through the use of his reason, to rise to the level of the angels.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 278.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 274.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 276.
For Mirandola, Man was not constituted by an original sin, but as a participant in and admirer of God’s creation. This meant that Man did not have to seek out salvation through the Church in order to repent for his natural state as fallen flesh. Rather, Man could either through reason ‘make of himself’ an angel or give into his primal passions and live as a beast. Through participation in the state, adhering to the laws, Man could define himself as “rational subject of the state.”\(^\text{13}\) Man’s ability to define himself ‘degodded’ Man, as Wynter writes, which dismantled the hegemony of the Church in both its production of knowledge and its characterization of Man.\(^\text{14}\) However, this degodded Man was still a Christian subject; Man could define himself, but he was still made in the image of God. Wynter refers to this humanist reformulation of Man during the Renaissance as ‘Man 1.’\(^\text{15}\) Thus, the theocentric grounds on which Man was originally defined in Europe were replaced with a definition of Man according to a rational-political matrix, although this new conception of Man was still “hybridly religio-secular,” according to Wynter. That is, by “hybridly religio-secular,” Wynter means to point out that Man1 is a rational political subject, but nonetheless still a Christian subject.

According to Wynter, the redefinition of Man that took place in Europe during the Renaissance also involved the colonial encounter between Europe and American Natives.\(^\text{16}\) In her 2003 interview with David Scott, “The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter,” Wynter explains “the West was to be able to reinvent its true Christian Self as

\(^\text{13}\) Ibid.

\(^\text{14}\) Ibid., 277.

\(^\text{15}\) Ibid., 264.

\(^\text{16}\) Wynter argues that her historiography is a “correlative hypothesis” to Walter Mignolo’s ‘colonial difference’ and Aníbal Quijano’s ‘Racism/Ethnicism complex.’ (Wynter, “Unsettling,” 260).
that of Man only because, at the same time, Western discourses […] were also inventing the untrue Other of the Christian self.”\textsuperscript{17} As we have seen, the secularist humanism defining the European Renaissance occurred, in part, as a battle internal to Europe between European subjects and the hegemony of the Church. However, in addition to this Western Man reinvented himself in the Americas by defining himself against the Other \textit{qua} Native and enslaved African. Wynter writes:

The large-scale accumulation of unpaid land, unpaid labor, and overall wealth expropriated by Western Europe from non-European peoples, which was to lay the basis of its global expansion from the fifteenth century onwards, was carried out within the order of truth and the self-evident order of consciousness, of a creed-specific conception of what it was to be human—which, because a monotheistic conception, could not conceive of an Other to what it experiences as being human, and therefore an Other to its truth, its notion of freedom.\textsuperscript{18}

The invention of Man in Europe recognized the Church as an institution against which Man could re-define itself. That is, the European Man was defined during the Renaissance in relation to the Church even though this relation was one of transgression. In contrast, Europeans did not recognize American Natives and enslaved Africans as Other—as a people with civilized belief systems, political structures, culture. According to Wynter, this is because the European self-conception of Man was monotheistic. Man did not have proper Others; there was only Man and the absence of Man. Thus, American Natives and enslaved Africans did not constitute an Other in relation to European Man, because the category ‘Other’ suggests an independent conceptual order of Man that, from the European perspective, did not exist. As a result, Native Americans and enslaved Africans were conceived of in relation to European Man only as lacking the defining features of Man itself. This monotheistic conception of Man led European colonizers to

\textsuperscript{17} Scott, “Re-Enchanting,” 176.

\textsuperscript{18} Wynter, “Unsettling,” 291.
establish a new matrix to define the Other and, in turn, define themselves. Wynter explains, “For the Europeans […] the only available slot of Otherness to their Norm, into which they could classify these non-European populations, was one that defined the latter in terms of their ostensible subhuman status.” Europeans defined themselves as the sole norm, the only representation of Man, and non-Europeans would be defined in a negative relation to this norm as subhuman and lacking the characteristics of Man, which was equal to non-human.

In this process of defining the Other, the European colonizers reflected upon that which made them Human and used these features to assess whether or not American Natives or enslaved Africans met these conditions. Seeking justification for the exploitation of Native peoples and their land, European colonizers originally determined that the American Natives were not eligible for ethical consideration because they were non-Christian. In other words, American Natives were not Human because, to be Human one must be Christian. However, with the reinvention of Man internal to Europe shifting from theocentric to ratiocentric grounds, the exploitation of Natives based on their ‘secularity’ was replaced—beginning in the fifteenth century—with claims regarding their rationality. To demonstrate their status as Human, Natives had to demonstrate their capacity to reason. In reality, the colonizers merely compared the religious practices of the Aztecs to their own Christian rituals and deemed the former clearly “irrational.” Again, using their own socio-political and cultural context as the ideal representation of Man, the colonizers identified Natives as irrational based on the differences between their culture and European culture. Wynter writes “the vast difference that existed in religion and culture between the Europeans and the indigenous peoples was clear evidence of the

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19 Ibid., 292.
20 Ibid., 298.
latter’s clack of an ostensibly supracultural natural reason.”21 Reason, insofar as it defines Man, is here extended from purely theocentric grounds to include culture and reason. Because the Native’s and enslaved Africans’ cultures did not mirror European culture, they were deemed irrational and, in turn, Natives and enslaved Africans were themselves deemed irrational—non-Human.

Wynter identifies a shift in episteme during the eighteenth century, when Man was defined according to a new hierarchy. Beginning in the fifteenth century, Man was defined according to a matrix of rationality and Christianity: the Human was rational and the irrational non-human animal constituted the primary referent of Human’s opposite; Christianity was further evidence of one’s rationality and, in turn, status as Human—Man 1. Conversely, the non-human was believed closer to the non-human animal and, therefore, irrational; and their irrationality was further demonstrated in their ‘secularity.’ Within this matrix, however, there was a hierarchy between the Human and non-Human. That is, the matrix ‘rational/irrational’ and ‘Christian/non-Christian’ was not a strict binary, but code along which people would be arranged to determine their relation to Man. Wynter describes this hierarchy as “the status-ordering principles generated from their respective codes—one based on ostensibly differential degrees of enslavement to sin/redemption from sin, the other on ostensibly differential degrees of rational nature/enslavement to the irrational nature.”22 Beginning in the nineteenth century, however, the governing episteme shifted because of Darwin’s evolutionary theory.23 According to Wynter,

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., 315.

23 Wynter’s account of Darwinism constituting the shift in episteme from ‘Man 1’ to ‘Man 2’ seems to overlook several important issues. First, Wynter’s historiography is primarily developed according to events in intellectual history without regard for the political and economic shifts, which took place at the same time in history, that would have also played a role in the transition from ‘Man 1 to ‘Man 2’. Furthermore, Wynter’s account of Darwin suggest that his evolutionary theory constituted the emergence of racist and racialized discourse in the Americas and beyond.
Darwin’s evolutionary theory erased the sharp divide between the human and non-human animal and it also challenged the Christian narrative of Man’s origin. Thus, the matrix according to which the Human was defined had to be re-invented; this new order was based primarily on race. The Human—Man 2—was defined as white and the non-human was defined as non-white.

Within this new matrix, however, Blackness constituted the ultimate referent of the non-Human. Wynter explains:

Then along comes the Darwinian revolution, with its new half-scientific, half-mythic Origin Narrative of Evolution, and sweeps away this value difference between humans and animals. It is in the wake of this that bourgeois intellectuals are going to redefine Man in purely secular, because biological, terms. By placing human origins totally in evolution and natural selection, they are going to be able to map the structuring principle of their now bourgeois social structure, that of the selected versus dysselected, the evolved versus non-evolved.

Darwin’s evolutionary theory placed Man on a scale with non-human animals. The non-human animal was no longer the opposite of the Man because Darwinian theory held that humans evolved from the non-human animal. The rational/irrational distinction, which previously distinguished the Human from the non-human (animal) gave way to secular and biological

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However, discourse on race pre-existed Darwin’s evolutionary theory. Darwin contributed to this theory a mechanistic, as opposed to teleological, account of race. However, if we situate Wynter’s analysis in line with Foucault, as she herself does, then the above issues may be reconciled. Wynter is here concerned with the descriptive statement. Her focus on the history of Man does not necessarily imply that political and economic conditions were irrelevant or secondary to the shifts in epistemes. In other words, Wynter is not providing a historical materialist analysis, but an archaeology. Similar to Foucault, Wynter seeks to highlight shifts in discourse and epistemes related to conceptions of life such that the evolutionary conceptualization of ‘Man’ would eventually emerge. Additionally, Wynter’s analysis of ‘Man 1’ demonstrates that she does recognize that discourse on race precedes Darwin’s evolutionary theory. Thus, Wynter’s historiography of Darwin does not treat racialized discourse based on evolution as the origin of race discourse, but a transformation of this discourse from a secular to a bio-centric and evolutionary conception of life.

24 Foucault introduces his concept of ‘episteme’ in his 1970 text, *The Order of Things*: “the epistemological field, the episteme in which knowledge, envisaged apart from all criteria having reference to its rational value or its objective forms, grounds its positivity and thereby manifests a history which is not that of its growing perfection, but rather that of its conditions of possibility” (Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xxii). ‘Episteme’ refers to the emergence of knowledge—the conditions of possibility for a claim to emerge and be regarded as true.

25 Scott, “Re-Enchanting,” 177.
claims concerning the Human. Evolution, as a guiding paradigm, was supplemented with biocentric claims regarding the nature of races and their respective relation to Man. Wynter explains that “Evolution—was now to be mapped and anchored on the only available ‘objective set of facts’ that remained. This was the set of environmentally, climactically determined phenotypical differences between human hereditary variations.”\textsuperscript{26} Where Man1 was characterized as a political subject, Man 2, that of our contemporary order, is defined according to biological features believed to be shared within a race and vary between the races. And, today, Black people represent the “ultimate referent of the ‘racially inferior’ Human Other” according to ostensibly biological truth of eugenics.\textsuperscript{27} However, Wynter argues that the Native did not magically gain the status of Human once Blackness was rendered the ultimate referent for the non-Human. The previous hierarchy governing Man 1 was replaced with a new one: “the status-ordering principle based upon ostensibly differential degrees of evolutionary selectedness/eugenicity and/or dysselectedness/dysgenicity.”\textsuperscript{28} Thus, under Man 2, whiteness constituted the highest end of the Human, and Blackness the ultimate referent of the Other. Among the non-human were included the Native, the Black Diaspora, Africa—African people and the continent itself, dark-skinned colonized people, and poor Europeans are also relegated to this position of Human Other.\textsuperscript{29} This is an important qualification because it means that Wynter’s historiography and her political ontology do not cite chattel slavery as an event that radically altered the ontology of humanity. Instead, the original tear in the world occurred during colonialism; and, according to Wynter, the same system of defining Man as rational/irrational

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Wynter, “Unsettling,” 315.}
\footnote{Ibid., 266.}
\footnote{Wynter, “Unsettling,” 316.}
\footnote{Ibid., 310.}
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that originally rendered the American Native Other to the European Man reigned during chattel slavery, altering only to include enslaved Africans into the category of Other.

**Afropessimism**

Drawing on both Hartman and Wynter, Afropessimists have made radical claims concerning contemporary Black subjectivity in the US. Some, like Wilderson and Sexton, have described Blackness as social death; Warren has claimed that Blackness is non-being, and exists only as metaphysical functioning for the white world. In this section, I evaluate these claims according to Hartman’s and Wynter’s political ontologies outlined above. Ultimately, I argue that neither Hartman nor Wynter’s political ontology provides Afropessimists with the necessary analysis to characterize the contemporary Black subject as one of nonbeing or socially dead.

In “The Social Life of Social Death” Sexton explains that Afropessimism, as a discipline, returns to Patterson’s notion of ‘social death’ to articulate the contemporary condition of Blackness, which, he argues, is still structured according what Sexton calls ‘racial slavery.’

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30 Sexton uses the term ‘racial slavery’ in reference what he calls the ongoing enslavement of contemporary Black subjects, which finds its origin in chattel slavery. His reason for this is two-fold. First, in conversation with those he refers to as ‘new abolitionists’ who characterize, for example, sex trafficking in the contemporary context as a form of slavery, Sexton argues that the conditions of racial slavery are distinct. In a 2015 article written for *Open Democracy*, Sexton argues that the used of the term ‘slavery’ to refer to contemporary forms of oppression, including human trafficking, results in “a conflation of slavery with conditions of severe material deprivation, including the conditions requisite for life itself.” According to Sexton, new abolitionists conflate the conditions of oppression with the condition of enslavement. One is, thus, characterized by this discourse as a slave because one is economically, politically, or socially oppressed. In contrast to this position, Sexton argues that Black people are slaves no matter their economic, political, or social situation. This is Sexton’s second point for using the term ‘racial slavery.’ Contemporary Black subjects are, according to Sexton, still subject to the mechanisms of slavery that were introduced in the New World during chattel slavery. He writes: “The salient point has to do with the novel political standing that racial slavery brought into the modern world: a null status ascribed to the essence of the enslaved and to those thought to be eligible for enslavement by virtue of a social category, creating negative social ties along horizontal and vertical axes to any and all contemporaries or to past and future generations” (my emphasis). Sexton argues that Black people are slaves today because of their ties to previous generations of peoples who were enslaved under chattel slavery. Sexton and other Afropessimists argue that the mechanisms of enslavement during chattel slavery are distinct from the racial slavery we experience today; however, the essence of Blackness continues to be defined in terms of the position of the enslaved because the alienation, exclusion, and commodification of contemporary Black subjects was first made possible by the alienation, exclusion, and commodification of enslaved subjects under chattel slavery. See Jared Sexton, “Don’t call it a comeback: racial slavery is not yet abolished,” *Open Democracy*, June 17, 2015, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/dont-call-it-comeback-racial-slavery-is-not-yet-abolished/.
Sexton writes: “In recent years, social death has emerged from a period of latency as a notion useful for the critical theory of racial slavery as a matrix of social, political, and economic relations surviving the era of abolition in the nineteenth century.”\textsuperscript{31} Where Patterson intended his concept of ‘social death’ to describe the alienated condition of the enslaved subject, Sexton proposes a return to this concept in order to determine whether or not contemporary Black subjects continue to exist as socially dead. Sexton explains that his interest in Black social death is not to deny Black social life, but to determine whether or not the structures of chattel slavery continue to condition contemporary Black life. That is, one may be socially dead, according to Sexton, but this does not mean that one does not have some degree of social life.

Sexton argues that in the contemporary US, Black subjects do in fact exist as socially dead because the US has not overcome the divide between “the Slave from the world of the Human in a constitutive way.”\textsuperscript{32} Two things are important to note here. First, Sexton draws upon Hartman’s ‘afterlife of slavery’ to support this claim. However, as I discussed in section I of this chapter, what this afterlife of slavery means remains, as yet, underdeveloped. Second, Sexton’s capitalization of Human in this context is a clear reference to Wynter’s political ontology. However, although Sexton argues that chattel slavery created a divide between the Human and Black subjects, it is hard to see how Wynter’s historiography supports this. As I have already explained, Wynter identified two historical ruptures in the ontological order of Man: the fifteenth century, specifically with the colonization of the Americas, and the eighteenth century with the introduction of Darwin’s evolutionary theory.

\textsuperscript{31} Sexton, “Social Death” 22-23.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
Critics of Afropessimism, such as Fred Moten, have claimed that their focus on social death neglects the reality of social life. In other words, Moten and others argue that Afropessimists treat Blackness as if it is reducible and, thus, identical with death itself. Sexton defends Afropessimism against this charge and, in so doing, he provides a more developed account of what he means by social death:

black life is not social life in the universe formed by the codes of state and civil society, of citizen and subject, of nation and culture, of people and place, of history and heritage, of all the things that colonial society has in common with the colonized, of all that capital has in common with labor—the modern world system. Black life is not lived in the world that the world lives in, but it is lived underground, in outer space.

Here I understand Sexton’s use of ‘social death’ to refer to Black subjects as non-participants in the codes of civil society insofar as they are subject to a law that is fundamentally anti-Black. This might also include the skewed life chances Hartman defines as the afterlife of slavery, along with Angela Davis’ work on mass incarceration as disproportionately targeting Black subjects is testament to this. I would agree with Sexton’s characterization in this regard. I would even add to this that Black subjects are not granted full citizenship as evidenced in, for example, the constant changes in the law regarding voting, which are clearly meant to disenfranchise Black voters. But what does it mean to say that Black life is not formed by a nation, history, people, culture? I would agree with Sexton that Black subjects are largely excluded from dominant culture. We are radically underrepresented in popular films, with the exception of those depicting the history of anti-Blackness—12 Years a Slave, Green Book, The Help. But to claim that Black people, Black life is not formed by a culture is, in my view, symptomatic of Afropessimism’s

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33 For a full account of Fred Moten’s critique of Afropessimism, see Fred Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh),” The South Atlantic Quarterly 112, no.4 (2013): 737-780.


failure to attend to the concrete conditions of Black life. Black meaning is created in fugitive spaces, what Sexton here calls an ‘underground,’ but Black culture is not limited to this space. If anything, we should say that Black culture is often subject to appropriation by members of the dominant culture who seek to claim it as their own.

Warren’s claims regarding the non-being of contemporary Black subjects is, in my view, also representative of Afropessimism’s unhistoricized conceptual framework; or rather, their transhistorical use of political ontologies concerning chattel slavery. In his 2017 article, “Onticide: Afro-pessimism, Gay Nigger #1, and Surplus,” Warren discusses the 2000 murder of Steen Keith Fenrich. As Warren explain, Fenrich’s body was found dismembered, stored in a blue plastic tub, and on his flayed and bleached skull was written both his social security number and “Gay Nigger #1.” Warren considers Fenrich’s death through the lens of Warren’s anti-humanism, another feature constitutive of Afropessimism. Reflecting on “Gay Nigger # 1” branded onto Fenrich’s skull, Warren writes:

The term Gay Nigger #1 carved into Steen’s skull is a philosophical conundrum, or problem space, precisely because it carries the antagonism between humanism and fungibility within its discursive structure. The term Gay indexes human identity, and Nigger is the ‘thing’ void of human ontology—ontology’s mystery.

The antagonism that Warren identifies between humanism and fungibility is derived from his reading of Hartman’s concept of the enslaved as a fungible commodity. For Warren, humanism and fungibility are antagonistic because Blackness has remained a fungible commodity since its origination in chattel slavery. But Warren goes further than Hartman here by characterizing

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37 Ibid., 391-392.

38 Ibid., 392.
Blackness as ‘void of human ontology.’ Where Hartman restricted her analysis of the enslaved subject to its ambivalent relation to humanity, Warren tautologically argues that Blackness is entirely outside of humanity because it is a void of human ontology. For Hartman, fungibility indicated the exchangeability and interchangeability of the enslaved subject, as I have already discussed in chapter I of this dissertation. However, Warren, understands fungibility’s exchangeability to mean “the undifferentiated zone of blackness.” 39 For Warren, this means that identity markers such as ‘gay,’ ‘woman,’ ‘child’ do not really qualify the Black subject because it is inherently undifferentiated; “the undifferentiated space of black fungibility in which differences are irrelevant, since violence is gratuitous (antiblackness).” 40

Other Afropessimists, such as Wilderson and Patrice Douglass, contend that violence constitutes the very being of Blackness. 41 Following Spillers, Afropessimists argue that the gratuitous violence that the enslaved subject was forced to endure transformed their being to non-existence, though to be clear, Spillers does deny that flesh has existence. Thus, reading these claims back into Warren’s comments regarding fungibility, we are left to conclude that Blackness is fungible, undifferentiated, and non-being because violence constitutes the very (non)being of Blackness. In other words, for Warren the ontological violence by which enslaved subjects were excluded from the Human is the condition of Blackness itself. This includes Blackness today, in his view. However, we are not told how the ontological violence forced upon the enslaved subject has transferred through the years to remain a constitutive feature of the

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39 Ibid., 393.

40 Ibid.

contemporary Black subject. Again, we are simply told that Blackness exists as nonbeing through ontological violence without explanation.

I highlight Warren’s article because, for me, it exemplifies the most extreme iteration of Afropessimism. Using Wynter’s concept of the ‘genre-of-Man,’ Warren argues that identities do not accrue for Black subjects because their Blackness renders them fundamentally undifferentiated. This is in contrast to non-Black subjects who, Warren claims, have the onto-metaphysical presence capable of differentiated identities. Thus, a white person can be gay, straight, poor, or rich only because they first have the onto-metaphysical presence around which such identities can accrue. In contrast to his, Black subjects are what Warren calls a function of metaphysics. Black subjects are the condition for the possibility for metaphysics and ontology itself. For Warren, this means that Blackness is fundamentally outside of the category of being and, in turn, outside of the differentiated identities according to which various beings may be identified. Warren advances his claim regarding the undifferentiated existence of Blackness using Wynter’s concept ‘genres of Man’, which he understands as equivalent to social identities: “I would suggest that we think of the terms human difference, such as woman, man, worker, and in this case Gay, as the discursive vehicles of differentiating violence, or the ‘genres of Man’ according to Sylvia Wynter.”

To understand this thought, we should must return to Wynter’s concept of Man. The notion of Man, for Wynter, is not developed within a metaphysical nor an ontological framework. She is clear that Man is a praxis and not a noun. Wynter writes “humanness is no longer a noun. Being human is a praxis.” Combining Foucault and Fanon,

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42 Warren, Onticide,” 395.

Wynter explains that humans invent the concept of Man and reproduce it in a law-like fashion through performativity, which, as she describes, functions similarly to Judith Butler’s account of gender performativity. For Warren to suggest, for example, that ‘worker’ is a genre-of-man, is in my reading a misrepresentation of Wynter’s theory. For he means that a genre of man does not alter Blackness; this is not Wynter’s position. In her article “Human as Noun,” Wynter defines genre accordingly: “The term genre […] is here being used to denote, different, always auto-poetically instituted and fictively constructed kinds of being.”44 Genre is, thus, a type of performative expression of Man according to various categories including class, gender, sexual orientation, etc. Wynter’s performative account of the operation of “fictively constructed kinds [or genres] of being” thus evades the ontological framework employed by Warren. The important distinction here is between kinds of beings and being itself. Warren is concerned with ontometaphysical being and Wynter, in contrast, is concerned with performative expressions of the kinds of being made possible within the governing order of Man.

The Black Archive

This section begins with an account of the archive as developed by Michel Foucault his 1969 text, The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language.45 I appropriate Foucault’s concept of the ‘archive’ for my own purposes to characterize the historical transformations of anti-Blackness in terms of discursive regimes that may be grouped together to constitute a Black archive. I examine how the contemporary Black subject lives in, through, and as the Black archive in four ways. First, drawing on Christina Sharpe’s 2016 text, In the Wake:

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On Blackness and Being, I consider how contemporary Black subjects ‘live in the wake’ of the archive. That is, contemporary Black subjects live with the conceptual awareness of the Black archive, and this awareness of the past conditions what Black subjects experience as available to them within the present. Second, I describe Black subjects living as the Black archives through Hortense Spillers’ concept the ‘hieroglyphics of the flesh,’ as developed in her article “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.” I consider how Black subjects live as the Black archive since they embody the hieroglyphics of the flesh, which symbolically mark the Black body as the fleshy history of captivity. Third, returning to Foucault, specifically his 1971 article, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” I describe contemporary Black subjects living as the Black archive insofar as the lines of descent are traced within the physiology of the Black body. And fourth, drawing from both Michael Hanchard’s 2008 article, “Black Memory versus State Memory: Notes toward a Method,” and David Scott’s article, “Archaeologies of Black Memory,” I explain that Black subjects live through the Black archive as a form of body-memory. Bodily movements such as reflexes and mannerisms are performed differently among the Black community. However, as I will discuss, these bodily movements are nevertheless similarly conditioned by the body-memory of the Black archive itself.


I give special attention in this section to the history of chattel slavery as it conditions Black subject formation in the US in the present. The history of slavery in the US is one pole around which Black group identity is formed. As Ron Eyerman argues in his 2001 text, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*, the history of slavery has been an especially salient feature of contemporary Black identity from the time of Emancipation through today: “Whether or not they directly experienced slavery or even had ancestors who did, blacks in the United States were identified with and came to identify themselves through the memory and representation of slavery.”\(^51\) Thus, my exploration of Black history in the US is focused on the history of slavery, captivity, trauma, and terror as this history conditions contemporary Black life in the US.

History conditions contemporary Black subject formation in the US as an archive of the Middle Passage through the present. The concept of archive that I use in reference to Black history is informed by Foucault’s theory of the archive as developed his text, *Archaeology of Knowledge*. I use the term ‘archive’ to designate the assemblage of multiple historical events and discursive regimes that are similarly regulated by anti-Black disciplinary and regulatory techniques of power. In a 1977 interview, “Truth and Power,” Foucault describes discursive regimes as “the effects of power peculiar to the play of statements.”\(^52\) The term ‘discursive regime’ refers to how the statement is transformed or maintained according to the functioning of power. What makes a statement verifiable or true as determined by power, thus, constitutes the realm of the discursive regime. To understand my concept of the archive, let us first get clear on


the concept from which I draw my own. In *Archaeology*, Foucault characterizes his concept of
the ‘archive’ as follows: “The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs
the appearance of statements as unique events.”\(^{53}\) An archive is a system governing statements,
which allows certain statements to be said and leaves others unsaid. It is a system that constitutes
regularities between discursive regimes and historical epochs. According to Foucault, an archive
is a conceptual framework that orders discursive regimes according to their shared conditions of
possibility without reducing these shared conditions to a historical continuity. Foucault argues
that the system of regularities that constitute the archive are the ‘historic a priori’ of discursive
regimes, which regimes he defines as “a condition of reality for statements.”\(^{54}\) The ‘historic a
priori’ refers to the conditions of possibility—how certain statements, events, or things not only
emerge, but emerge as legible and verifiable within a given discursive regime.

Foucault’s ‘archive’ is, thus, developed in contrast to the traditional notion of the archive
as a formal institution of record-keeping in which documents are said to be related only if they
refer to the same historical era, person, or event. Foucault writes:

> the archive is […] that which determines that all these things said do not accumulate
> endlessly in an amorphous mass, nor are they inscribed in an unbroken linearity, nor do
> they disappear at the mercy of chance external accidents; but they are grouped together in
> distinct figures, composed together in accordance with multiple relations, maintained or
> blurred in accordance with specific regularities.\(^{55}\)

Foucault’s archive does not group together all of history into an amorphous mass, but rather it
groups together historical events according to the specific regularities shared among discursive
regimes. For example, Foucault examines the communication between natural scientists Carolus

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\(^{53}\) Foucault, *Archaeology*, 129.

\(^{54}\) Ibid., 127.

\(^{55}\) Ibid., 129.
Linnaeus and Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon to identify the broader epistemological field and conceptual field that constituted “the same field of battle” for both.\(^{56}\) It is because of arguments between Linnaeus and Buffon, according to Foucault, that Linnaeus’ taxonomy of species could eventually emerge and win out over Buffon’s competing taxonomy. Thus, an archive would expand Linnaeus’ \textit{oeuvre} to include the battle of ideas that were, for Foucault, the condition of possibility for Linnaeus’ claims to emerge as true.

In his 2014 chapter “Archive,” Richard A. Lynch distinguishes between Foucault’s concept \textit{‘episteme’} and his concept \textit{‘archive’}. Lynch explains: “The \textit{episteme} reflects the relations that exist between sciences or discourses, whereas the archive is the set that encompasses these discourses (as well as the relations between them) and gives them their regularity.”\(^{57}\) The archive is, therefore, a much broader conceptual framework for analyzing history than Foucault’s \textit{‘episteme’}. It is an assemblage of various epistemological fields, the fields of possibility for a statement to emerge, and their respective systems of rules. Identifying the regularity between discursive regimes does not, however, render these regimes static. An archive treats history as malleable and gathers together historical epochs and discursive regimes according to a regularity, which is not the same as a transcendental or an ahistorical rule.

The Foucauldian concept of the ‘archive’ is important for my purposes for two reasons. First, an archive groups together various discursive regimes according to their shared regularities without eliding the distinct elements of each regime. To give an example from the contexts that concern me here, the history of chattel slavery is distinct from the history of Jim Crow; however, we may gather these histories together in an archive according to their shared disciplinary and

\(^{56}\) Ibid., 126.

\(^{57}\) Ibid.
regulatory techniques, assuming we identify them. Second, I am interested in identifying the US Black history with which I am concerned with an ‘archive’ in order to contribute to a symbolic restoration of the archival records related to US Black history that have either been lost or were never recorded. As David Scott explains in his 2008 article, “Introduction: On the Archaeologies of Black Memory,” developing a Black archive is, “the constructing of what might be called an institution of memory and an idiom of remembering.” Following Foucault, Scott understands the archive at the level of discourse and the statement. The archive is not a catalogue of what has been said, but an assemblage of the conditions of possibility for statements to be made and others to go unsaid. Scott refers to the archaeological act of recovering archives—recovering the context in which statements were made both possible and impossible—as remembering. On the archival approach I develop, I extend the archive to include subject formation conditioned by the act of remembering of which Scott writes. I characterize the Black archive as a form of remembering the history of Black trauma and violence from the Middle Passage to the present which affects contemporary Black subject formation. However, I do not regard Black subject formation to be analogous to the subject formation or ontological status of enslaved subjects. Unlike claims made by Sharpe, Hartman, and by theorists working within Afropessimism, I explain that contemporary Black subjects in the US are conditioned by the memory of anti-Black history, that is, we are already Black archives.

I develop the notion of a Black archive in conversation with Foucault’s archeological writings. Foucault is clear in his discussion of the ‘archive,’ that concept of ‘statements’ may include events or things. Thus, in my re-appropriation of the Foucauldian archive, my focus is

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59 Foucault, Archaeology, 130.
not on enunciative statements, but rather various discursive regimes and historical events related to Black life in the US, which are distinct and yet, share specific regularities. If we focus primarily upon the archive as “that which differentiates discourses in their multiple existence and specifies them in their own duration,”\textsuperscript{60} then we may attend to the multiple existences of Black discursive regimes, which may be grouped together into a Black archive according to their shared system of regularities. I use the term ‘Black archive’ to indicate the assemblage of multiple discursive regimes and historical events related to Black life in the US, including chattel slavery, Jim Crow, Black power movements of the 60s and 70s, and Black Lives Matter movements. I do so because I recognize in these discursive regimes a distinct and, yet, shared system of regularities, namely, the surveilling, anti-Black disciplinary and regulatory techniques of biopower.

Accepting Foucault’s claim that an archive cannot be exhaustively described, I limit my account of the Black archive to consider how it conditions contemporary Black subject formation.\textsuperscript{61} Christina Sharpe’s analytic of ‘wake work’ as developed in, \textit{In the Wake: On Blackness and Being}, allows us to think of an archive as it is both lived in and through by the contemporary Black subject: “the conceptual frame of and for living blackness in the diaspora in the \textit{still unfolding aftermaths} of Atlantic chattel slavery.”\textsuperscript{62} That the aftermaths of Atlantic chattel slavery are still unfolding, indicates that this history is not temporally behind us. Sharpe describes living in this still unfolding aftermath as “living in the wake” of Black history.\textsuperscript{63} And,

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 129.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 130.
\textsuperscript{62} Christina Sharpe, \textit{In the Wake: On Blackness and Being} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 2, my emphasis.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 15.
playing on the multiple definitions of wake as vigil, celebration, tracks left on the water’s surface, and wakefulness, Sharpe describes living in the wake of Black history as occupying this history within the present: “Black being in the wake [is a form of] consciousness and […] to be in the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery’s as yet unresolved unfolding.”\textsuperscript{64} Living in the wake of Black history is, thus, living with the awareness of the past as it unfolds within the present to condition present possibilities of and for Black life. Stated otherwise, living in the wake is living in the Black archive as both temporally past and as it continues to unfold in the present to condition Black subject formation.

But what does “still unfolding” mean here? The history of the wake that conditions contemporary Black life is described by Sharpe as a conceptual awareness of a history of exclusion, abjection, terror, and trauma. Sharpe writes: “Living in the wake means living the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the ground of our everyday Black existence; living historically and geographically dis/continuous but always present and endlessly reinvigorated brutality in, and on, our bodies.”\textsuperscript{65} The forms of terror experienced by Black subjects in the US have transformed throughout history and across geographies, and these transformations are reflected in distinct discursive regimes. Sharpe’s description of living the ‘historically and geographically dis/continuous’ terror induced by anti-Black oppression and violence bolsters my claim that Black history ought to be treated as an archive. However, because these discursive regimes are connected according to specific regularities—techniques aimed at creating terror for Black subjects—they may be grouped together to constitute a living archive. I characterize the Black archive as ‘living,’ because, as Sharpe explains, the temporality

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 13-14.

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 15, my emphasis.
of this archive is both past and present. The Black archive is thus, both an *assemblage* of historical events as discursive regimes related to Black life and a manner of *living* Black history as both past and present.

To live ‘as’ the Black archive is also to live with what Hortense Spillers refers to in her article, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” as the “hieroglyphics of the flesh.” As discussed in Chapter One of this dissertation, Spillers argues that the violent practices and instruments used to enslave Africans and (re-)enslave African Americans, transformed their being into *flesh*: “If we mean ‘flesh’ as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship’s hole, fallen, or ‘escaped’ overboard.” In the acts of being seared, divided, and ripped apart, Spillers explains, the captive’s body was transformed into flesh. The body and flesh qua biological material, were wounded through the violent practices of enslavement. However, according to Spillers, in this process of wounding, the enslaved was *transformed* from subject to object, person to commodity, and from body to flesh. Flesh designates the ‘thingliness’ to which Black persons were reduced in the process of enslavement: “the captive body reduces to a thing, becoming *being for* the captor.” ‘Being for’ here indicates the enslaved subject’s dispossession of body and the corresponding dispossession of self. A being reduced to flesh is described by Spillers as an existential ‘being for’ another. Stated otherwise, flesh lacks the capacity to occupy the existential position that is for-itself, and instead flesh is restricted to the position of being-for-*another*, namely the captor. Spillers explores this position of ‘being for’ in terms of its particular effects for the female captive turned flesh. That is, female flesh became “the source [i.e., being]

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67 Ibid., 67.
68 Ibid.
of an irresistible, destructive sensuality” for the captor’s sexual and sensual pleasure.\textsuperscript{69} Without seeking to abstract race from gender in my adoption of Spillers’ concept of ‘flesh,’ I want to attend to the \textit{symbolic} characteristic of the hieroglyphics of the flesh in order to explore how these hieroglyphics are both inherited and lived by the contemporary Black subject. In so doing, we may continue to expand upon the contemporary Black subject formation as it is conditioned by the Black archive.

According to Spillers, during Emancipation Black subjects became embodied personhoods, and were, thus, no longer flesh. However, Black body is marked by the history of wounds and wounding that once produced flesh. Symbolically, the hieroglyphics of flesh represent alleged “visible truths” about Black subjects. Spillers describes these hieroglyphics as visually depicted in skin tone, what she calls a ‘cultural seeing by skin color.’ The hieroglyphics of the flesh symbolize the production of values and meanings—"ocular truths”—and the corresponding associations of these values and meanings to races according to visible differences, such as skin tone. Thus Black/Brown skin symbolically represents the alleged “truth” of a Black subject’s inferiority to whiteness, or of hypersexuality, or criminality, or any number of anti-Black characterizations of Blackness.\textsuperscript{70}

\textsuperscript{69}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{70}Following Marquis Bey, we could refer to these “visual truths” of blackness as ‘bodily scripts.’ Bey writes, “The [Black] body, in effect, is a text onto which scripts and meaning are inscribed. When the White gaze reads the script of the Black body, it acts on its interpretation of crime and hostility,” Marquis Bey, “‘Bring Out Your Dead’: Understanding the Historical Persistence of the Criminalization of Black Bodies,” \textit{Cultural Studies \& Critical Methodologies} 16, no. 3 (2016): 272. Patricia Hill Collins’ concept of ‘controlling images’ is also be relevant for describing the “ocular truths” associated with Black subjects, though she is particularly concerned with the truths associated with Black women. Collins writes: “controlling images […], which are assumed qualities that are attached to Black women are used to justify oppression. From the mammyes, jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture” Patricia Hill Collins, \textit{Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment} (New York: Routledge, 2000), 5.
The fleshy history represented in Spiller’s hieroglyphics is “transferred,” according to Spillers, through “various symbolic substitutions in an efficacy of meaning that repeat the initiating moment.” The captive flesh is, therefore, substituted for the Black body within the dominant symbolic order that transfers the status of cultural vestibulary from the captive to the Black subject. Again, we see that the history of the Black archive is lived by the contemporary Black subject. Drawing upon Sharpe, we could see history lived as a conceptual awareness of the Black archive as both past and present. And drawing upon Spillers, we see the Black archive is lived as the embodiment of the Black archive.

What is important, for both Spillers’ purposes and my own, is that the symbolic order which produces values and meanings represented in the visible features of the Black body today, originated in the symbolic order that previously governed practices of captivity and the reduction of Black subject to flesh: “dominant, symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation.” Thus, dark skin is not a value-neutral visible truth about Black people. The visible truths associated with, projected onto, and internalized by Black subjects are determined by the ruling episteme. This episteme characterizes the visible truths seen from the position of the racializing gaze, which I considered in the previous chapter. Ultimately, we should say that the hieroglyphs of the flesh symbolize the history of “depravation and deprivation.” That is, these hieroglyphs symbolize the historical wounding of the Black body turned flesh. The

71 Ibid., 65.

72 Spillers, “Mama’s Baby,” 68, my emphasis; Spillers does not make explicit what she means here by ‘episteme,’ but the context suggest Spillers is using ‘episteme’ in the Foucauldian sense as previously described in footnote 24 of this chapter. ‘Episteme,’ as it is used by Spillers, seems to align with Foucault’s concept in its concern with the emergence of knowledge—the conditions of possibility for a claim to emerge and be regarded as true.

73 Weheliye, Habeas Viscus, 39.
contemporary Black subject, thus, lives as the Black archive in her dark/darkened skin tone, which is marked by hieroglyphics that symbolize anti-Black “truths” and the historical wounds/wounding of Black captives.

Having considered the formation of the contemporary Black subject as living the Black archive qua consciousness of living in the wake, and living the Black archive qua inheriting bodily symbols of Blackness’ fleshy history, I now want to focus on the Black archive as it is physiologically inscribed into the Black body. Extending Spillers’ concept of hieroglyphics of the flesh beyond the symbolic realm, I describe these hieroglyphics as traced in the physiology of the Black body as lines of descent. The claim I seek to advance here, is that the history of anti-Blackness is sedimented into the organism of the contemporary Black subject, which, as I will later discuss, creates a body-memory that influences the styles, gestures, and reactions of contemporary Black embodiment.

The project of interpreting the embodiment of historical Black trauma is both archaeological and genealogical in scope. First examining the genealogy of embodied Black trauma, I draw upon Foucault’s description of genealogy as developed in his article, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.” In this article, Foucault provides an interpretation of Nietzschean genealogy, which he identifies as “effective history” in opposition to traditional history. Foucault describes traditional history as the search for origins such as, for example, the origins of values or traditions. In this search, the traditional historian (re-)constructs continuities between historical events. In contrast, genealogy, as ‘effective history,’ rejects this search for origins in favor of ‘points of emergence’—when and how values came into being—by tracing the discontinuities and accidents underlying the emergence of values, etc. Thus, a genealogy of

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74 Foucault, “Nietzsche,” 86.
Black history and the Black body, would trace the discontinuities and errors from which, among other things, ‘Black’ as a racial category eventually emerged. Rather than attempt this much larger genealogical task of identifying points of emergence, what Foucault calls ‘Enstehun’, I want to instead trace the lines of descent carved onto the biological organism of the Black body using the genealogical method referred to by Foucault as ‘Herkunft’.75 To be clear, my concern with the body here is not a reduction of Black subjects to their biological organism; nor do I claim that all Black bodies share the same lines of descent, physiological or otherwise. Rather, I aim to extend the symbolic register of Spillers’ ‘hieroglyphics of the flesh’ to analyze the depth to which the Black archive is embodied by Black subject, which extends beyond the ‘cultural seeing by skin color.’ In other words, I am interested in identifying how the Black archive is lived in the body and expressed through modes of embodiment.

In order to do so, however, I need to further specify the Foucauldian conception of genealogy I am drawing upon. Herkunft, translated by Bouchard and Simon as ‘descent,’ is the method of tracking the discontinuities in traits, described by Foucault as “the subtle, singular, and sub individual marks that might possibly intersect in them to form a network that is hard to unravel.”76 In contrast to this method, traditional history identifies the continuities (i.e., shared) traits, understood as blood lines and physical characteristics, among social categories such as class or race. For example, phenotypical traits—the observable traits of an organism—have long

75 In this 1971 article, Foucault argues that Nietzsche is inconsistent in his use of Ursprung [origin] throughout his genealogical works. According to Foucault, this inconsistency results from Nietzsche’s shift in focus from the origin of duty, to the origin of logic, and finally to contrasting the genealogical method as a search for an Ursprung [origin] with traditional history’s search for Wunderursprung [miraculous origin]. The distinction I rely upon, between Herkunft [descent] and Entstehung [origin] is one developed by Foucault in his reading of Nietzsche’s Genealogy (Foucault, “Nietzsche,” 77-80).

76 Ibid., 81.
been used in the US to distinguish between and categorize races.\footnote{A genealogical analysis in the form of a Herkunft would also be useful for tracing the discontinuities underlying the ‘one drop rule’ as this rule was applied in the US to categorize Black subjects. This approach might consider how the ‘one drop rule’ was constructed by traditional historians in order to establish apparent continuity of Black identity through ancestry.} The genealogical task as Herkunft, however, identifies “the accidents, the minute deviations—or conversely, the complete reversals—the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us.”\footnote{Ibid.} Thus, genealogy identifies how racial divisions based on, for example, phenotypical traits continue to function as a purportedly “valuable” method for classifying racial groups; understanding why phenotypical traits are still commonly considered accurate measures of racial difference or sameness, despite evidence to the contrary provided by social and biological scientists, is the task of genealogy.

_Herkunft_ is especially relevant for our purposes because, as Foucault explains, it concerns how history is physically manifest in the body: “The body—and everything that touches it: diet, climate, and soil—is the domain of Herkunft. The body manifests the stigmata of past experience and also gives rise to desires, failings, and errors.”\footnote{Ibid., 83.} Here, Foucault is explicitly interpreting Nietzsche’s genealogy, and not providing an account of his own unique genealogical method. Foucault’s own genealogical method concerns the processes through which the body is disciplined, and, in turn, how the body is molded through these disciplinary practices. Rather than attempt to reconcile Foucault’s definition of genealogy as provided in the above quote with his own genealogical work, I am instead concerned with how we may think of the ‘stigmata of past experience’ manifested in the Black body. That is, how is the Black archive, the trauma of historical anti-Black oppression and violence, today manifested in or on the Black body?
Recalling Spillers’ claim that the body of the enslaved subject was transformed into flesh through practices and instruments of wounding, we could say that these practices are marked as ‘lines of descent’ in the physiology of the contemporary Black body. I do not mean marked in the symbolic sense as I have already considered above. Rather, I want to describe the Black body as *physiologically inscribed* by the events and instruments of wounding. While the anti-Black disciplinary techniques used to dominate enslaved subjects are distinct from those used in the domination and oppression of contemporary Black subjects in the US, we can identify between them a shared regularity with our concept of the Black archive. Foucault writes:

*The body is the inscribed surface of events* (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of the dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history’s destruction of the body.\(^8^0\)

The body is the inscribed surface of events because it is affected by its environment. Foucault explains that “diet, climate, and soil” touch the organic material of the body.\(^8^1\) For example, someone living in the Caribbean is exposed to stronger ultraviolet sun rays than someone living in Norway. Exposure to sun might cause one’s skin color to appear tan; it might also lead to skin cancer. In this sense, the history of one’s exposure to a certain climate is inscribed on the skin of the body and in one’s very cells. In addition to one’s environment, the body is also affected by various activities taken up by a subject. For example, truck drivers often suffer from chronic back pain because their job requires them to sit for hours at a time, which strains the joints. Carpenters who work without adequate protection might be exposed to asbestos in old insulation, which can lead to lung cancer and other respiratory illnesses. The lines of descent carved into the

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\(^8^0\) Ibid., my emphasis.

\(^8^1\) Ibid.
body are historical traces of the body’s exposure to its environment and participation in certain activities. Tan skin, skin cancer, back pain, and lung cancer are all examples of the processes of history’s destruction on the body. In keeping with the genealogical commitment to identifying discontinuities, Foucault characterizes the self as an illusory substantial reality. However, the body in Foucault’s description, even in its perpetual disintegration, is a substantial unity; and it is in the body that the history of destruction is imprinted. I want to extend Foucault’s claim further, to consider how the history of destruction, a history that is both past and present, is imprinted upon the Black body to condition the movements of the contemporary embodied Black subject. In other words, I am interested in exploring how the history of destruction inscribed in the Black body constitutes something like a ‘body-memory’ for contemporary Black subjects. In this vein, I will explore Black archaeologies of the Black body as it has been theorized by contemporary thinkers in Black studies.

I understand Black archaeology to be a methodological and conceptual framework that emphasizes the body, history, and memory. In his article, “Archaeologies of Black Memory,” Scott explains that an archaeology of Black history requires the work of memory, or remembering, to reclaim what has been lost or never recorded in an archive understood in the traditional sense as a collection of records, bodies of work, etc. Scott develops the notion of “an archaeology of black memory” to emphasize the role of memory in the constitution of a Black archive. Drawing upon Foucault’s theory of archive, as I have likewise sought to do throughout this section, Scott makes a distinction between ‘memory-thinking’ and ‘body-memory.’ That is, he argues that in addition to ‘memory-thinking,’ where memory re-constructs the archive as social practices, narratives, and records, there is also a kind of body-memory or, as Scott writes,

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82 Scott, “Archaeologies,” vi.
“body [as] a memory-machine.” Scott’s habit-memory, as described by Scott, is the archival sedimentation of Black history into the Black body:

The concept of the body’s ‘habit-memory’ […] re-orient our attention to the ways we preserve the past without explicitly re-presenting it to ourselves in words and images, to the social disciplines and rituals and techniques by which the body (in its distinctive postures and gait and modes of adornment) learns to be—and acquires the memory of being—a body of a certain kind: a black body, for example. In habit-memory, the past is not ‘pictured’ as such but sedimented into the body.

I understand the point that the past is sedimented into the body, as described by Scott, to refer to the inscriptions of history on and in the body. The process of sedimentation mirrors Foucault’s account of genealogy, rather than his account of archaeology. In chapter II of this dissertation, I provided a phenomenological account of sedimentation in the context of ‘body schema,’ ‘body image,’ and ‘habit body,’ which I understand as distinct from ‘body-memory.’ However, Scott does not describe his archaeology according to a phenomenological framework. Rather, he draws upon sociology to describe postures and gaits that become sedimented in the habit-memory of the body through traditions and learned ‘techniques of the body.’ This last expression is an explicit reference to the work of sociologist Marcel Mauss who wrote about habits as techniques of the body. Re-orienting our attention from archives as formally constructed spaces in which historical documents are preserved, Scott asks us to consider how the body itself preserves the past. My interest at this point is not with habits or habit-memory, though I do return to these

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83 Ibid., 8.
84 Ibid., xv-xvi, my emphasis.
85 Ibid.; See also Marcel Mauss, “Techniques of the Body,” *Economy and Society* 2, no. 1 (1973): 70-88. It is interesting to note that Mauss’ discussion of the techniques of the body, originally published in 1934, concerns the various processes of disciplining the body necessary for a subject to acquire a technique (e.g., walking) most appropriate to their society and generation. Though Mauss, a student and nephew of Émile Durkheim, develops his concepts according to their physio-psycho-sociological dimensions, one can easily identify similar themes of disciplinary techniques articulated by Foucault within the context of biopower and biopolitics.
concepts throughout this dissertation. Rather, I want to ask if the contemporary Black subject is conditioned, at least in part, by a collective Black body-memory of the past. Is the Black body itself a Black archive qua collective Black body-memory?

Exploring this question of collective Black body-memory, I now consider whether, as Black subjects, our gestures, reflexes, and other bodily movements are shaped by a ‘collective body-memory’ of the Black archive. In his article, “Black Memory versus State Memory,” Michael Hanchard explains that memory and history are “documented” in modes of embodiment. He writes:

> memory shares with history the space between the documentation of events, practices, and presences in visual and literary form, and life itself, which eludes total capture; the gestures, speeches, modes of dress, acts of solidarity and betrayal, furtive projects and open conflicts are lost if not recuperated and documented in either memory or history.\(^86\)

Hanchard is here concerned with collective, as opposed to individual, memory of Black subjects. Collective memory is the documentation of history, for Hanchard, which does not simply mean physical documents or museum artifacts, but memory and history as documented in life itself. Styles of embodiment, speech, etc. are transmitted across generations through storytelling and tradition, and these styles are either adopted, altered, or lost in their transmission. Defining the parameters of Black memory as “the phenomena of a collectivity rather than the practice of an isolated and disparate array of individuals,” Hanchard allows us to consider how embodiment is remembered in collective Black memory as a form of life itself.\(^87\) That is, for Hanchard, memory includes the memory of past expressions of embodiment, such as gestures. As these memories are transmitted through generations, we must consider how the memory of modes of embodiment

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\(^{86}\) Michael Hanchard, “Black Memory,” 55, my emphasis.

\(^{87}\) Ibid., 47.
is re-embodied, remembered, by Black subjects. However, as Eyerman discusses in his text, *Cultural Trauma*, collective memory is mediated through history, which means that what is transmitted through generations are not *direct* experiences.\(^8^8\) When I see visual images of slaves working in the field, I do not re-embody the posture of working in a field. The point is not that history is repeated in memory as a re-enactment of the past, but that history is embedded within our bodies as memories. Given the collective body memory that is Black memory, Eyerman asks us to consider how “the past becomes present through the embodied reactions of individuals as they carry out their daily lives.”\(^8^9\) How does the collective memory of historical anti-Black violence condition our contemporary expression of Black embodiment under white supremacy?

Eyerman sees in rap music, the legacy of Black resistance to anti-Black violence and oppression: “The legacy of slavery and the heroes and values of the black power era are especially present in rap lyrics, performance style, body language, and […] in recorded image.”\(^9^0\) The rap group N.W.A, active in the late eighties and early nineties, became famous for lyrics that overtly expressed resistance. Their 1988 sound “Fuck the Police” included lyrics protesting the police brutality of contemporary Black subjects in the US. N.W.A’s acts of resistance were so powerful in fact, that their music was ultimately banned from most mainstream US radio stations.

According to Eyerman, the spirit of resistance in rap music is informed by the history of Black struggle and resistance dating back to chattel slavery. While the forms of resistance differ between the contemporary setting and chattel slavery, the expression of resistance itself is shared between these historical periods. The collective memory of Black resistance has been transmitted

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\(^8^8\) Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma*, 3.

\(^8^9\) Ibid., 5.

\(^9^0\) Ibid., 219.
across generations and expressed in unique styles of embodiment, style, art, and other features of Black life.

I offer these reflections on collective Black body-memory in order to consider how the history of anti-Blackness is corporeally manifested in the contemporary Black body. I want to re-emphasize that I do not argue that all Black subjects or Black bodies shared the same body-memory. It is also important that we acknowledge that the distance we have from an original event, such as chattel slavery, affects the degree to which our body-memories are shaped by the remembered event. But, if we consider the collective body-memory of Black subjects, then we may say that many of us inherit the body-memory of anti-Black history, though, again, we do so in distinct ways. And if we consider history in the context of contemporary Black formation, then I think it likely that many of us who are Black and living in the US, have some kind of collective Black body-memory of slavery sedimented into our modes of corporeality. If our bodies are sedimented by a history of trauma, then how are our modes of embodiment altered or freed in the space of fugitivity? I will explore this question further in chapter IV of this dissertation.

Eyermen argues that in the 1880s it became clear that, though Black people were no longer legally enslaved, they were clearly denied full citizenship. As a result, Eyermen argues, “the meaning of slavery emerged as the site of an identity conflict,” not just for the individual, but for the collective Black community (Eyerman, Cultural Trauma, 16). Furthermore, he argues that “Slavery has meant different things for different generations of black Americans, but it was always there as a referent.” (Ibid., 18).
Chapter Four: The Crucible of Black Gesture

This goal of this chapter is to establish an account of Black gestures as immanent expressions of Black meaning that are not about white supremacy or anti-Blackness; Black gestures and Black meanings are, in my account, created in fugitive spaces and produce new meaning. Rather than provide a strict definition of gesture, I explicate two distinct theories: Vilém Flusser’s symbolic theory of gesture and a theory of gesture based upon Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological. Taken together, Merleau-Pontian and Flusserian theories of gesture allow us to recognize a variety of gestures in contrast to mere movement; so too do they provide us multiple ways to register the meaning expressed in a gesture. There are gestures that we intentionally perform and are fully conscious of (e.g., waving hello); there are also gestures that may be sufficiently explained through physical causation (e.g., a reflex); and there are gestures that are both developed within and characterized by our socio-political contexts (e.g., avoiding eye contact), Black gesture or Black gesticulation.

In section one of this chapter, I examine Vilém Flusser’s theory of gesture. For Flusser, gestures are deliberate acts performed by a subject who seeks to represent and express an underlying symbolic meaning. In this account, gestures are tools of the body and, as such, they are not immanently meaningful. That is, Flusser’s theory of gesture is not rooted in a specifically embodied subjectivity. Rather, Flusser adopts the Kantian position of the subject as primarily a consciousness that experiences the world through categories and pure intuitions. By conceiving of subjectivity primarily as a consciousness, Flusser neglects the body’s own potential to produce meaning. It is for this reason that gestures, as bodily movements, are not regarded by Flusser as immanently meaningful—meaningful in themselves, independently of others, and not as the product of a non-embodied consciousness.
In section two, I draw upon Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology to develop a theory of gesture rooted in embodied intentionality. I explore linguistic and bodily gestures within Merleau-Ponty’s work to examine how and what gestures immanently signify. I explain that, because linguistic and bodily gestures emerge from an embodied intentionality, they are meaningful in themselves. This is in contrast to gestures conceived of as signs of meaning, where the meaning remains external to the gesture itself.

In the third section, I explicate my concept of fugitivity in two ways. First, I draw upon Saidiya Hartman’s concept of the ‘loophole of retreat’ to identify fugitivity as a retreat from white supremacy and anti-Blackness. Second, I explore the places in which Black queer ballrooms were held in the early nineties to provide a concrete example of fugitive territory.

In the fourth, and final section of this chapter, I work through three examples of Black gesture: i) the Black Nod, ii) Tommie Smith’ and John Carlos’ raised fists at the 1968 Olympics, and iii) Black queer ballroom performances. I characterize the Black Nod as an empty signifier that does not itself have meaning, but points toward fugitivity and Black meaning. In the case of the Nod, the gesture is a sign of meaning that exists elsewhere, namely in fugitivity. Next, I examine Smith’s and Carlos’ gesture(s) through the Flusserian model of gesture to characterize the deliberate and symbolic meaning expressed in their gestures. I extend this analysis by exploring meanings expressed in Smith’s and Carlos’ gesture(s) that they do not deliberately intend to express. And finally, I examine immanently meaningful Black gestures and meaning created in Black queer ballrooms through an uninhibited embodied intentionality.

*Flusser’s Theory of Gesture*

What kind of phenomenon is gesture? What does gesture communicate and how do we interpret it? While these questions are not entirely new to philosophy, they have traditionally
been considered only in relation to another, more central, philosophical aim. Semioticians, for example, have examined gesture as one kind of sign among others, including words, images, sounds, and objects.¹ In this context, the philosophical investigation is primarily concerned with signs, and gesture is bracketed within this larger framework. Phenomenologists, as I will demonstrate in the next section of this chapter, have examined gesture as a kind of signification. Again, we see gesture as one kind of another concept, i.e., signification, which constitutes the philosophical focus. Philosopher and media studies theorist, Vilém Flusser’s 1991 text, *Gestures*, inverts this model: his primary philosophical aim is understanding what gestures are and how they communicate. For the first time, we discover a theory of gesture where gesture is not an example of another, more central, concept; gesture is the central concept.

Flusser’s goal in *Gestures* is defining gesture in order to establish what he calls ‘a phenomenology of gesture.’² As I will demonstrate later in this section, Flusser’s emphasis on a phenomenological investigation of gesture is best understood as an attempt to interpret, as opposed to explaining, gesture.³ Thus, while Flusser does offer a brief definition of gesture, his


² The subtitle of the opening chapter of *Gestures* is “The Practice of a Phenomenology of Gestures” [*Einübung in die Phänomenologie der Gestern*]. Despite his formal training in philosophy, Flusser’s understanding of phenomenology is rather inconsistent, especially in the context of his work on gesture. In his introduction to *Writings*, Andreas Ströhl attributes the apparent inconsistencies within Flusser’s work to his rejection of an “academic style” of writing. Rather than adopting the rigor of traditional philosophical writing, Flusser attempts “to philosophize ex nihilo,” as Ströhl explains [Vilém Flusser, *Writings*, ed. Andreas Ströhl, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), x]. His transgressive writing style makes tracking his precise use of phenomenology quite difficult. Thus, while Flusser describes his project as phenomenological, I think semiology provides a more apt description of his project. This is not to deny that some notion of phenomenology informs his project. Rather, I think that if we start from semiology and leave open the phenomenological interpretations of his theory, we will have a more comprehensive understanding of his theory of gesture than if we were to begin with phenomenology as he perhaps intended.

³ It may be the case that Flusser’s interest in describing gestures, as opposed to explaining them, is informed by his background interest in phenomenology. This is true if, following Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, Flusser understands phenomenology as descriptive philosophy. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), lxxi.
concern with the interpretation of gestures allows him to pursue two aims: 1) determining an appropriate disciplinary approach and method for understanding the importance of gesture and, 2) establishing what and how gestures communicate. Ultimately, for Flusser, because the humanities seek to interpret phenomena, they provide the appropriate methodological tools to understand the significance of gesture by contrast to what he refers to as the ‘information sciences’. Drawing upon these humanistic traditions, with special emphasis on semiotics and phenomenology, Flusser defines gesture as the free and willful act of a subject who wishes to communicate a codified meaning for another who is familiar with the code to interpret.

Because gesture constitutes the central theme of Flusser’s work, at least in the case of *Gestures*, I regard his work as important for the project at hand. However, because his theory of gesture fails to consider a more robust phenomenology of embodiment, one that would include the social, political, and historical significance of gestures, I do not heavily rely upon his work to establish my own concept of Black gestures and Black gesticulation. Flusser’s classification of gesture as a deliberate act of a subject neglects those gestures that result from unconscious processes of habituation.

Flusser provides several tentative descriptions of gesture that themselves require interpretation. First, he describes gestures as “movements of the body that express an intention,” before immediately casting aside this account for its lack of imprecision. In order to avoid what he calls the ‘ontological trap’ of defining intention, Flusser switches gears, so to speak. Rather than begin with a definition of gesture, Flusser proposes we first consider what method is best


5 Flusser does not expand upon his claim that intention leads to an ontological trap. He simply states that “‘intention’ needs to be defined, and because it is an unstable concept that involves issues of subjectivity and of freedom, it will surely get us into difficulties” (Flusser, *Gestures*, 1).
suited for a theory of gesture. In this vein, Flusser explicitly rejects what he refers to as ‘causal explanations’ of gesture in favor of an interpretive theory of gesture. Thus, while gestures may have a causal explanation—physiological, psychological, economic, etc.—this explanation proves unsatisfactory for Flusser. The first serviceable definition of gesture he provides reflects just this:

‘a gesture is a movement of the body or of a tool connected to the body for which there is no satisfactory causal explanation.’ And I define satisfactory as that point in discourse after which any further discussion is superfluous.⁶

Of course, this definition of gesture tells us more about what gesture is not than it does about what exactly gesture is. Gesture is a movement of the body, but not just any movement of the body. Gesture must contain something that exceeds causal analysis. If we look to Flusser’s other work on communications, though, we can establish the importance of and reason for his rejection of a causal definition of gesture.

In his 1973-74 article, “What is Communication?,” Flusser introduces a distinction between the humanities and information sciences, which he later reiterates in Gestures. Information sciences include psychology, sociology, economics, historical area studies, linguistics, and any discipline that seeks to understand objectively either human nature or the nature of reality. Flusser explains that these disciplines are concerned with explaining phenomena as opposed to interpreting them. Explanations of phenomena yield useful information, but these explanations necessarily miss something significant: the meaning of those phenomena. In the context of communication, for example, information sciences might explain communication as the “development of the communication of mammals, [or] as a consequence

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⁶ Ibid., 2.
of human anatomy, or a particular method of transferring information.” In this case, communication can be satisfactorily explained according to its function, purpose, evolutionary role, etc. Gesture, as one mode of communication, may be similarly explained according to physiology, evolutionary psychology, etc. For example, if someone punches me in the arm and I react by claspings my arm, then I can be said to have moved as a reflex or the result of some other physiological process. This explanation tells us *how* the body moves or *why* the body moves according to my physiological functions. However, this causal, physiological analysis (i.e., information science) can only tell us what a gesture *is*—it is a movement of the body—whereas the humanities can tell us what a gesture *means*. To be more precise, only those movements that are the result of an intention are gestures because only those movements are meaningful. In the example of being punched, my physiological reaction is a movement and not a gesture. If, however, I intend to represent my feeling of pain in my movement, then I have advanced to the level of gesture.

We know that a gesture contains meaning, according to Flusser, because it is the result of intention. That is, the gesture is neither accidental nor necessary—it is, what Flusser calls ‘an artificial constructed’. In this model, only that which humans intentionally construct or accomplish is meaningful. Thus, Flusser distinguishes between what I will refer to as ‘mere movement’ and a gesture; the former is a movement of the body caused by external or internal forces, and the latter is the result of human intention—a free act of a subject. In the Appendix to *Gestures*, Flusser describes the three categories of movement in order to make explicit that, of those three, only gestures are meaningful:

Gestures can be seen as a kind of movement. For this purpose, movements can be classified as (1) those which can be adequately explained through an understanding of the effects of external forces on the moving bodies; (2) those which require an understanding of the effect

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of forces within the moving body to be adequately explained; and (3) those that can be explained as in class 2, but for which such an explanation is unsatisfying. An example of class 1 would be an object in free fall; of class 2, the swimming movements of an amoeba; of class 3, the movement of the hand in writing.  

An object in free fall moves according to the rules of physics; the movement is the result of necessity. Flusser argues that these causal analyses provide satisfactory accounts for necessary and accidental movements. Similarly, the swimming movements of an amoeba can be satisfactorily explained as the result of an internal compulsion. The amoeba moves not because of an external force acting on it, but as the result of an internal force, what Flusser calls its ‘nature’. By contrast, gestures are intentional movements of the body; they are neither necessary nor accidental, rather they are unconstrained and therefore free movements. Because gestures are free, as opposed to necessary or accidental, they are ‘unnatural.’ In fact, all human communication is unnatural, according to Flusser, because it is an artificial construct of human intention: “Human communication is an artificial process. It relies on artistic techniques, on inventions, on tools, and instruments, that is, on symbols ordered in codes.”  

Again, the unnatural and artificial character of gesture is due to its free, as opposed to necessary or accidental, movement. Communication is freely constructed through subjective intention and rendered meaningful through a system of symbols and codes.  

The distinction between mere movement and gesture can help us understand Flusser’s claim that only the latter represents an affect. We represent a meaningful ‘affect’ (Gestimmtheit) through gestural codes. The Flusserian concept ‘affect’ does not mean ‘emotional state’ as would traditionally be the case. Rather, by affect Flusser means the purposeful representation of a state of mind. Frustratingly, Flusser does not clearly define ‘state of mind’ for his reader. Translator Nancy Ann Roth’s discussion of the difference between Gestimmtheit and Stimmung may account for Flusser’s lack of clarity. Gestimmtheit (affect) can be translated as ‘the condition of

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8 Flusser, Gestures, 162.


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would traditionally be the case. Rather, by affect Flusser means the purposeful representation of a state of mind. ¹¹ As we have already established, mere movement is defined by Flusser as a movement resulting from either necessity or accident, and gesture is defined as the free movement of a subject. In the context of affect, mere movement passively expresses a state of affairs, whereas gesture actively expresses a state of affairs. The active expression of a state of affairs would require the intention of the subject, and it is this intention that transforms the state of affairs that are expressed in gesture into an affect, that is, into a purposeful representation of a state of mind. In other words, according to Flusser, all bodily movements may express a state of mind, but only the bodily movements we actively intend to perform have the potential to express a higher-order state of mind, namely affect. So any reaction I have to being punched in the arm can be said to express a state of affairs. If my reaction is determined entirely by necessity, as in the case of reflex, then it only passively expresses a state of affairs: “The reactive movement of my arm announces pain, and in this sense, it is to be understood that pain comes to expression experiencing’ a mood or feeling” (Flusser, Gestures, 177). Stimmung, on the other hand, is translated by Roth as “mood, state of mind, or feeling” (Ibid.) Thus we can understand affect, for Flusser, as an attempt to articulate the phenomenological experience of a mood or feeling. Indeed, as Roth explains, the term Gestimmtheit is frequently interpreted from German to English as ‘attunement’ in order to make its phenomenological sense explicit. However, as I have previously indicated, Flusser’s inconsistent use of phenomenological concepts makes it difficult to understand the importance of emphasizing ‘the condition of experiencing a mood’ as opposed to merely ‘the experience of a mood.’ Rather than attempt to make explicit the otherwise implicit phenomenology at play in his discussion of gesture, I will restrict my own interpretation of Flusser’s theory to his claims regarding causal versus interpretive analyses and passive versus active representations of meaning.

¹¹ Frustratingly, Flusser does not clearly define ‘state of mind’ for his reader. Translator Nancy Ann Roth’s discussion of the difference between Gestimmtheit and Stimmung may account for Flusser’s lack of clarity. Gestimmtheit (affect) can be translated as ”the condition of experiencing a mood or feeling” (Flusser, Gestures, 177). Stimmung, on the other hand, is translated by Roth as “mood, state of mind, or feeling” (Ibid.) Thus we can understand affect, for Flusser, as an attempt to articulate the phenomenological experience of a mood or feeling. Indeed, as Roth explains, the term Gestimmtheit is frequently interpreted from German to English as ‘attunement’ in order to make its phenomenological sense explicit. However, as I have previously indicated, Flusser’s inconsistent use of phenomenological concepts makes it difficult to understand the importance of emphasizing ‘the condition of experiencing a mood’ as opposed to merely ‘the experience of a mood.’ Rather than attempt to make explicit the otherwise implicit phenomenology at play in his discussion of gesture, I will restrict my own interpretation of Flusser’s theory to his claims regarding causal versus interpretive analyses and passive versus active representations of meaning.
through the movement.”¹² My movement expresses my experience of pain to another who can then understand that I am in pain. There is nothing unnatural or artificial about this, however. It is not until I express and articulate my state of affairs (i.e., pain) through the symbolic movement of gesture, such as yelling “ouch”, that I express a state of affairs that reaches the level of affect. I would express and articulate not just ‘pain,’ but ‘the condition of experiencing pain.’ Given his concern with phenomenology, we can infer that the expression and articulation of my pain represents something significant about my subjective experience. However, in what is an apparent pattern for Flusser, we are not told how or why the active expression and articulation of a state of affairs represents a phenomenal condition that is not similarly represented in the passive expression of pain. We simply learn that mere movements passively express a state of affairs, in contrast to gestures, which actively express and articulate the state of affairs called affect.

Here we may finally begin to thread the needle of Flusser’s overarching claims regarding gestures. First, only intentional as opposed to necessary or accidental movements are gestures. We know that a movement is intentional, and therefore a gesture, if it is freely expressed by a subject. Second, gestures are unnatural and artificial. And, because information sciences are concerned with what is natural, they cannot properly attend to the unnatural expression of gesture. Information science would seek to explain a gesture. In contrast, the humanities are positioned to satisfactorily interpret the unnatural character of gestures. And third, gestures are interpreted according to the symbols and codes expressed therein. These symbols and codes express the ‘meaning’ of a gesture. Before we can explore Flusser’s understanding of symbols and codes, we must first follow his elliptical line of thought: we must understand how and why

¹² Flusser, Gestures, 4, my emphasis.
humans create meaning before we can properly assess how and why symbols and codes express meaning.

Returning to his article, “What is Communication?” we find something of an existentialist theory of meaning in Flusser:

the purpose of the codified world [i.e., the world of codes] is to make us forget that it is an artificial texture that imbues our essentially meaningless, insignificant nature with significance according to our needs. The purpose of human communication is to make us forget the meaningless context in which we are completely alone and incommunicado, that is, the world in which we are condemned to solitary confinement and death: the world of 'nature.'

The Heideggerian influence is quite clear in this passage, though Flusser never explicitly references Heidegger. Indeed, Flusser characterizes human’s ‘natural’ state as ‘being-towards-death.’ Our existence is, therefore, inextricably bound up with our death. According to Flusser, we search for ways to create meaning within our lives because we cannot bear to face our death. We “spin a veil” around ourselves “in the form of the codified world.” Understood in this manner, human communication is not natural so much as it is the result of our existential human condition. Through communication, we can escape our solitude and take up residence in community. In our community, we construct increasingly complex systems of communication and meaning in order to ‘spin a veil’ around ourselves, which creates distance between ourselves and our ‘natural state’ of being-towards-death.

Flusser’s existentialism, taken together with his semiotics, provides the backdrop against which we can understand his theory of gesture. We make meaning by artificially constructing symbols and codes in order to deny our natural state. This is why gestures must be freely and

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14 Ibid.
deliberately performed in contrast to ‘mere movements,’ which are necessary or accidental. Meaning is only possible if it is the result of an unnatural and artificial construct. If communication in general, and gestures in particular, are meaningful, it is neither because of evolutionary necessity nor due to some other explanatory theory provided by sciences of information rather than the physical sciences. Instead, communication is meaningful precisely because we have freely created it.

Nonetheless, Flusser falls short in specifying the meaning expressed in a gesture. According to Flusser, we recognize and interpret gestures through intuition. In fairness to Flusser, I understand the nature of gestural interpretation to be an unresolved issue (or unsatisfactorily explained) within semiotics and linguistics in general. Structuralist semioticians, such as Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, argue that we interpret gestures through convention. Before concluding this section with an account of Flusser’s theory of our intuitive interpretation of gestures, it is important to first understand why philosophers have difficulty accounting for our ability to interpret symbols, codes, and meaning in general.

In his 2007 text, Semiotics: The Basics, philosopher Daniel Chandler identifies the major debates in semiology concerning how signs signify. While we can trace elements of semiotics back to Ancient Greece, it is not until Saussure that we find a rigorous and fully developed semiotic theory. For semiotic discourse, meaning is not contained in the world. Rather, meaning is artificially constructed, transmitted, and interpreted by humans using signs and codes. A sign is meaningful, according to Saussure, if it contains two parts: the signifier and the signified. Chandler describes the distinction accordingly: “the signifier [is] the form that the sign takes and

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15 Chandler, Semiotics, 11.
the signified [is] the concept to which it refers.” Waving, for example, is frequently used as a sign of greeting. The movement of my hand is the signifier; the greeting is the signified. What is important here is that there is no necessary relation between the sign and the meaning expressed therein. Saussure describes the relation between the signifier and the signified as arbitrary. Chandler explains, “Although the signifier is treated by its users as ‘standing for’ the signified, Saussurean semioticians emphasize that there is no necessary, intrinsic, direct or inevitable relationship between the signifier and the signified. Saussure stressed the arbitrariness of the sign.” There is nothing intrinsic to the movement of my hand when I wave that means ‘hello.’ It is a matter of convention, with varying levels of arbitrariness, that links the two. It does not follow, however, that each individual can make arbitrary signifiers to represent a signified. I cannot simply choose to shake my leg at someone and hope that they understand it as my personal expression of greeting. While there is nothing in nature that determines which signifier will be linked with which signified in communication, the meaningful expression of a sign is bound by convention. Again, Chandler explains, “while the relationships between signifiers and their signifieds are ontologically arbitrary […], this is not to suggest that signifying systems are socially or historically arbitrary.” Meaning is established through conventions that result from social and historical practices. Thus, if I hope to successfully express (to mean) ‘hello’ to another, I must adhere to the systems already established through convention.

The notion of convention as developed within semiotics allows for a more robust interpretation of Flusser’s meaning of intuition. In his discussion of how we interpret gestures,

16 Ibid., 14.
17 Ibid., 22.
18 Ibid., 27.
Flusser writes, “we have no theory of the interpretation of gestures and are restricted to an empirical, ‘intuitive’ reading of the world of gestures, the codified world that surrounds us.”\(^{19}\) For Flusser, we cannot exactly pinpoint the rules governing our interpretations of gestures. ‘Reading’ gestures is simply something we already know how to do. Drawing upon Saussure, however, we could understand gestures as interpreted according to convention, which is itself socially and historically constituted. Some gestures are so common to us that we do not even realize when or that we have interpreted their meanings. Waving hello, for example, is such a conventional gesture of greeting that I am likely to forget that the relation between the gesture and its meaning is artificial. Other gestures, a sideways glance, for example, allows various, though not infinite, interpretations. A glance might be a flirtatious gesture or a gesture of shadiness depending upon the context. Thus, we may supplement Flusser’s brief discussion of our intuitive interpretations of gesture with the Saussurean theory of semiotic convention.

A final point on Flusser’s notion of intuition before we conclude this section. According to Flusser, not only do we interpret the meaning of a gesture through intuition, but we also recognize a gesture through intuition. He writes:

> When I observe another person and see gesticulation, I do in fact have a criterion for deciding between reaction and gesture, between the expression of a state of mind and its codified representation. This criterion is the fact that I recognize myself in others and that I know from introspection when I am expressing a state of mind passively and when I am representing it actively.\(^{20}\)

We can intuitively distinguish between a mere movement and a gesture as performed by another subject by drawing upon our own experience. Though Flusser does not develop his claims about recognition-based intuition, if we continue to supplement Flusser’s own position with Saussure’s

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\(^{19}\) Flusser, *Greetings*, 3, my emphasis.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 5, my emphasis.
theory of conventional codes, we may argue that our ability to recognize a gesture in another is due to the conventional code expressed in the gesture. That is, if we are familiar with the gesture’s code, then we might work back from the code to the underlying distinction between mere movement and gesture. If, for example, I come across someone crying, my first reaction might be to ask the person if they are okay or ask if something is bothering them. I have recognized the gestures associated with crying and I intuitively interpret the code as signifying a state of sadness. Flusser might say that I recognize in the other the expression of the condition of experiencing sadness. In either case, I intuitively perceive the significance expressed in the gestural code. If, however, the other explains that she is not crying but that her eyes are watering because they are dry, then I would re-calculate my assessment and determine that her watering eyes were not in fact a gesture. Our intuitions are not objective criteria that unerringly allow us to distinguish between mere movement and gesture. Intuitions are developed in relation to social and cultural convention. Thus, if we were to develop Flusser’s recognition-based account of intuition, we have to further explore the relation between intuition and familiarity with convention. We can simply conclude that, for Flusser, there is no objective method by which we identify a gesture. We must simply rely upon our intuitions to guide us.

Turning now to a Merleau-Pontian phenomenology of gesture, I explore a theory of gesture as immanently meaningful in contrast to the Flusserian gesture, which relied upon an external code for its meaning. In Flusser, we have discovered that some gestures are deliberate acts of signification that express a subject’s affect. However, this theory neglects the crucial fact that some gestures occur as a result of pre-cognitive processes of habituation; a Flusserian account might wrongly class these as mere reactions or reflexes, but a richer phenomenology will offer us a third option for this kind of meaning-making. A more robust account of
subjectivity than that offered by Flusser, one provided to us by phenomenology, will account for the kinds of gestures that occur as a result of pre-cognitive processes of habituation. Those are best exemplified by such gestures as a woman who unconsciously avoids making eye contact with a man passing by in order to signal lack of interest, or someone who unconsciously rolls their eyes in response to someone arguing that their workplace has sexist policies, or even an animal lover who unconsciously smiles and greets a dog walking by before greeted the person walking the dog. While Flusser may provide us with the theoretical tools to identify a gesture as opposed to a meaningless movement, Merleau-Ponty allows us to go further to understand the pre-cognitive processes of habituation that condition the possible meaning expressed in gesture.

_Merleau-Ponty’s Gestures_

Merleau-Ponty shares with Flusser the belief that the significance represented in a gesture exceeds the explanatory laws of causal and/or mechanistic theory. Flusser rejects causal interpretations of gestures in favor of a quasi-existentialism that grounds the interpretation of gesture in intuitions of resemblance. For Flusser, I recognize a gesture because I can recall having previously performed a similar gestural expression within my own subjective history. I have waved and, thus, I recognize the symbolic expression of another’s wave. Merleau-Ponty’s theory of gesture is similarly based in an existentialism. However, for Merleau-Ponty, gestures are not mere vehicles of symbolic communication for another who shares knowledge of the symbol and code to interpret. Rather, gestures are immanently meaningful; the meaning of gesture neither stems from, reflects, nor relies on a prior and different phenomenon. The meaning of gesture is internal to the gesture itself. Gestures are living expressions of our existence, our being-in-the-world, our attitude of and toward the world, and the nexuses of significance that inhabit us as we inhabit the world. Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of gesture is
developed within the context of his account of perception. This means that he does not examine
gesture as a concept—something that may be abstracted from the world and reflected upon by
consciousness—but as it is performed and perceived within the world.

This section develops a theory of the Merleau-Pontian gesture, a theory that does not
culminate in a definition of gesture as such. I focus on the communicative character of gesture,
both linguistic and bodily gestures, to identify gesture’s existential dimension. I examine how
linguistic gestures, specifically ‘speaking speech,’ along with bodily gestures are communicative
in three ways: They i) express the particular way one inhabits the world, ii) alter one’s being-in-
the-world, and iii) affect another’s being-in-the-world. Next, I analyze gesture’s immanent
significance by identifying them as expressions of an embodied intentionality that produces
meaning in the world by virtue of being in and having an attitude toward the world. The body
produces meaning, not by standing apart from the world and projecting meaning onto objects.
Rather, the embodied subject is in communion with the world; together, embodied subjectivity
and the perceptual world produce meaning.

Gestures communicate an individual’s being-in-the-world. Communication here is not akin
to the transmission of information. Rather, communication is an expression of meaning. Thus,
we should say that bodily and linguistic gestures express one’s being-in-the-world, which can be
interpreted by another who is also affected through witnessing another’s gestures. In this regard,
Merleau-Ponty’s theory of gesture is fundamentally intersubjective, not only in its understanding
of communicative expression, but in its view of the existential alteration of one’s own and
another’s very being-in-the-world.

In the process of developing his own theory of linguistic and gestural expression, Merleau-
Ponty follows the familiar pattern of identifying the limits of intellectualism and empirical,
mechanistic theories of speech. Intellectualism assumes that linguistic expression is a tool used by a subject to relay ‘verbal images.’ Flusser’s theory of semiotics and gesture would, according to Merleau-Ponty’s account, fall under the intellectualist linguistic tradition. For intellectualists, ideas themselves have sense, and the word is a mere envelope for this sense. That is, words are not regarded by intellectualism as containing any sense—as having immanent meaning.

Empiricism similarly assumes that words are vessels for sense; words are external representations of inner cerebral stimulations. In order to disprove the assumption that speech is either a tool of consciousness or the result of physical stimulation, Merleau-Ponty explains that speech is immanently meaningful—it is not a vehicle for meaning, but the expression of meaning itself. According to Merleau-Ponty, speech expresses one’s way of being-in-the-world; so too does it affect another’s being-in-the-world. The speaker and the listener are affected by speech; the writer and the reader are affected by the word. The subject is penetrated, as Merleau-Ponty would say, by signification in the acts of speaking, listening, writing, and reading.

A communicative theory of gestures holds that gestures are immanently expressive and the proof of this lies in our immediate ability to understand that signification is expressed in another’s gesture. That a gesture is immanently meaningful, however, does not entail that an observer adequately grasps its meaning in all case. For Merleau-Ponty, meaning is immanent to the gesture itself, which means that the observer will not discover its meaning through reflection, de-coding it as a sign, or any other process that entails turning away from the gesture in search of its significance. We may be mistaken in our understanding the meaning expressed in a gesture. Even in those cases where we misperceive the meaning expressed in a gesture, Merleau-Ponty

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21 In the final section of this chapter, I will argue that there are instances in which a gesture’s significance is imperceptible to another. In the case of the Black nod, for example, I argue that its significance is perceptible for those who recognize Black meaning/significance.
explains that we nonetheless recognize that meaning is present in the gesture itself. Merleau-Ponty considers the example of a child who has not yet reached the age of maturity.\textsuperscript{22} According to Merleau-Ponty, the child will recognize a sexual scene as unusual or a spectacle even though the scene may not make sense to her. Without registering the meaning of the act, the child still notices the unusual nature of a sexual scene in a manner that is distinct from, for example, noticing the color of a rug. The sexual scene, just as all gestures for Merleau-Ponty, is immanently expressive of meaning whether or not the child understands or properly grasp its meaning. In support of this claim, Merleau-Ponty considers an example of gestures of anger. When I see someone turn red and stamp their foot, I recognize the expression of anger. “The gesture does not \textit{make me think} of anger, it is the anger itself.”\textsuperscript{23} The gesture is not a symbol of anger, it is anger itself. I recognize that the gesture is meaningful and I grasp its meaning by opening myself to the intention of the other. Merleau-Ponty argues that when I perceive a gesture, I fit my intentionality to the other’s intentionality, and I become attuned to the signification driving their movements. He writes, “Communication or the understanding of gestures is achieved through the reciprocity between my intentions and the other person’s gestures, and between my gestures and the intentions which can be read in the other person’s behavior.”\textsuperscript{24} Merleau-Ponty characterizes our ability to understand gesture as a process of reciprocity because, as he argues, we have only limited knowledge of anger, for example. We are familiar with our own experiences of anger and our own gestures expressive of anger; it would be insufficient, according to Merleau-Ponty, to simply analogize my understanding of anger onto

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 190.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 191.
another. For, analogization would miss the significance expressed in the other’s gesture. The gesture is not a sign of anger, as smoke is a sign of fire. Rather, the gesture emerges from the body of another, and I recognize the intentionality present in the gesture. Thus, I must become attuned to the other’s gesture, as I do in perception in general, in order to register the significance of the gesture. This attunement requires that I inhabit the field of signification present in the gesture displayed by another. When I see the intentional directedness of another through witnessing their gesture, I experience “a change in my existence provoked by another.”

Intersubjectivity here involves a communion between my intentionality and another’s intentional directedness, which alters us both; both sides engage in a reciprocal relation, which leaves both sides exposed to an alteration in their being-in-the-world.

Consider the case of reflection. When I reflect upon my own existence as an embodied subject with perceptual and motor capacities, I discover that my world is already given to me. In this sense, I discover myself in a world that precedes me. This means that my perception of the world is limited, or rather, that the world exceeds me. Merleau-Ponty explains, “I have the world as an unfinished individual through my body as a power for this world.” Insofar as I am unfinished, insofar as the world precedes my existence, and insofar as I am not entirely transparent to myself, I recognize that I am not the originating source of the world. This humility in the face of the world allows for the possibility to experience another as not only another embodied and intentional subject, but as a participant in the world that we both share. Merleau-Ponty writes, “There is, between my consciousness and my body such as I live it, and between this phenomenal body and the other person’s phenomenal body such as I see it from the outside,

25 Ibid.

26 Merleau-Ponty, Perception, Ibid., 366.
an internal relation that makes the other person appear."27 Since Merleau-Ponty characterizes the subject and world as co-constituted—neither are self-enclosed, they both come into existence through a communion with one another—he understands the subject as always already open to the world and to others who inhabit it. The other is not perceived as an object because I witness in their gestures and other behaviors an expression of embodied intentionality. Instead, without reducing the other’s intentionality to my own, I recognize an internal relation between us, namely that we are both embodied intentionality, rather than phenomenal objects in the world. Furthermore, the presence of the other assures me that my experience of the world is not solipsistic; the other is proof that world does not belong to me. Preester explains that the external world functions as a mediation between my existence and that of the other: “The ego meets his counterpart in an alter ego if both share an object (in the very broad sense). The mediating term between me and other is the external world, the intended action to which ego and alter ego are equally directed.”28 I recognize the other as an embodied intentionality through their behaviors—gestures, gazing, talking—but I do not fully know the other. I do not identify the other with myself, which would make the other fully knowable to me; rather, I open myself to them and engage in a reciprocity of our intentions as a means of understanding the other. Understanding is a “synchronizing modulation” that involves a “transformation of my being, which resonates the intentions of the other.”29 Understanding here is my involvement with an other who is capable of altering my own existence.

27 Ibid., 368


29 Ibid.
The communicative potential of gestures is made possible because my experience of the other is fundamental to my understanding of my own existence. We understand what the other’s gesture communicates because we share a common world towards which we are both intentionally directed. I thus perceive the other’s gestures as expressive of their unique entanglement with the world. And, in witnessing the other’s gesture, I recognize it as immanently meaningful even if I do not grasp the meaning expressed in it. To recognize a gesture as immanently meaningful means, for Merleau-Ponty that “The sense of the gesture thus ‘understood’ is not behind the gesture […] The sense of the gesture spreads across the gesture itself.”

That is, the meaning of their gesture is not underneath or behind the gesture, rather it is the gesture itself. In other words, the meaning of the gesture is not the meaning which the gesture expresses, but the meaning it is. Expressive gestures, as modes of communication, are understood as immanently meaningful because they express another embodied intentionality’s particular way of being-in-the-world.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the process of reciprocation between my embodied intentionality and another’s, which is engendered by witnessing the other’s bodily gesture, occurs in a similar manner when I witness or hear their linguistic gesture. Merleau-Ponty characterizes speech as a gesture—a “verbal gesture—in order to explain how speech itself is immanently meaningful. First, he explains that bodily gestures are immanently meaningful because the perceptible world is “given to the spectator through natural perception.”

We saw this in the example of gestures of anger. In contrast, however, Merleau-Ponty explains that the

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31 Ibid.
verbal gesture “intends a mental landscape that is not straightaway given to everyone.” The meaning of the verbal gesture does not appear to spread across the verbal gesture itself. However, Merleau-Ponty situates verbal gestures within culture and argues that they signify within culture in the same manner that bodily gestures signify within the natural world:

   culture here offers what nature does not provide. Available significations, namely, previous acts of expression, establish a common world between speaking subjects to which current and new speech refers, just as the gesture refers to the sensible world.

Humans are cultural beings. We have various conventions within our respective cultures, which allow for communicability between subjects. Thus, while verbal gestures may intend a mental landscape, they express cultural significances that may be immediately discerned by another who shares this culture. Vasterling explains, “Linguistic signification, that is, the expression of meaning in speech, prolongs and accomplishes the gestural signification that is deployed in bodily forms of behavior.” Both linguistic and bodily gestures are immanently meaningful because they immanently express one’s manner of being-in-the-world. To further explore the immanently expressive nature of linguistic gestures it is important to turn to a distinction that Merleau-Ponty draws in *Phenomenology of Perception* between two forms of speech, both of which are linguistic gestures. These are constituted speech and constituting speech, sometimes referred to by him as spoken speech and speaking speech. I now explore each form of speech in order to examine how linguistic gestures are immanently expressive of an embodied intentionality’s way of being-in-the-world. In both cases of constituted and constituting speech,

\[\text{\cite{Ibid.}}\]

\[\text{\cite{Ibid.}}\]

\[\text{\cite{Vasterling, “Body and Language,” 7.}}\]
expression is contained within speech precisely because speech emerges from an embodied intentionality.

**Constituted speech.** Constituted speech draws upon “constituted systems of vocabulary and syntax, or the various empirically existing ‘means of expression,’ [which] are the depository and sedimentation of acts of speech.”\(^{35}\) The references to sedimentation in this context are clearly linked to the notion of sedimentation I discussed in chapter II in the context of body schema. What Merleau-Ponty finds in constituted speech is a specifically linguistic sedimentation that makes intelligible speech possible. We accrue this sedimentation by experiencing speech, which means that speech, like habit, depends upon an existential relation to the world through perceptual and motor experiences. Because constituted speech is so familiar to us, we forget its contingency. That is, we forget that speech does not exist independent of us; its existence is contingent upon the subject who can and does speak. “Speech forgets itself as being a contingent fact, it relies upon itself and, as we have seen, this gives us the ideal of a thought without speech.”\(^{36}\) This is similar to Merleau-Ponty’s critique of reflection. Neither empiricism nor intellectualism examined original perception. Instead, they relied upon a second-order perception—the reflection of our perception—in order to account for the subject’s relation to the world. Merleau-Ponty extends this critique of reflection to the context of speech. We forget the original speech and instead we restrict ourselves to examining constituted speech. For Merleau-Ponty, original speech is “that of the child who utters his first word, of the lover who discovers his emotion, of the ‘first man who spoke,’ or of the writer and the philosopher who awaken a


\(^{36}\) Ibid., 196.
primordial experience beneath traditions.”

Original speech is not the original acquisition of speech, but a form of speech that alters one’s being-in-the-world. It is the introduction of new significance oneself and, at times, for others who inhabit the world.

Constituted speech is creative even though it draws upon already established conventions of language. Examining T.E. Lawrence’s, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Merleau-Ponty explains that constituted speech includes the possibility to alter one’s being-in-the-world. In *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Lawrence describes his experience of learning Arabic and adopting Arabic customs while station in Jordan in the early 1900s. For Lawrence, this process required that he leave behind his English self: “In my case, the efforts for these years to live in the dress of Arabs, and to imitate their mental foundation, quitted me of my English self, and let me look at the West and its conventions with new eyes: they destroyed it all for me.”

In order to learn Arabic customs and language, Lawrence had to abandon his English self and take up the Arabic world. He had to adopt a new way of being-in-the-world and was, therefore, existentially transformed. Arabic is constituted speech; it has its own syntax, vocabulary, and means of expression. However, Lawrence’s emergence into Jordanian customs and learning Arabic was a creative expression of constituted speech. Constituted speech is, thus, a repetition of conventional language, which, paradoxically is also creative.

How should we understand this paradox? Donald Landes’ 2013 text, *Merleau-Ponty and the Paradoxes of Expression*, describes spoken speech—constituted speech—as a paradox because it is both creative and a repetition of spoken speech. According to Landes, this paradox is

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37 Ibid., 530.


39 Ibid.

resolved if we understand that speech takes up already established linguistic conventions, but it also expresses the particular way one inhabits the world. “Words are not simply message bearers but are expressions of a certain style of singing the world; different languages are not simply different means for expressing the same ideas, but are different ways of being in the world.”

The style with which we say words, the emotional sense of our words, express our being-in-the-world. And, precisely because I must adopt a style of speech, a way of being-in-the-world, my style of speech has the potential to create new modes of signification. Thus, constituted speech is immanently meaningful because it expresses our style of being-in-the-world; the style of being-in-the-world is spread across the speech itself such that the speech is no longer an empty instrument for the expression of this style but an expression of it. Constituted speech is therefore, immanently meaningful in the Merleau-Pontian sense, where immanently meaningful denotes the fact that meaning is not hidden behind the gesture but expressive in and through it. In other words, the meaning and sense of the speech spreads across the speech itself.

Constituting speech. Constituting speech is more clearly creative than is constituted speech. Both are technically creative because they are significations of an embodied intentionality. However, as Veronica Vasterling explains in the 2003 article, “Body and Language: Butler, Merleau-Ponty and Lyotard on the Speaking Embodied Subject,” constituting speech is “language or expression at its primary stage, where the signifying intention is ‘at the stage of coming into being.’” Constituted speech allows for the intelligibility of the one who speaks; it draws upon a sedimentation of previous creations of signification that occur in constituting

41 Landes, Paradoxes, 92-93.

speech. When I say, “I like my chair,” an example of constituted speech, my meaning is immediately graspable by another because I have expressed myself using very basic elements of linguistic conventions. However, even this mundane statement is an expression of my relation to the world, specifically my chair, which expresses my embodied intentional attitude toward my situation in the world. In contrast, when I say, “I love you,” for the first time to a romantic partner, an example of constituting speech, I have altered by manner of being-in-the-world. My declaration is a form of original speech because it transforms my existential situation. When I say that I love my chair, I am simply describing a situation. Perhaps I am trying to persuade you to love my chair and to go out and buy your own. However, if I am genuine when I say that I love you, then I am introducing new meaning within my being-in-the-world. For Merleau-Ponty, all speech has an emotional sense and expresses our being-in-the-world. However, only original speech, such as ‘I love you,’ expresses our new way of being-in-the-world. This is distinct from Lawrence’s experience of ‘leaving his English self behind,’ because Lawrence did not create a new manner of being-in-the-world; he merely adopted an alternative and already constituted manner of being-in-the-world. Again, this is the paradox of Merleau-Ponty’s theory of speech. Arabic customs were new for Lawrence and, therefore, led him to develop a new manner of being-in-the-world; but this new manner is a repetition of a style of being-in-the-world that already exists.

Constituting speech does more than accomplish one’s own fully pre-existing thought; it also creates new thoughts for the one who listens. Merleau-Ponty examines what speech accomplishes in the case of an orator: “Through speech […] there is a taking up of the other person’s thought, a reflection in others, a power of thinking according to others, which enriches
our own thoughts.”

For the listener, speech reveals and creates new significations. When I listen to someone deliver a paper at a conference, for instance, I do more than comprehend how the words fit together. The meaning contained in the words provokes new meaning for me. I might, for instance, already be familiar with Kant’s first *Critique*. When listening to a paper that explores the possible interpretations and arguments presented in Kant’s work, however, I become more attuned to a greater field of signification related to Kant. This process of understanding the speech of another occurs “as if the other person’s intention inhabited my body, or as if my intentions inhabited his body.”

Merleau-Ponty is clear that this process of inhabiting the intentions of another subject does not mean that I pretend to be the other subject, or that I am even able to epistemically adopt the position of the other subject. I understand the significance of another’s speech through an exchange between my intentionality and my understanding of another’s intentionality. “The entire difficulty is to conceive of this act properly and not to confuse it with an epistemic operation.”

Bodily gestures and linguistic gestures are understood in the same manner because they are both expressions of an embodied intentionality. Understanding the speech and gesture of another requires that I place my own intentional framework into a reciprocal relation to the perceived intentionality of another. Understanding here is not achieved by translating another’s speech through my intentionality, nor is it a process of abandoning my intentionality to adopt another’s intentionality. Rather, I understand another’s speech when “the powers of my body adjust to it and fit over it.”

Thus understanding another’s speech involves a kind of communion with the intentionality of the other, similar to the

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44 Ibid., 191.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid., 191.
communion between subject and world described by Merleau-Ponty in the context of originary perception.

In this communion, new significance emerges. That is, speech creates something new; it is an intersubjective act of meaning-making. The other with whom I am in conversation understands my speech because we both participate in the conventions of constituted speech. The listener is also affected by my speech. The listener inhabits my field of signification to access new meanings and significations, which then become elements of the sedimentation that shapes the listener’s unique body schema. When I “adjust my body to fit over” another’s speech, I am altering my body schema. In other words, I am expanding my field of signification, my intentional “I can,” in the process of understanding another’s speech. Consider instances of learning new slang, or instances when you discover that a word you took to be universally understood within your culture is in fact specific to your hometown. For example, after explaining to my mom what “on fleek” meant several years ago, she now uses the term with familiarity (even though this term is now outdated). The slang altered her body schema and became sedimented to such a degree that she continues to call upon it with—far too much in my opinion—ease.

_Fugitivity_

In chapter II, I examined the Black lived experience under white supremacy, which I characterized as inhibited by the racializing gaze. My interest in this section is identifying spaces wherein the contemporary Black subject is free from the direct surveillance of this gaze, which therefore allows them to experience an uninhibited embodied intentionality. I define fugitive spaces as places wherein Black subjects can create life-worlds and new forms of meaning without regard for whiteness or anti-Blackness. Fugitive spaces are areas wherein Black subjects
are temporarily released from their defensive posture and can, therefore, adopt a robust habit body open to spontaneous and creative movements and meaning-making. In this vein, I identify two features important to my notion ‘fugitivity’. First, I develop Hartman’s concept of the ‘loophole of retreat’ to characterize fugitive territory as a retreat from anti-Blackness. And second, I describe the spaces wherein Black queer ballrooms did and, in some cases still do, characterize fugitive territory in its most concrete form.

_Loopholes of retreat_

In _Scenes of Subjection_, Saidiya Hartman uses the term ‘loophole of retreat’ to characterize fugitivity. Reading Harriet Jacob’s narrative, _Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl_, Hartman examines the way in which Jacob’s retreat from her captor also made her captive to the loophole. In her text, Jacobs writes about the seven years spent in the crawlspace above her grandmother’s shed to escape her captor. Reading Jacob’s account of retreat, Hartman defines this loophole as “a space of freedom that is at the same time a space of captivity.”⁴⁷ For Jacobs, this loophole of retreat was a material location, an actual place of concealment. Hartman extends this concrete conception of the loophole to explore how Black people in the US have historically sought out spaces to gain varying degrees of freedom within a society that disallows such freedom for Black subjects. Jacobs is free so long as she remains in the crawlspace; her confinement to the crawlspace, however, is at the same time a space of captivity. This double-bind expressed in the concept of ‘loophole of retreat’ is precisely what I seek to emphasize in my own conception of fugitivity. Freedom from persecution in the case of Jacobs, or freedom from anti-Black disciplinary regimes in the context with which I am concerned, is sustainable only if one allows oneself to remain in the space of captivity—to remain out of sight. Fugitivity speaks to the

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⁴⁷ Hartman, _Scenes_, 9.
historical exclusion of Black subjects from freedom, from protection, and basic rights. It is only through a withdrawal from a white supremacist society that the Black subject achieves the muscular freedom characteristic of a robust habit body and, as a result, achieves the means of cultivating creative and spontaneous forms of meaning.

While the notion of captivity is important for my own conception of fugitivity, it does not eclipse the potential freedom that is also created in this space. Freedom here is freedom from the direct surveillance of anti-Black disciplinary regimes. Recognizing that, as Foucault argues, one is never entirely outside of power, fugitive territory occupies an ambiguous space that is both inside and outside of the polis. So, I now explore fugitive territories that exist along the margins of surveillance and in the loopholes between discursive regimes.

**Fugitive Territories**

Alex Mugler: *We’re too different. We’re too queer. We’re too Black. So we come to the ballroom.*

Jelani Mizrahi: *Ballroom says, “you’re not gay.”*

Precious Ebony: *“Here you’re cunt.”*

Mizrahi: *Ballroom says, “you’re not lost.”*

Mugler: *“You’re a legend.”*

Ebony: *Ballroom is a safe place for us. It’s like the Golden Gates to our community.*

Mugler: *Ballroom is our release, our battleground, our strength, our imagination. It’s our story.*

Ebony: *We all speak the same language because dance is art and art is communication.*

Mizrahi: *If you’re alone, this is your family. If you’re homeless, this is your house.*

The epigraph to this section includes the opening lines of Viceland’s first episode of *My House.* There, Black queer ballroom performers describe what ballroom means to them—the freedom it provides. Mugler’s description of being “too queer” or “too Black” expresses feeling out-of-place in dominant culture. His queerness and his Blackness render him vulnerable to violence.

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under white supremacy. At the ball, however, not only does one feel at-home, but one’s queerness and one’s Blackness make them a legend or an icon. Within this space, which I refer to as a fugitive one, Black subjects have cultivated a sophisticated world of meaning that is not about whiteness or anti-Blackness, but about celebration, joy, and family.

I will return to creation of new meaning within fugitivity in the final section of this chapter to explore the gestures produced within Black queer ballroom. For now, however, I want to focus on the places where these ballrooms are, for the most part, held. In his 1995 article, “The Slap of Love,” journalist Michael Cunningham describes ballroom performances and their performers, which he encountered while in search of details concerning the background of ballroom icon Angie Xtravaganza. Cunningham arranges a meeting with Dorian Corey, another icon of Black queer ballroom, at the drag club Sally’s II. Cunningham’s description of the space emphasizes for us just how underground, how out of view ballroom performances were, especially in the nineties:

Corey’s show took place in a largish room behind the bar proper, a leftover from some other incarnation, its walls covered with faded murals of Edwardian men cavorting heterosexually. The room was furnished with scarred garden furniture—wobbly white plastic tables and molded plastic chairs.

While the performance Cunningham describes is a drag show and not a ballroom show, it does still give us insight into the types of spaces occupied by participants of the Black queer ballroom scene—spaces where these performers could safely express themselves through queer gesticulation. These spaces were undergrounds of already underground venues. In order to freely gesture, these performers had to seek out spaces left behind, forgotten by members of dominant

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50 Ibid.
culture. Despite this, however, or perhaps because of this, ballroom grew into a spectacle that could last for twelve hours. The ballroom scene of today, where performers freely walk the runway in public, would be impossible without the pioneers of queer ballroom who developed their performances in fugitive territory. This is not to suggest, however, that ballroom is no longer fugitive territory. While performers are no longer restricted to the underground for balls, at least not as frequently as they had been, they are still by and large in flight. In an interview originally aired in December of 2019, multidisciplinary artist Rashaad Newsom describes the continued importance of balls as a refuge from violence, or, in the context of our current discussion, from anti-Black and anti-LGBTQ+ disciplinary regimes: “There’s this whole idea … about ballroom kind of being this utopian space, safe space for black queers. And in some ways it is. […] So much of it is in those spaces are coming from violence, diminishment and abandonment.”51 It is impossible to isolate Newsom’s Blackness from his queerness when analyzing the forms of violence, which he describes as needing to escape. We can be certain that more than one disciplinary regime is at work to enforce multiple norms in an effort to render his Blackness and his queerness docile. However, we can also be certain that anti-Black disciplinary regimes are included in the larger list of regimes from which he continues to flee.

Fugitive spaces offered performers in Black queer ball culture the possibility to experience muscular freedom and produce new meaning. In this regard, we see that fugitive territory is not only freedom from anti-Black disciplinary techniques, but also freedom to new access a robust habit body capable of spontaneously and creatively developing new meaning. Unlike Jacobs who had to restrict her movements in her grandmother’s crawlspace or risk being

discovered, the fugitive spaces with which I am concerned allow for a release of one’s musculature, a freedom to move and exist in undisciplined ways. In his 1961 text, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon describes the muscular release I am imagining. Describing the restricted movements of the colonized subject, Fanon writes:

> The first thing the colonial subject learns is to remain in his place and not overstep its limits. Hence the dreams of the colonial subject are *muscular dreams*, dreams of action, dreams of aggressive vitality. I dream I am jumping, swimming, running, and climbing. I dream I am laughing, I am leaping across a river […] During colonization the colonized subject frees himself night after night between nine in the evening and six in the morning.52

In fugitive territory, these muscular dreams become a reality. One can jump, swim, dance, and gesture without fear of the racializing gaze or the anti-Black disciplinary techniques of surveillance.

**Black Gestures**

The list of Black gestures I provide are by no means exhaustive, nor are these gestures performed in the same way and with the same significance by all Black people. My position is that Blackness is expressed through embodied gestures that convey cultural, historical, social, and political belonging to the Black community. Blackness may be identified, lived, experienced, and targeted through bodily gestures. The specific bodily gestures at issue are learned in some cases, intergenerationally “inherited” in others, and sometimes lost due to changes in disciplinary regimes governing Black life. To be clear, although the theory of Black gesture established in this chapter argues that Black gestures express Black meaning, it does not reduce Blackness *per se* to its gestural representation.

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The Black Nod

The Nod is perhaps the most quintessential Black gesture. Without explanation, most Black people will know to what I refer when I say, ‘the Nod.’ For those unfamiliar with this gesture, the Nod is a slight movement of the head that the Black Diaspora performs, which signifies differently depending upon the context. Sometimes the Nod means ‘solidarity,’ and other times the Nod is a more affective expression of affirmation of another’s Blackness, especially when one is in a predominantly white region. However, drawing upon Lacan, I explain that the Nod functions as an empty signifier. It is not really meaningful in itself; rather, the Nod points away from itself and toward fugitive Black meaning.

Recently, while sitting on the beach in Croatia with two Kosovar friends, I had the unique opportunity to demonstrate the nod in action. Among a large group of white people, I spotted one other Black person, a Black woman, swimming in the Adriatic Sea. I had just finished explaining my philosophical interest in Black gestures to these two friends, when I saw an opportunity to highlight the kind of everydayness of my more abstract philosophical claims. Without much effort, a simple glance in the Black woman’s direction, she did it! She gave me the Nod! Her gesture said, “I see you in this place where people like us are few and far between. I see you exploring geographies that were historically meant to be beyond our reach.” Nodding back, I signaled the same sentiment: “I see you. I recognize you celebrating life out here by the sea. I see you flaunting your Blackness rather than trying to blend in.” The Nod is a gesture that both expresses and grounds the Black community. In receiving the Nod, I feel affirmed in my sense of belonging to the Black community. By giving the Nod, I also affirm the other’s belonging to the Black community. The Nod, and other Black gestures, exemplify forms of meaning that are about and for Black subjects and, therefore, not about white supremacy.
The Black Nod is paradoxically meaningful and meaningless at one and the same time. I described feeling affirmed in my Blackness when another Black woman gave me the Nod in Croatia. But, when pressed to fully translate the meaning of the nod at the time to my friends, I was at a loss. I could characterize its affective value; but I could not explain it in the way one can explain the meaning of a wave. In his 2014 article, “The Nod: A Subtle Lowering of the Head You Give to Another Black Person in an Overwhelmingly White Place,” Musa Okwonga offer a similar account to my own. He describes what the Nod means for him: “It’s a swift yet intimate statement of ethnic solidarity. The Nod is saying, ‘Wow, well, I really didn’t expect to see another one of us out here, but you seem to be doing your thing just fine. More power to you, and all the best’.”\(^{53}\) Okwonga’s characterization of the Nod as ‘intimate’ evokes the affective character of the gesture at the same time that it evokes the notion of solidarity. The surprise Okwonga describes as partially motivating the Nod is also, for me, an intuitive understanding of its meaning. But again, the meaning of the Black Nod is evasive; the Nod is a sign that points away from itself in the direction of an external meaning found in fugitive space. However, even as a sign, the Nod tells a story of solidarity and it expresses the intimacy of belonging to the same community, even if those engaging in the Nod are strangers. The story is not itself the Nod’s meaning. The Nod points to the space where meaning is cultivated through the solidarity and intimacy of the Black community. Mukoma Wa Ngugi catalogues the various meanings associated with the Nod’s in his 2013 article, “The Black Man’s Nod”: “The nod of solidarity”; “The black power nod”; “The nod of I see you even when others do not”; The stay cool/keep

your cool nod”; and “The Rasta greeting.”

Each version of the Nod is described by Ngugi in terms of solidarity and intimacy. Thus, we are reminded that the Nod’s meaning is not reducible to a single purpose; it is a manner of relating to one another that varies depending upon the context. I believe that the meaning of the Nod, its purpose or definitive significance, is not actually immanent to the Nod itself. Or rather, the Nod is meaningful, but only as a gesture that points away from whiteness and toward Black life-worlds. Following Lacan, we could say that the Black nod is the purloined letter—the empty signifier.

In Écrits, Lacan discusses Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Purloined Letter” to explain how it is possible for a signifier to be empty. Poe’s story concerns a Queen who receives a letter that would jeopardize her “honor and peace.” We are never told the contents of the letter, only that it contains information that the Queen wishes to remain secret. When the character, Minister D— , enters the room in which both the Queen and the King reside, the Queen places the letter face down in the hopes that neither the King nor Minister D— notice. However, this gesture, subtle though it may be, was not only witnessed by Minister D— but immediately recognized as meaningful. Specifically, he understood in the Queen’s gesture that the letter contained secret and, therefore, valuable information. The letter is stolen several times throughout the story, and the efforts to retrieve it ultimately fail. What is important for our purposes, is that the content of the letter is never revealed. We know that there is a letter; we know that, if revealed, the letter could damage the Queen’s reputation; but, we never actually learn what information is in the letter itself. The presence and absence of the purloined letter is, for Lacan, emblematic of the empty signifier: “For the signifier is a unique unit of being which, by its very nature, is the


symbol of but an absence. This is why we cannot say of the purloined letter that, like other objects, it must be or not be somewhere but rather that, unlike them, it will be and will not be where it is wherever it goes.”\textsuperscript{56} The letter is a symbol insofar as it represents something the Queen wishes to hide. However, its symbol is of an absence because it is never retrieved and, more importantly, we never learn of its content.

I suggest we read the Black Nod as analogous to Poe’s purloined letter; it is a gesture of which everyone is aware, though few would be able to define its meaning.\textsuperscript{57} The Nod happens every day and it seems to occur across the Black Diaspora, if my experience and the articles referenced are any indication. But I could neither tell you definitively what it means, nor could I tell you how and when it became such a familiar practice amongst Black subjects. I could not even tell you when I began performing the nod. It was only when, in the presence of a white friend, a stranger and I exchanged the Black Nod that I realized I had cultivated the practice. When asked if I knew the person to whom I nodded, my friend was confused by my casual response that I had never seen them before in my life. The Nod has become so familiar to me, has sedimented so thoroughly into my body schema that I call upon it without necessarily being aware that I do so. And, though I describe the Black Nod from my personal perspective, it is not hard to imagine that many contemporary Black subjects have similarly acquired and performed this gesture in a pre-cognitive manner. I would therefore consider the Black Nod as part of the body-memory of the Black archive described in chapter III of this dissertation.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 17.

\textsuperscript{57} I say ‘everyone’, but really it seems that not many non-Black people are familiar with the Black nod. Okwonga makes a similar point in his article: “The Nod is something that several white friends of mind often find bewildering. A few years ago, as I walked down a street in Italy with a friend, a black man looked at me and gave me a small, stern, bow before making his way off. ‘Who was that?’ my friend asked. ‘Did you know him?’” (Okwonga “The Nod”). Thanks to Maia Nahele for suggesting Lacan’s reading of Poe to articulate the meaning of the Nod.
In 1968 during the Olympic Medal ceremony held in Mexico City, Tommie Smith and John Carlos each held a raised fist in the air throughout the duration of the playing of the “The Star-Spangled Banner.” This took place during the height of civil rights activism in the US. The Supreme Court had handed down its decision in *Loving v Virginia* only the previous year, and Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated just six months earlier. The Montgomery bus boycotts, various sit-ins, and other protests in response to the discriminatory laws of Jim Crow had culminated in the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which banned discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. Within this context, Smith and Carlos’ raised fists became a symbol of the protest for Black rights.

In this section I explore the significance of Smith’s and Carlos’ gestures in two contexts: the significance during the moment they raised their fists, and the significance this gesture has within the contemporary context. I interpret the deliberate and undeliberate significance of their gesture. That is, Carlos and Smith deliberately intended to express significance in their raised fists, which, for Flusser, would make their gestures vehicles of meaning for others to de-code. Additionally, further, perhaps undeliberate, significance was expressed and continues to be expressed in their gestures.

As I outlined in section I of this chapter, Flusser distinguishes between mere movement and gesture, and identifies gesture as a willful act performed by a subject with the intention of conveying a code for another to interpret. I understand Smith’s and Carlos’ raised fists as symbolic representations of protest in response to international anti-Black violence. In a 2016 interview with *Smithsonian Magazine*, the then 72-year-old Tommie Smith stated that his raised fist was “a cry
Here, Smith decodes the symbol contained in his gesture for us; the meaning of his raised fist was a cry for freedom, or, as I have characterized it, a protest. However, in this same interview, Smith lists several other symbols that he and Carlos intended to express alongside their raised fists.

The socks represented poverty, black people’s poverty from slavery to where Tommie Smith and Carlos were. …The bowed head represented prayer. The Christian experience of us on the victory stand wasn’t there by mistake. We were there because we were appointed in that moment by God to do something representing freedom to man. The fist, Smith continues, represented power…a need to move forward proactively. Not necessarily the black pride of an illegitimate type of fight with the background of militancy. Militancy had nothing to do with that victory stand.  

The bowed head symbolically represented the Christian act of prayer, and their raised fists symbolically represented Black power. Even their clothes were deliberately chosen to convey symbols to those in the stands or watching from home. They wore socks without shoes to signify Black poverty; and, in his autobiography, The John Carlos Story: The Sports Movement that Changed the World, Carlos explains that the beads worn around their necks symbolized the lynching of Black people in the US: “I looked at my feet in my high socks and thought all about the black poverty I’d seen from Harlem to East Texas. I fingered my beads and thought about the pictures I’d seen of the ‘strange fruit’ swinging from the poplar trees of the South.” Carlos’ description of Black lynched bodies as ‘strange fruit’ provides for us the code to interpret the symbolic meaning represented in his gesture. It is a clear reference to Nina Simone’s, Strange Fruit, which is about the lynching of Black people in the US. From their bodily gestures to their

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59 Ibid.

choice in clothing, Carlos and Smith deliberately constructed symbols for others to interpret. In this manner, their gestures are distinctly Flusserian. However, the meaning of their gestures exceeded what both Smith and Carlos describe as their original intention in two ways. First, their bodily gestures immanently expressed what Flusser calls the ‘freedom to act as a subject’. That is, their gestures expressed more than ‘a cry for freedom’; they expressed a kind of freedom. Second, their gestures immanently expressed their Black-Being-in-the-world.

According to Flusser, we recognize gestures as expressions of inwardness [Innerlichkeit], which for him means subjectivity, precisely because gestures are artificial constructs. That is, gestures, in contrast to mere movement, are not natural in a physiological or reflexive sense, but rather artificially constructed by subjects. Therefore, we must attribute subjectivity to one capable of performing a gesture. Furthermore, for Flusser, gestures inherently express a subject’s freedom to act: “the concept of ‘gesture’ may be defined as a movement that expresses freedom. […] But what makes it unique is that […] it expresses a subjectivity that we are forced to call freedom.”

In other words, freedom is manifest in the meaningful and creative act of gesticulation. Freedom here refers to the freedom to act, move, or exist in manners that are not pre-determined. This is not a political freedom, but a causal or mechanistic conception of freedom. A subject is free to gesture in contrast to, for example, an amoeba the movements of which are constrained by the natural laws governing its organic life. The gesture of Smith’s and Carlos’ raised fists symbolizes power, as they intended; but it also unintentionally signified their inherent freedom as subjects. For Flusser, the freedom expressed in Smith’s and Carlos’ gestures is merely a freedom to willfully move. It would be odd to describe this form of freedom as

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61 Vilém Flusser, *Gestures*, trans. Nancy Ann Roth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) 163, my emphasis; What Flusser means by subjectivity in this context is not fully fleshed out. However, based on Roth’s translation, we should translate the German Innerlichkeit as ‘inwardness.’ (Flusser, Gestures, 180)
political in character; even the most ardent racist will acknowledge that a Black person is freely capable of movement. However, if we include in this notion of freedom the freedom to construct meaning, where gestures are expressions of meaning, then we may identify a political dimension of Smith’s and Carlos’ freedom. Because, Flusser explains, only subjects have the capacity to artificially construct meaning, then it follows that Smith and Carlos expressed not just the freedom to move, but the freedom to construct meaning. And it is this freedom to construct meaning as expressed in their gesture that constitutes a form of political freedom. I understand this latter point to be the fundamental reason why Smith’s and Carlos’ raised fists shook the world, so to speak. As Black men, they stood, quite literally, on an international platform and dared to exercise and express their freedom to create and express meaning, a freedom disallowed them under white supremacy, especially during Jim Crow.

In a 2018 article written for History News titled, “How the Black Power Protest at the 1968 Olympics Killed Careers,” journalist Erin Blakemore describes the crowd’s reaction to Smith’s and Carlos’ protest: “As the American athletes raised their fists, the stadium hushed, then burst into racist sneers and angry insults.” Later, when the two men returned to the US, they received death threats for their actions. Obviously, their gestures hit a nerve. In this case, I propose that the backlash was not solely in response to what the gestures symbolized to Carlos and Smith; I do not believe the crowd could have so immediately decoded the multiplicity of symbolic meanings expressed in Carlos’ and Smith’s gestures and clothing. This is evident in the fact that, forty-eight years later, Smith had to explain the various symbols that were never directly acknowledged. With the exception of the raised fist, the other gestures and symbols—socks, beads, and lowered head—were not as transparent. That is, these other symbols relied

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upon a code with which the audience was likely unfamiliar. It is my contention that the crowd was roused to anger simply and precisely because their gestures were immanently meaningful expressions of their subjectivity and, thus, their right to freedom. In other words, even if members of the crowd did not immediately understand the symbolic meaning represented in Carlos’ and Smith’s gestures, they did recognize their acts as gestures rather than mere movements. In this regard, I think Flusser is correct in saying that gestures are intuitively recognized, at least this is often the case; and, in the case of Carlos’ and Smith’s gestures, I suggest that the crowd intuitively recognized them as such. Furthermore, following Flusser, I we can understand the crowd’s angry reaction to Carlos and Smith as motivated by the recognition that their gestures were expressions of freedom due to their subjectivity. In an effort to reject their expression of freedom to create and express meaning, the crowd sought to reject their claims to freedom by hurling racial epithets intended to dehumanize them. The gesture of Carlos’ and Smiths’ raised fists was an act of defiance; it was a rejection of the racializing gaze and anti-Black disciplinary techniques of white supremacy. Refusing fragmentation of their phenomenal body before the racializing gaze, their gestures expressed a robust habit body, rather than the routinized habit body demanded of them.

Through gesticulation, Carlos and Smith expressed their uninhibited embodied intentionality, and forced Black meaning into the space of white supremacy. I characterize the meaning of their gestures as Black for several reasons. First, the codes of their symbols were not discernable to the audience at the time, which, at the very least, suggests a form of meaning independent of white supremacy. And second, we see the significance of the Black power fist as expressed in contemporary protests in response to the murders of Black and Brown people at the hands of police. The raised fist continues to signify Black power and solidarity with the Black
community. Carlos and Smith were not the first to use a clenched fist as a sign of protest, but the significance of their protest continues to reverberate throughout the world today. In solidarity with Black Lives Matter, many people have replaced their profile pictures on various social media platforms with the image of a Black raised fist. As I walk through my neighborhood, I see yard sign after yard sign of the clenched Black fist in solidarity with Black people. The Black power fist signifies the right to Black meaning. For Black people who raise their fist in protest, the gesture also signifies Black-being-in-the-world as one under siege. It is, thus, existentially meaningful in its expression.

**Black Queer Ballrooms**

This section returns to the context of Black queer ballroom in order to identify Black gestures performed by a robust habit body that spontaneously and creatively creates new forms of meaning. I begin this analysis by examining the history of Black queer ballroom, which emerged after white queer ballrooms failed to incorporate Black performers into the competitions.

While queer ballroom gained international attention after Jenny Livingston’s 1990 documentary, *Paris is Burning*, Madonna’s *Vogue* music video of the same year, and, more recently, the television series, *Pose*, the history of the gestures created within and shared throughout ballroom culture far precedes these relatively recent surges of ballroom’s popularity. Tim Lawrence describes the history of ballroom in his 2011 article, “‘Listen, and You Will Hear all the Houses that Walked There Before’: A History of Drag Balls, Houses, and the Culture of Voguing.” Lawrence traces the history of ballroom back to the 1920s. During this time, drag shows included a majority white gay community. As Lawrence explains, Black performers were expected to whiten their skin if they hoped to win a contest, and even then, their chances of
winning were slim. Because of the anti-Blackness of queer ballroom, Black and Latinx queer communities created an independent ballroom scene in the 1960s. This turn away from anti-Blackness was not expressed as a form of resistance, but rather as establishing a space outside of anti-Blackness—a space of fugitivity. By the 1970s, these new ballroom communities had established houses. These houses fulfilled a variety of needs for performers: a chosen family unity, a name under which members of the house would perform and one they would also represent both in the ballroom and in everyday life, and importantly security and access to resources for the POC youth who, for a variety of reasons, were forced to live on the streets.

Within the fugitive spaces of Black queer ballrooms and their respective houses, these communities did more than merely survive, they flourished to create radically new styles of gesture and, in turn, new meaning. The Black queer ballroom scene is characterized by the celebration of Black and Latinx queerness through dance, competitions, and, of course, shade. Exploring the robust habit body displayed in the performer of Black queer ballroom, we find significance both intentionally and unintentionally expressed Black gestures.

Each ball has a theme and a set of categories. The categories vary from competition to competition; however, they generally include the following: voguing, runway, realness, realness with a twist, face, and many more. Despite their apparent ambiguity, the guidelines for each


64 Ibid., 3.

65 It is important to note that the queer ballroom culture is not strictly comprised of the Black community. The Latinx and the Afro-Latinx community have a large presence within the scene. However, because the queer ballroom scene with which I am concerned is predominantly Black and, given the history of Latinx participation in the scene—the first Latinx house was not created until 1982—I will refer to the gestures within ballroom culture as Black gestures. This should not be understood as an erasure of the Latinx presence and influence in ballroom. Rather, I am highlighting the specific stories and experiences of Black ballroom performers, some of whom are Afro-Latinx.
category are understood by both judges and performer. For example, when asked by the makers of *Vice’s My House* to describe the elements of voguing, ballroom commentator Precious Ebony, vacillates between a verbal description and a physical demonstration: “These are the five elements of vogue. The first one is hands. Then, you wanna transition to a catwalk. Then you would go into ‘big girl I focus on rising.’ Then you have spin dance. And then full performance.”

Precious Ebony, referred to by friends as Precious, performs each category as she describes them. One recognizes that there is an ineffable quality to each category. What does ‘hands’ mean? What does ‘big girl I focus on rising’ mean? To understand these terms requires familiarity with the forms of meaning produced within this fugitive space, which remains independent of dominant culture even if it is occasionally represented in film or television. Thus, an outsider such as I, would have difficulty understanding the elements of vogue based upon Ebony’s description; however, members of the community know and perform these elements with deep familiarity. In order to recognize voguing when it is performed or, better yet, recognize a good as opposed to bad voguing performance, one has to know the significance expressed in the performance itself. This recognition is more than the Flusserian notion of intuition. Rather, knowledge of what a gesture means and of the measure by which gestures are assessed requires familiarity with the meaning produced within this specific fugitive culture.

Consider the various categories included in Black queer ballroom. Realness, for example, is the performance of cis-heteronormative expressions of masculinity by a queer and/or trans man. A good performance means that one would be ‘unclockable.’ That is, the performer must portray a convincing image of straight masculinity without letting slip their ‘true’ queer or trans identity. In a *BET* series called *Queer as F**k*, ballroom performer, Krystal Labeija, describes

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realness as a question: “Can you go get food for the house?”⁶⁷ In other words, can you convincingly move through the world as non-queer or non-trans such that you can get a ‘legitimate’ job without being discovered as queer and, thus, vulnerable to discrimination? Even more than the category of voguing, the performance of realness exceeds the limits of verbal description. The gestures involved in the performance of ‘realness’ rely upon background experiences of both performer and judge. That is, the standards for judging realness require familiarity with Black and queer identity as lived under white supremacy, as well as familiarity with the horizons of the ballroom scene itself. Someone may be clocked in their performance, and thereby fail in their expression of realness if, for example, their hips sway a bit too much, or if their facial expressions are not hardened enough. Having either had their own queer and/or trans identity be clocked in the real world or having to move through the world with the fear of being clocked, judges and performers understand the meaning of realness.

Each category—with the possible exceptions of face, pretty boy, futuristic or bizarre—is a gestural performance. The element of hands in the performance of voguing involves deliberate movements of the arms to strike a series of poses. Realness involves deliberate gestural mimicry of unintentional gestures conditioned by hetero-masculine norms in dominant culture. In her 1993 text, Bodies that Matter: On the discursive limits of ‘sex’, queer theorist Judith Butler describes these performances in terms of their reiteration and impersonation of gendered norms:

[W]hat determines the effect of realness is the ability to compel belief, to produce the naturalized effect. This effect is itself the result of an embodiment of norms, a reiteration of norms, an impersonation of a racial and class norm, a norm which is at once a figure, a figure of a body, which is no particular body, but a morphological ideal that remains the standard which regulates the performance, but which no performance full approximates.⁶⁸

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Butler recognizes in queer ballroom performance the parodic inhabitation of norms, which are so deeply ingrained in our society that they have the appearance of a naturalness based upon biology. In Black queer ballroom, performers impersonate the norm, either by repeating those gendered norms that are not designated for biologically male bodies, or by mimicking gendered norms with such exaggeration that the norm itself is seen as unnatural. It is important that, in the above quote, Butler calls our attention to the body in the performance. While the ballroom performance is itself modeled on the unattainable norms governing of how straight bodies should move, it also relies upon a very real body for the performance. That is, the performance of each ballroom category is bodily performance, and these bodily performances are sets of gestures constructed according to gendered and racialized norms.

Queer ballroom performances are not, however, restricted to the repetition or mimicry of dominant norms. As a fugitive culture, the performers access an uninhibited embodied intentionality, which releases them from the routinized habit body and allows them to cultivate a robust habit body. Take, for example, the category ‘realness with a twist’. The performance begins according to the same rules of ‘realness,’ then, the performers shift into bodily gestures that signify queerness. The ‘twist’ in this category is the ability to reproduce the dominant norm and then shift to unroutinized gestures expressive of queerness. Again, what a queer gesture means, how it is judged, requires familiarity with a field of meanings particular to these fugitive spaces. The meanings produced in fugitivity are not (often) represented in dominant culture. Therefore, one does not understand these meanings as ‘common sense’—naturalized and self-evident.

69 Butler mistakenly refers to queer ballroom as ‘drag shows’ in her discussion of Livingston’s Paris is Burning.
Fugitive space affords members of the Black queer ballroom scene the safety to relax their musculature. Before becoming mainstream, if we now consider the ballroom scene mainstream, these performances occurred late into the night in the backs of queer clubs. Hidden from the view of the police who surveilled the streets in search of homosexuality that needed to be disciplined through carceral mechanisms, and away from the white, queer ballroom scenes that rejected any hint of non-whiteness in the performance, Black and Latinx LGBTQIA+ communities created fugitive meaning. They gained access to a robust habit body and uninhibited embodied intentionality to creatively and spontaneously express immanently meaningful Black gestures.
Conclusion

This project is an endeavor to draw attention to the concrete expressions of contemporary Black life and Black meaning in the contemporary US. I have aimed to do so primarily in response to Afropessimists who claim that contemporary Black life is overdetermined as nonbeing due to the schism created during chattel slavery between Blackness and being or Blackness and the Human. To be clear, Afropessimists do not claim that Black people are dead, just that we are socially dead. According to this tradition, Black people cannot re-gain ontological presence so long as our demands for freedom and liberation from nonbeing continue to rely upon humanist discourse.

This rejection of humanism on the grounds that it cannot guarantee Black liberation from nonbeing is not, however, the sole provenance of Afropessimism. Existentialists of Black studies, especially those whose work draws upon Frantz Fanon, similarly dismiss humanism as a viable means for Black liberation. For existentialists, Black liberation is not liberation from an ontological essence as nonbeing, but from an anti-Black world that produced Black nonbeing—what Fanon calls the ‘zone of nonbeing.’\footnote{Frantz Fanon, \textit{Black Skin, White Masks}, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 8.} What differentiates existentialists from Afropessimists, however, is their respective characterization of the world. As existentialist Lewis Gordon explains in his contribution to the 2017 article, “Critical Exchange: Afro Pessimism,” “\textit{an} antiblack world” is not identical with \textit{‘the world is antiblack’}.\footnote{Lewis Gordon, “Critical Exchange: Afro pessimism,” \textit{Contemporary Political Theory} 17, no. 1: 106.} In the first case, an anti-Black world is an existentialist project; in the second, claims that the world is anti-Black are distinctly historical. As an existentialist project, \textit{an} anti-Black world is open-ended and, therefore, has the potential to become different in kind. In contrast, the historical claim that \textit{the} world is anti-Black suggests, to Gordon
at least, permanency and immutability. Following Fanon, existentialist theorists argue that the liberation from an anti-Black world requires a new humanism since the present humanism originally made possible the exclusion of Black subjects from what Wynter refers to as ‘Man’.

The Afropessimist and existentialist focus on humanism has led these theorists to neglect the presence of Black existence in our current historical era in favor of a future Black existence, which may or may be achieved. If the ontological presence of Black being is only possible after the overthrow of humanism, as these traditions assert, it then follows that Black life is an ontological absence in the present historical period. If, however, we can identify Black meaning, meaning that is neither about white supremacy nor anti-Blackness, then we may identify Black being in the here and now. My interest is not to restore humanism; rather, I have sought to restore attention to concrete expressions of Black life and Black meaning in order to demonstrate that, despite white supremacy’s greatest efforts, our meaning and our being persist.

In the process of researching and, eventually, writing this dissertation, I have come to realize that there is no single tradition on which this work of affirming the ontological presence of contemporary Black subjects in the US can rely. As yet, I have found no text dedicated to an analysis of the ontological presence of Black being. In process of analyzing Black ontological presence in and through Black gestures, I have also found no rigorous theory of gesture nor a documented path to follow into the space of fugitivity. The absence of established discourse on gesture and fugitive space has proven difficult in my efforts to theorize contemporary Black meaning and Black life along the lines of interest that I have pursued. My concern with Black gesture has presented, for me, a strange paradox: I must draw upon concrete, lived experience in order to justify my larger philosophical claims regarding Black life and yet, such concrete analysis is regarded as anthropological, anecdotal, or distinctly unphilosophical. But how does one theorize
gesture without considering specific examples of gesture? There is a demand for evidence—a concrete example in support of one’s claim—and, at the same time, a rejection of one’s philosophical claim because the evidence is itself too specific. In fact, I regard this paradox as illusory. Gestures are not examples of Black meaning; they are themselves expressions of the presence of Black meaning. Whether gestures are immanently meaningful, as Merleau-Ponty argues, or symbols of meaning, as Flusser claims, gestures are inherently expressive of a subject’s ontological presence. The gestures involved in vogue, as I have argued, are immanently expressive of Black meaning and, therefore, Black ontological presence. And, as I have demonstrated, Smith’s and Carlos’ gesture of the raised fist is inherently expressive of their capacity to construct and express meaning—a capacity unique to subjects who have ontological presence. If humanism has yet to be overthrown, then how can we account for these examples of Black ontological presence?

If we leave aside critiques of humanism in our analysis of Black existence, then we may find the potential to theorize Black life and Black meaning in a manner that affirms Black existence as it concretely unfolds in the current period. This analysis requires a historicization of Black life in the contemporary US. Such historicization would not conflate the present with the past, nor would it disregard the present in favor of analyzing the future. While contemporary Black subjects in the US descend from the enslaved subjects of chattel slavery, our current existence if not identical to these subjects. The violence endured by enslaved subjects is fundamentally different from today’s forms of anti-Black violence under white supremacy. This difference is not accounted for in contemporary Black subject’s increasing access to socio-political life, as Patterson would claim. Rather, it is due to our ability to develop kin relations, to trace our ancestry through several generations, to own property as opposed to being property, and to participate in a socio-cultural sphere even if this sphere is not that of dominant society. The changes to Black life since chattel
slavery may not constitute full liberation for Black subjects, but they have afforded us the means to cultivate meaning that remains independent of white supremacy, anti-Blackness, and dominant society. Black liberation from oppression and anti-Blackness must be the ultimate aim for those of us who seek to dismantle anti-Blackness and white supremacy. Until then, however, we should highlight the presence of Black life and Black meaning that persists in the face of a world designed on its erasure.
Works Cited


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