



# SENTIENT FLESH

*THINKING IN DISORDER,*

*POIĒSIS IN BLACK*

R. A. JUDY

© 2004 R. A. JUDY

SENTIENT FLESH

BUY

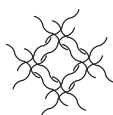
**DUKE**

**BLACK OUTDOORS** INNOVATIONS IN THE POETICS OF STUDY

*A series edited by J. Kameron Carter and Sarah Jane Cervenak*

**UNIVERSITY  
PRESS**

# SENTIENT FLESH



*THINKING IN DISORDER,*

*POIËSIS IN BLACK*

R.A. JUDY

DUKE

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS · *Durham and London* · 2020

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

© 2020 DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS

All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Designed by Matthew Tauch

Typeset in Garamond Premier Pro by Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Judy, R.A., [date] author.

Title: Sentient flesh : thinking in disorder, poiësis in black / R. A. Judy.

Other titles: Black outdoors.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2020. | Series: Black outdoors. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020013671 (print)

LCCN 2020013672 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478009962 (hardcover)

ISBN 9781478011026 (paperback)

ISBN 9781478012559 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Race—Psychological aspects. | African Americans—Race identity. |

Mind and body. | Race. | Critical theory.

Classification: LCC E185.625 .J839 2020 (print)

LCC E185.625 (ebook)

DDC 155.8/496073—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020013671>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020013672>

Cover art: David Hammons, *Close Your Eyes and See Black*, 1970. Photo courtesy of Tilton Gallery, New York.

DUKE

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

FOR SADIA ABBAS

*The Gifts of the Body are Better than those  
of the Mind, or of Fortune*

—JOHN DONNE

DUKE

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

|      |  |
|------|--|
| ix   | LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS                    |
| xi   | NOTES ON TRANSLATION AND TRANSLITERATION |
| xiii | PREFACE: PRELIMINARY SIGNPOSTS           |
| xxi  | ACKNOWLEDGMENTS                          |

CONTENTS

459  
545  
573

NOTES  
BIBLIOGRAPHY  
INDEX

**DUKE**

**UNIVERSITY  
PRESS**

1 Introduction: Body and Flesh

[ 1ST SET ]

25 *On Lobengrin's Swan*  
 25 A STYLE OF INTERIORITY AND THINKING  
 54 BY MODERNISM WITHOUT FLÂNERIE  
 86 ASYMPTOTIC THINKING  
 116 BY INTERIORITY FREE OF ESCHATOLOGY

150 *Sentient Flesh*  
 150 AN ONTOLOGICALLY DISCORDANT BEING  
 169 BY DISCREPANT TAXONOMY  
 179 A SEMIOSIS OF FLESH THINKING  
 200 BY FLESH SPEAKING SEMIOLOGICALLY

[ 2ND SET ]

215 *Sentient Flesh Dancing*  
 215 JUBA AND THE BUZZARD LOPE PLAY  
 232 ETHNOGRAPHIC EPISTĒMĒ ABUTS PERFORMATIVE TECHNĒ POIĒTIKĒ

252 *Poiēsis in Black*  
 252 CONSCIOUSNESS ARTICULATED WITH SEMIOSIS  
 263 DOCTRINE OF SUBMISSION WITH "THE RENAISSANCE OF ETHICS"

319 *Para-Semiosis*  
 322 ALL THAT COMES WITH PARAONTOLOGY  
 376 IN PARA-SEMIOSIS, DIVISIBLE PERSON US BE

419 *Coda: Gifting Blues Love-Improper*

DUKE

UNIVERSITY  
 PRESS



- 71    **FIGURE 1.1**    Arthur Dugmore, *Working by the Day in the Cotton Field*
- 72    **FIGURE 1.2**    Arthur Dugmore, *In the Cobbler's Shop*
- 73    **FIGURE 1.3**    Arthur Dugmore, *Her Week's Marketing*
- 74    **FIGURE 1.4**    Arthur Dugmore, *At Work Making Brooms*
- 75    **FIGURE 1.5**    Arthur Dugmore, *Learning to Shuffle Early, A Pickanny Cake Walk*
- 76    **FIGURE 1.6**    Arthur Dugmore, *"Big House" and Negro Quarters, Negro Cottages*
- 77    **FIGURE 1.7**    Arthur Dugmore, *A Negro School Near Albany, Georgia*
- 78    **FIGURE 1.8**    Arthur Dugmore, *A Typical Negro Store*
- 79    **FIGURE 1.9**    Arthur Dugmore, *Negro Woman Plowing in a Cotton Field*
- 80    **FIGURE 1.10**    Arthur Dugmore, *A Rest in the Furrow*
- 81    **FIGURE 1.11**    Arthur Dugmore, *Huts Near Albany, Georgia*
- 82    **FIGURE 1.12**    Arthur Dugmore, *Women from the Country, A Parson and Part of His Flock, On the Street*
- 83    **FIGURE 1.13**    Arthur Dugmore, *Log Cabin Home, Women "Sowing" Guano, A Friend of George Washington*
- 89    **FIGURE 1.14**    The Asymptotes of the Hyperbola
- 186    **FIGURE 2.1**    The Semiological Order of the Negro Problem
- 190    **FIGURE 2.2**    The Semiological Order of French Imperialism
- 270    **FIGURE 4.1**    Du Bois's Chart of the History of Thought in Western Christendom
- 273    **FIGURE 4.2**    Du Bois's "Lesson IV" Diagram

DUKE

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

All translations in this work are mine, unless otherwise indicated. In keeping with the key concept of *para-semiosis* at play here, languages such as Greek, Hebrew, and Arabic are given in their native transcription, followed by an italicized Latin-script transliteration, then an English-language translation. Rather than following the established convention, which calls for all subsequent occurrences of such “foreign” terms to be Latin transliteration, the tripartite pattern shall be constant throughout with few exceptions. The exceptions are quotations, chiefly in German, where Greek is given in the original; in such cases, the Greek is transliterated, followed by an English translation. This accords with the postulate that cognition and consciousness are articulated *with* semiosis, the material expression of which is integral to effective signification, as well as the corollary postulate that *para-semiosis* is the nonsynthesizing confluence of multiplicitous *semiosis*. The point in so persistently marking the material dynamics of transliteration is not to tediously and needlessly burden the reader, but rather to track iterations of *para-semiosis* entailed in the compositional form of *Sentient Flesh*—something that the established convention of having Latin-script transliteration displace the native obfuscates by muffling the phonetic and phonographic noise of the non-Latinate.

DUKE

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

## Preliminary Signposts

*Sentient Flesh* is a book about dynamic confluence that is composed in confluence. It exhibits what it exposit, and so is a working of *poiēsis*, a thinking-in-disorder, the enactment of which is called *para-semiosis*. The form it traces in chaos is arranged into two parts called “Sets.” Each Set has its moments, and each moment has its *ostinato* riffs. While the play of *para-semiosis* is to be at the crossroads of confluence without any resolution or synthesis, each moment and riff can be attended to in itself, although the flow will always carry the reader to multiplicitous crossroads, which will be encountered as interpolations of many discourses and knowledges: literary genre—short stories, novels, poetry—literary theory and philology; structuralism and semiotics; anthropology and ethnography; foundations of mathematics and number theory; philosophy, from classical Greek to twentieth-century phenomenology and existentialism, and the history of ideas; Arabic philosophy and scholasticism; music—spirituals, “folk music,” blues and jazz—and ethnomusicology; political economy and legislative history. Such multiplicitous interpolation has to do with the proposition that *Negro* is indicial of the circumstances of its genesis in North Atlantic commercial discourse as designator of a commodity asset—the casualness with which John Smith, writing from Jamestown colony in 1618, refers to the “Dutch man of warre that sold us twenty Negars” is indicative of how this denotation was already well established by the seventeenth century. Smith’s “Negars” is an anglicized transcription of the Dutch term for the commodity sold to the Jamestown colony, *Neger*.<sup>1</sup> Then again, the English use of

D U

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

*Negro* in reference to the same commodity asset long predates Smith's remark, as is evidenced by the numerous references in Richard Hakluyt's 1589 *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation*, to the Spanish commerce in Negroes in the Americas, one of which—Richard Grenville's account of the governor of Isabela, Hispaniola, coming to his ship "accompanied with a lusty frier, & xx. Other Spaniards, with their servants, & Negroes"—the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites as the earliest use of the term to specifically connote "a slave of black African origin or descent."<sup>2</sup> Besides the Dutch *Neger*, there are other well-known cognates and reputed etymons, such as the French *négre*, the Spanish *negro*, and the multilingual *nigger*. In this usage, the word *Negro*, along with all its cognates, entails an anthropological categorization, whereby those so designated belong to a physically distinct type of not fully human hominid, which is what makes them legitimately available as prospective commodity assets. While it is indeed the case that in every instance of its expression, *Negro* connotes the formations of political economy in the Atlantic World in modernity, it also has historical usage as an ethnographic designation for a specific population of people, "the Negro." In that designation, the term connotes not only the slave formed in capitalism but also the populations of people who may be enslaved, and who remain Negro after slavery's abolition. Yet even though that ethnographic sense of Negro contradicts the commercial *Negro* by recognizing the full humanity of the designated population, it is still within the ambit of the same anthropological categorization. There are moments in this work when I shall refer to the juridical designation in italics as *Negro*, and the ethnographic as Negro. There are also moments when the two connotations get confused. The confusion is unavoidable because both *Negro* and "the Negro" connote a type of human, whereby *human* denotes a type of being distinct from other extent life-forms. Thinking through how this anthropological categorization is underwritten by this metaphysics of being, by ontology, is part of the itinerary of *Sentient Flesh*; along the way, the historical practices of creative, dedicatedly emancipatory knowledges of those designated Negro are explored as entailing a radically different conceptualization of being from that implied by both the commercial and the ethnographic usages of the term. This work, then, is an involved generatively convoluted itinerary, for which a preliminary map might be useful.

#### 1st Set in Two Moments

FIRST MOMENT: "On *Lohengrin's Swan*" is an extended reading of W. E. B. Du Bois's short story "Of the Coming of John" as a poetic elaboration of his theory of the sociogenesis of human intelligence.

1ST RIFF: “A Style of Interiority and Thinking” explores Du Bois’s narrative style, analyzing closely how he depicts a particular impressionistic consciousness in a manner akin to what Charles Baudelaire describes as modernist, which is compared to Edgar Allen Poe’s depiction of consciousness in his short story “The Man of the Crowd.”

2ND RIFF: “By Modernism without Flânerie” contrasts the nature of the interiority depicted through John Jones in “Of the Coming of John” to that of Baudelaire’s *flâneur* and argues that Walter Benjamin’s elaboration of *flânerie* as the emblematic figure of modernism cannot comprehend Jones. This is an extended critique of normative bourgeois accounts of interiority and consciousness, from Wilhelm Dilthey to Benjamin, elaborating how Du Bois’s conceptual style reveals Negro consciousness as thoroughly modernist but not in accordance to the dominant paradigm of modernism.

3RD RIFF: “Asymptotic Thinking,” which takes its title from Du Bois’s own description to Herbert Aptheker in 1956 of his intellectual project, tracks the theoretical foundations of Du Bois’s depiction of Jones’s consciousness to his critical engagement with mathematics, specifically developments in analysis and number theory and its applications in statistical sociology. It establishes how Du Bois’s asymptotic thinking relates to Richard Dedekind’s work on number theory and Charles Sanders Peirce’s theory of semiosis.

4TH RIFF: “By Interiority Free of Eschatology” deepens the critique of the Baudelaire/Benjamin *flâneur* as emblematic of modernity by elaborating how Jones’s consciousness, here taken as exemplifying what Du Bois calls “double consciousness,” is free of the redemptive eschatological anticapitalism Benjamin discerns in the *flâneur*. Jones’s perception of the Swan Song in Wagner’s *Lohengrin* is explored as Du Bois’s depiction of a subjectivity, the expression of which is necessarily in relation to the world of things and others’ thinking—a subjectivity that is wholly semiotic, and in that way ethical.

SECOND MOMENT: “Sentient Flesh” takes up the question of sentient flesh through a consideration of the freedman Tom Windham’s remark, “We should have our liberty cause . . . us is human flesh.”

1ST RIFF: “An Ontologically Discordant Being” discusses the conflict between the subjectivity of negrophilic ethnography—exemplified by John Lomax’s domination of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) interview process in which Windham’s remark was recorded—and that which is both exposit and exhibited by Windham himself. This other subjectivity is indicative of a taxonomy of being different from the one being utilized by the ethnographer; it is one in which flesh is paramount.

2ND RIFF: “By Discrepant Taxonomy” expounds on the taxonomy of flesh evoked by Windham’s remark encompassing a range of animal life. Situating

Windham's remark in relation to Frederick Douglass's complaint of taxonomic confusion expressed throughout his published work, this riff establishes that Windham's "us is human flesh" challenges the Aristotelian distinction between free rational humans and animality, proffering an understanding of being flesh as entitlement enough to liberty.

3RD RIFF: "A Semiosis of Flesh Thinking" presents a careful reading of Hortense Spillers's exploration of the relationship between fleshliness and persona. Focusing on Spillers's concept of the hieroglyphics of flesh, this riff extrapolates a theory of vestibularity according to which the contestation between the enslaved from Africa and the capitalist system of slavery is accounted for as that of distinct semiological systems.

4TH RIFF: "By Flesh Speaking Semiologically" is where the nonontological nature of that semiology, exemplified by Windham's "us is human flesh," is first explored by showing how Spillers's hieroglyphics of flesh, while deploying elements of Roland Barthes's semiology, does not rely upon or embrace its underlying phenomenology. Rather than giving temporal primacy to flesh as the stolen sign, Windham's statement presumes that meaning and form are expressed contemporaneously: flesh is *with* and not *before* the body and person, and the body and person are *with* and not *before* or even *after* the flesh.

xvi

## 2nd Set in Three Moments

FIRST MOMENT: "Sentient Flesh Dancing" explores two forms of song and dance, Juba and the Buzzard Lope, which were performed by both slaves and their postemancipation descendants, as a signifying system that is contradictory and appositional to capitalism's commodification of the body.

1ST RIFF: "Juba and the Buzzard Lope Play" takes up Frederick Douglass's account of Juba beating as a carnivalesque ritual deployed by the slaveholders to suppress insurrection by "authorizing" regular symbolic actions of resistance. Arguing against that construal of the dance, it reads Juba as an enjoyment of the flesh in and of itself in communion. The performance of beating the flesh in complex polyrhythms contradicts the violence enacted on the flesh by slavery in order to yield the disciplined body. Along these lines, the riff explores another dance that is reported by the amateur ethnologist Lydia Parrish and recorded by the ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax, called the Buzzard Lope, which also expresses and enhances sentience without denying animality.

2ND RIFF: "Ethnographic Epistēmē Abuts Performative Technē Poiētikē" recounts how Lomax's collection of "authentic" African American music, chiefly from the Georgia Sea Islands, constitutes an official archive at the expense of the living transmission of performative *poiēsis in black*. Here is where

the theory of *para-semiosis* is developed as the dynamic constitution of the world in the recombinant fluidity of multiple enactments of referentiality, whereby being human is enunciated in the flow. It is also where *poiēsis in black* is discussed as an instantiation of that *para-semiosis*.

SECOND MOMENT: “Poiēsis in Black” revisits Windham’s assertion of basic freedom as flesh to elaborate how Du Bois’s insistence on using the term *Negro* entails a theory of semiosis and human being that is nonontological.

1ST RIFF: “Consciousness Articulated with Semiosis” explores how the connotative history of *Negro* indexes the problematic of the capacity of the flesh to embody values of *person* in accord with the semiological system of emergent Enlightenment Europe—self-awareness, full self-possession of motive will and desire, liberty—while also, in accord with that same order, embodying values of property—real estate, personal, and chattel property.

2ND RIFF: “Doctrine of Submission with ‘The Renaissance of Ethics’” carefully interrogates Du Bois’s unpublished 1890 essay, “The Renaissance of Ethics,” to show the extent to which such performance forms as Juba and Buzzard Lope are related to a radical critique of the tradition of philosophical ontology. This is then related to Du Bois’s 1890 Harvard commencement speech, “Jefferson Davis as a Representative of Civilization,” in which he postulates a doctrine of Submissive Man as the basis for a theory of human civilization contra the dominant historiography of individual virtue through might or strength, thereby construing the Negro in terms other than victim, or subjugated pariah.

THIRD MOMENT: “Para-Semiosis” is the elaboration of the theoretical concept *para-semiosis* as the dynamic of differentiation operating in multiple multiplicities of semiosis that converge without synthesis. This is what is referred to in the blues, but also in numerous instantiations of “Africanisms” across the New World, as *being-at-the-crossroads*.

1ST RIFF: “All That Comes with Paraontology” is an extensive engagement with Nahum Chandler’s and Fred Moten’s use of the term *paraontology*. After tracing Chandler’s use to Oscar Becker and Martin Heidegger through Jacques Lacan’s concept of *parêtre*, it underscores that lineage’s investment in the historical project of philosophical ontology, and then takes up the problem posed by the Negro qua primitive to that project. It has four gestures:

- 1 *Worldliness*, which is an analysis of Heidegger’s effort to discover fundamental ontology.
- 2 *Historicity*, which relates Heidegger’s project to that of his colleague and friend, Oskar Becker, who developed the concept of paraontology as a corrective augmentation of Heidegger’s phenomenological analysis.



- 3 *Primitive Thingliness*, which considers how both Heidegger and Becker expressly flounder in their respective projects with regard to the semiosis of black people.
- 4 *The They of Primitive We*, which accounts for that falling as a function of their primitivism and raciology. The argument is that Heidegger's admitted failure to be able to account for the signification of blacks, while acknowledging that they are indeed signifying human beings, speaks to the severe limits of the ontological project, its inability to say anything truly meaningful about anything not subsumable to the philosophical project. At issue in that inability is the limitation of personhood only to those entities that adhere to the philosophical concept of individuation, which is the indivisible integrity of subjective consciousness.

2ND RIFF: "In Para-Semiosis, Divisible Person Us Be" presents an account of personhood that is documented among various populations in Africa, as well as among those in the New World who were taken from Africa and enslaved as Negro. It begins by contrasting Heidegger's account of primitive semiosis to those of Maurice Leenhardt, Roger Bastide, and Geneviève Calame-Griaule, showing that the absence of an indivisible subject is not a flaw or failure, but rather a viable way of being. It also entails four gestures:

- 1 *Us Ain't Paraontological* relates the ethnographic reports of divisible personhood to the previously described performances of Juba and Buzzard Lope, as well as the practitioners' exegeses of what they are doing, and postulates that this is an aspect of *para-semiosis* as a widespread mode of human being. *Poiēsis in black*, as an instantiation of such *para-semiosis*, is characterized as thinking-in-disorder, which is not *para* or *contra* ontology; it simply has nothing to do with ontology.
- 2 *Para-Semiosis of Being in-Flight-with-One-Another* takes up the question of nowhere to consider what is blackness as an aspect of a life in common. In the aftermath of working our way through the project of philosophical ontology so as to leave it behind us, this gesture takes up Moten's question: What is blackness as an aspect of a life in common? Along these lines, the thinking-in-action concomitant with the advent of Negro as an embodiment of sentient flesh—that is to say, *poiēsis in black*—is considered as thinking-in-disorder. The moment at which the ontological project, by means of its derived juridico-legislative discourse of polity, decrees *Negro* indexes that project's failure at achieving a necessary universal account of existence qua existence, and hence a universal definition of the human. Saying, *Negro*, is indicial of a perennial crisis of ontology is not to say that *poiēsis in black*, although emergent in that crisis, is circumscribed by ontology. Rather, it is *in dynamis*, in active flight, moving according to un-ontological *para-semiosis*.



- 3 *Love Ain't Sacrificial* returns to "Of the Coming of John" in order to elaborate on Du Bois's "Doctrine of Sacrifice," showing how it is not a form of quietist submission, but rather a rejection of *caritas*, Christian love, in favor of a non-sacrificial, nonproprietary care for fellow beings. Following this reasoning, Du Bois maintains that community founded on the Pauline and Johannine gospel of love cannot bring about a viable ethical community on earth precisely because its prerequisite is fulfillment in the afterlife.
- 4 *Para-Semiosis, Poiēsis in Black, and Love-Improper* considers how, in rejecting the Pauline and Johannine gospel of love that hopes for the end-of-days and after-life, Du Bois's "Gospel of Sacrifice" calls us to embrace the very love Nietzsche attributes to aristocratic virtue, the love of living, of fulfillment in community of the living, but *without* the proprietary force Nietzsche gives it. The sacrifice Du Bois advocates does not stem from a love of that which is mine through force of arm or will, or which I can assimilate to myself in mimicry. It is what we might call *improper-love*, love that does not seek to comprehend the other; it does not bring the object of love into grasp, into the fold of a proper self, but encounters and opens the self up to its incomprehensibility. We may well think of it as the love of *poiēsis in black*. Insofar as that *poiēsis* is a function of *para-semiosis*, it is a potentiality-of-being that might attend multiple, multiplicious embodiments of flesh. While indissolubly associated with Negro embodiment, *poiēsis in black* as semiosis is not identical with black people, even though it indisputably belongs with them. Once we have left the line of philosophical ontology, the more generative question may be broached: What does the *para-semiosis* of *poiēsis in black* have in common with other embodiments of flesh? Can *para-semiosis* be a commonplace whereby a planetary worldliness of vestibularity enables multiplicious possibilities? Considering the multiplicious possibilities of *para-semiosis* as commonplace entails radically reimagining what is human.

Coda: "Gifting Blues Love-Improper"

This is a preliminary exploration of two such instantiations of *para-semiosis* that, while in resonant engagement with the love-improper of *poiēsis in black*, is neither derivative of nor identical with it. One instantiation is the Algerian writer, Nabile Farès's encounter with James Baldwin presented in his novel, *Un passager de l'occident*. The other is the writing of the Algerian Arabic writer aṭ-Ṭāhir Waṭṭār, which demonstrates an Arabic-expressed *para-semiosis*. This resonant conversation without the necessity of identity bespeaks the possibility of a human love that is non-agapeic and so not sacrificial, but also not egocentric.

D U O I E

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

The genesis of “On *Lohengrin’s* Swan” was a talk entitled “Sur la question du nègre: *Ames noires: essais et nouvelles* par W. E. B. Du Bois et la figure de récit,” which I was invited to give by Didier Coste in 2002 for his conference *Récit émergent, récit renaissant: 1859–1939*, at the Centre de Recherche sur les Modernités Littéraires, Université de Bordeaux 3. An abridged version of “On *Lohengrin’s* Swan” was published in 2015 under the title “*Lohengrin’s* Swan and the Style of Interiority in ‘Of the Coming of John’” in “Philology and the Future of Thinking,” a special issue of the *New Centennial Review*, thanks to its editor, Nahum Dimitri Chandler. Portions of “Sentient Flesh” were presented at the Futures of America Summer Institute at Dartmouth College in 2016 and 2018, each occasion for which I am deeply thankful to Donald Pease. Another portion was presented at the Orientale American Studies Summer Institute at Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale” in 2018, thanks to the generous invitation of Donatella Izzo. Many colleagues, close friends, and loved ones have contributed to and encouraged this endeavor, as well as patiently awaited its outcome. To list all of them would take quite a few pages. But without meaning to slight any, I single out a few. Fred Moten has been a most invaluable interlocutor, as have Hortense Spillers, Donald Pease, Roy Kay, Richard Purcell, and Joe Razza. Thanks to J. Kameron Carter and Sarah Jane Cervenak, editors of the Black Outdoors: Innovations in the Poetics of Study series, for having seen something worthwhile in this endeavor. While the writing of a book is truly a solitary affair, its production is a collective endeavor involving many crafts, or as I am wont to say, *technē poiētikē*. This work would not have seen the light of day without the efforts of Kenneth Wissoker, Joshua Tranen, Jessica Ryan, and the entire production team at Duke. Among those who have cast glances at portions of this work and generously engaged its promise are Wlad Godzich, Didier Coste, Jim Merod, Kevin Bell, and Nahum Chandler. Among those who have patiently waited are my good friends Tony Bogue, Donald Pease, and Paul Bové. Not least of those who wait have been my children, Ashnfara, Alejandra, Javier Sidi Mansour, and Lucia Mari-Hilda. They have suffered innumerable days and nights of abandonment as I wrote and wrote and wrote . . . what my sister, Dyann, came to call “the book without end.” Finally, there are more reasons than I can enumerate for why this work is dedicated to Sadia Abbas, whose imagination, astuteness, tenacity, and care convinced me it needed to be done, and who waited most of all.

DUKE

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

καὶ τοῦτ' ἦν ὁ καλούμενος ὑπ' αὐτῶν 'συγκρητισμός.  
(And that is their so-called *Syncretism*.)

PLUTARCH · *Moralia*

We knew that something was Jes Grewing just  
like the 1890s flair up. . . . Don't you understand,  
if this Jes Grew becomes pandemic it will mean  
the end of civilization As We Know It.

ISHMAEL REED · *Mumbo Jumbo*

I think we should have our liberty cause us  
ain't hogs or horses—us is human flesh.

THOMAS WINDHAM

## Body and Flesh

The last epigraphic remark is taken from the three-page typewritten transcript of an interview with the ninety-two-year-old freedman Tom Windham conducted by Bernice Bowden at Pine Bluff, Arkansas, sometime in 1937. This was one of the 696 done in the state over a two-year period under the aegis of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Writers' Project, 677 of which were submitted to the WPA Writers Unit of the Library of Congress to be eventually compiled for archiving, along with those of sixteen other participating states, into the seventeen-volume *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*. Claiming the human entitlement of freedom is not at all extraordinary in the context of the WPA project mandate, which was to record the experiences and memories of those who had endured enslavement before they passed away. What's more, throughout the period during which these interviews were conducted, from April 1937 to August 1939, there was a sharp recession precipitated by Federal Reserve monetary policy that prolonged the worst effects of the Great Depression, which for black folk like Windham resulted in amplified peonage and forced labor under incarceration. So, claims of deserving freedom attended by comparisons with the conditions of antebellum slavery were par for the course throughout the entire interview qua narrative collection. Even so, asserting humanity as a predicate of the flesh rather than a condition of being beyond the flesh was remarkable. In stating "us is human flesh," Windham evokes a taxonomy of flesh encompassing a range of animal life; more precisely hogs, horses,

2

and humans, all of which, in strictly zoological terms, belong to the class of vertebrate, neocortical, eutherian mammals. His privative “ain’t” introduces a subdivision within that zoological class along the lines of a punctuated continuum of sentience moving from the basic to complex. On the one hand, there is the vital biological commonality of animal flesh, which may be sentient in a rudimentary sense of having the capacity to perceive and respond to the environment sufficiently enough to live actively without any signs of self-awareness or having psychological states, something we ascribe to hogs and horses. On the other hand, there is the manifest self-aware possession of psychological states and of being in relation to others and other things, which is associated with *Homo sapiens*. In this sense, Windham’s “ain’t” articulates a taxonomy of sentient flesh, which interpolates zoology and anthropology. Of course, the full force of his privative is directed at another, albeit related, taxonomy: the political economy of modern capitalist slavery, within which Windham, as a slave, belonged to the class of chattel property, along with the hogs and horses. In that political economic taxonomy, the flesh is valued for what it can produce in assets. This is a matter of speculation as much as it is of consumption in use. And, in that regard, asserting “us is human flesh” acknowledges the vital biological commonality—the form of life—while rejecting evaluation as chattel. Focusing on the rejection in her glossing of Windham’s remark alongside those of another freedman named Charlie Moses, Saidiya Hartman understands him to be saying “the flesh, existence defined at its most elemental level, alone entitled one to liberty.”<sup>1</sup> She then takes this to be his invocation of universal rights and entitlements based on humanism, well aware this same “discourse of humanism . . . was double-edged since [in accordance with Enlightenment anthropology] the life and liberty they [the slaves] held in esteem were racial entitlements denied them. . . . Thus, in taking up the language of humanism,” she concludes, “they seized upon that which had been used against and denied them.”<sup>2</sup> Yet the so-called discourse of humanism is vexed on the question of the flesh.

On the face of it, Windham’s claim of entitlement to liberty seems to imply the distinction between the human as animal and the person as a social being with inalienable natural rights. Were it doing just that, however, it would not be all that remarkable, but simply a fair summary paraphrasing of Frederick Douglass’s well-publicized arguments against slavery as a violation of the natural law expressed in the Declaration of Independence because, while its criminal codes offer “acknowledgment that the slave is a moral, intellectual, and responsible being,” it denies that same slave full personhood.<sup>3</sup> Douglass’s objection was well grounded in Enlightenment natural rights theory, particularly the liberalist concept of individual freedom found in Locke’s political philosophy, as articulated in *The Two Treatises of Government*, but also the concept

of personal identity given in his epistemology laid out in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. The latter work, being conceptually foundational for the first, makes a hard distinction between the identity of biological man, which as an animal is a life-form consisting of constantly fleeting particles of matter in succession, vitally united to the same organized body—that fleshly thing—and the person as a social entity with inalienable rights, as well as moral and political responsibilities. Locke defined person as “a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places.”<sup>4</sup> In the Lockean sense, the person is attached to a body, or stands in a principal proprietary relationship to the flesh, disciplining it to embody a specific consciousness. By that same account, the idea in our minds signified by *man* is not merely any rational animal, let alone any sentient one, but rather a rational animal of a specific bodily form. “For I presume it is not the idea of a thinking or rational being alone that makes the idea of man in most people’s sense,” Locke states, “but of a body, so and so shaped, joined to it.”<sup>5</sup> Locke’s liberalism is problematized around the question of slavery, however. According to his epistemology, anthropologically, an individual human cannot be alienated from himself in body but is consistently and continually himself throughout the material existence, the life span of the body. His political theory of government, on the other hand, argues that an individual can be legitimately alienated from his rights *as a person* due to war—more precisely, by becoming the defeated aggressor in war, which implies an ethical judgment. What makes this even more vexed a matter is that during the time he was writing *The Two Treatises of Government*, Locke had a substantial hand in drafting the 1669 *Fundamental Constitution of the Carolinas*, clause 110 of which states: “Every Freedman of the Carolinas has absolute power and authority over his negro slaves, of what opinion or religion whatsoever.”<sup>6</sup> The pertinent point here is that the Carolina Constitution’s stipulating absolute proprietary power and authority over what it designates as “negro slaves” exceeds the limited paternal power Locke defines in the *Second Treatise* and is more in line with the Roman Law postulate *vitae necisque potestas* (power of life and death), making it akin to the illegitimate despotic political power of monarchy against which he contrasts the parental. The specificity of this stipulation indicates a relationship of person and body unique to the so-designated negro slave, who, not having been taken in war but purchased as property, is made an exception to natural rights. The basis for that distinction is in the capitalist process of enslavement—which clearly violates Locke’s precept of legitimate alienation from rights—whereby the term *negro* designates a commodity asset that, while hominid, is not fully human. As far as this type of hominid is concerned, personhood is diminished or otherwise alienated in relation to the body, and the body has no rights.

Douglass, in his argument against slavery, while adhering to the Lockean proposition of the inherent freedom in natural personhood, asserts, contra the proposition implicit in the *Fundamental Constitution of the Carolinas*, that full personhood is a universal property in every instance of bodies with generally the same form; that is to say, it belongs to all *Homo sapiens*, irrespective of superficial physiognomic variation. The *person* has rights irrespective of the body. Windham's "we should have our liberty cause . . . us is human flesh" strikes an altogether more strident note of discord with Lockean natural rights theory, however, postulating it is the person *of* not *in* the flesh who has inviolable rights. An additionally noteworthy detail of Windham's assertion in this regard is the complete absence of any theological reference. Entitlement to liberty is not based on divine endowment or any other claim of transcendent purpose, nor even on providential or evolutionary teleology. It simply is a fact of the very nature of human flesh. And so, his privative rebuts the market evaluation without appealing to transcendence. Lacking as it does even a residual trace of the transcendent postulate, Windham's "us is human flesh" moves us away from the theological, as well as the metaphysical tendency of thought, the tendency to think the *I* that falls into the world of things, having its reality beyond them. We may well ask: What does it mean, however, to say flesh alone as existence defined at its most elemental level entitles one to liberty? What is the relationship between flesh and *one*? Is *one* predicable of flesh, or is flesh a predicate of the *one*?

Addressing this question, it is useful to distinguish between *person* in the quasi-biological Lockean sense to which Douglass adheres, and person as a social role. Better still, we gain a better sense of what is in play with Windham's declamation, when we take into account that the etymon of *person* is the Latin term *persona*, which connotes the performative assumption of character—what the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as "the aspect of a person's character that is displayed to or perceived by others." While this initially denoted a theatrical mask akin to, and possibly derived from, the Greek term πρόσωπον (*próspon*), by the time of Justinian's *Corpus juris civilis*, it denoted a legal disposition that, contrary to the modern Lockean construal, was not affixed to a natural body. The thing to bear in mind here is that in each of those usages, *persona* connotes a determinate discursive sociality, rather than a state of nature. Bearing this in mind, according to the order of knowledge subtending modern capitalist slavery, to which Windham's testimonial remark refers, the crucial rift is between sentient animality and fully entitled humanity. This particular rift is enacted and sustained through systemic techniques of severing the captive enslaved body from its motive will and active desire, the latter being markers of personhood. The purpose of the system is not to completely eradicate motive will and desire, but rather to circumscribe them within it, seizing their efficacy in the



service of economic value. We can say, then, that motive-will and desire are distorted, not erased, by the rift, a distortion that has been given the name of civilization. On one side of the divide is the captured individual, the particular process of whose individuation as a social being is in relation to, but not based on physically embodied presence. Whatever the particularities of that process of sociality, whatever its relational terms of identification and individuation, the *persona* articulated is its signifier. Simply put, the phenomenal body *purports* an order of signification, a semiological system, which is heterogeneous to that of capitalist slavery. In keeping with received representational practice, we can refer to this system and its sign as *African*. The rift demarcates civilization's interdicting the fluidity of this semiological system. Interdiction is not total eradication, however, and, *pace* Orlando Patterson's postulate of social death, elements of the African semiological system are subsequently iterated, albeit modified and adjusted on account of slavery—to wit, the barbaric elements of supposedly purely African origin in the “Negro song” that John Lomax, and later his son Alan, sought to collect and archive. What falls on the other side of the rift, then, is the *African* transformed in the interdiction of the semiological system for which the *persona* is a signifier into *enslaved captive body*, which is a signifier of particular value in the economy of slavery as an altogether alien order of meaningful sociopolitical living.

5

We can express this relationship as *African/enslaved captive body*. The dividing line is both conjunctive and transitive, symbolizing the activity of interdictory transformation. It presents the *African* as such; which is to say, as both the residual sign of a prior order of signification and a signifier of value in slavery's order. Yet, even though the supposedly indigenous meaningfulness is rendered inoperative, the efficacy of motive and desire implicated in it is not, becoming instead “liberated” from the first-order semiological system and made available to the economy of slavery in the form of the *enslaved captive body*. This semiological activity is the theft of the body, which can be read in the double sense of the physical capture of bodies from West Africa but also the *enslaved captive body's* robbing the *persona* of its referentiality. We can, thus, just as easily recast the rift as being between *body* and *flesh*, with *flesh* functioning in place of *persona* as the synecdoche of the semiological system from which the *enslaved captive body* steals. “In that sense,” as Hortense Spillers has said, “before the ‘body’ there is the ‘flesh,’ that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography.”<sup>7</sup> What does it mean, however, to state that before the body there is the flesh? An even more probative question is: How does the flesh, formally expressed as the enslaved captive body, become Negro?

The articulated flesh become Negro, of course, is not tabula rasa. Human flesh, by definition, or at least by the definition taken from Windham's remark,

6

is always already marked as interpolated in some signifying system, some thinking on the cosmic arrangement of things. Any discernable, not easily placed residuum of the dynamics—*δύναμις* (*dunamis*) in the Aristotelian sense of potentiality as a thing's capacity to be in a different more complete state—of those systems at play in the flesh prior to its entering modernity's cultural vestibularity gets assigned as *African*. We might well take this assignment as synonymous with Rousseau's hypothetical *savage*, the archaic human passing on the way to civilized society. Only, whereas Rousseau's savage is compelled by the interaction of exchange to make the passage in order to become a proprietary social subject, in this instance, the interaction *civilizes* the African as capital of the exchange system. The procedures of racialized capitalist modernity seek the energy—in the sense of “is-at-work-ness” denoted by another Aristotelian term, *ἐνέργεια* (*energeia*), which is in relation to the just-mentioned sense of *dunamis*—of motive-will and desire bound up with the flesh and body associated with the person of the prior African semiological system. The implication being that the modern capitalist semiological order acquires, or as we say, steals the potential of the prior system *in actuality* as the Negro body. The fruit of this theft is *le nègre* codified by the Marquis de Seignelay in Louis XIV's 1685 *Code Noir* as fungible property—“les esclaves être meubles, & comme tels entrent en la communauté [the slave is fungible property and enters the community as such].” *Le nègre* (Negro), thus, connotes in law racialized human capital, which is an alienable asset used but not consumed in the production of goods and services. And that asset's appreciation and depreciation is calculated relative to real as well as prospective use. What gets destroyed in this process, or rather what is supposed to be destroyed but is more aptly speaking parenthesized, is any semiological order that negates or otherwise compromises the Negro's capital value. In other words, any articulation of person, including gender, that contradicts capital value is supposed to be deracinated. Accordingly, the rift between flesh and body demarcates the distance between culture and, let us say for argument's sake, nature. The rift is not a singular event or action, but is rather an ongoing processual activity through and in which individual consciousness has actual presence in the order of things. We can say, then, that individual consciousness is a cognitive articulation of some process of sociality wherein biological, cultural, linguistic, ritualistic, and psychological fortunes converge—which is what is meant by the historicity of consciousness, its quality of being historically situated with and in the world.

Windham's assertion, “us is human flesh,” instantiates this historicity; which is to say, it evokes the processual nature of the entire order of things. In a remarkably straightforward way, he is simply stating in respect to flesh: “us is it.” The copula here functions as a sign of equality rather than attribution, situating person in some relational schema *with* things. In Windham's assertion

DUKE

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS



of liberty, us is not *in this flesh*. By that same token, the actual living person is not predicable of the thingness of flesh; us is not *a piece of flesh*, but rather us *is flesh*. To the extent that Windham's "us is human flesh" implicitly postulates an irreducible elemental level of existence, it is *flesh/person*. This bifurcation is not to be confused with the one backing Western ontological tradition's underlying presumption (inclusive of the entire range of the humanities as well as natural sciences) that the world and consciousness are distinct orders of being, which the full force of philosophical/scientific thought, ἐπιστήμη (*epistēmē*) must contrive to reunite in recollection; a way of thinking Merleau-Ponty once aptly characterized as *pensées de survol*, "fly-over surveying thought."<sup>8</sup> Along this line of thinking, it is only within the purview of a particular subject-of-knowledge capable of seeing things that meaning is affixed to them, that their significance as things is determined *in being seen*.

Windham's "us is human flesh" troubles this orientation in a way that cannot be easily dismissed. Rather than giving temporal primacy to flesh as the stolen sign, his statement presumes that meaning and form are expressed spontaneously: the flesh is *with* and not *before* the body and person, and the body and person are *with* and not *before* or even *after* the flesh. Windham's person *is* in relation to his generally perceived fleshly thingness. It is not a representation of substance *for* some mind that, extricating it from the vagueness of things (the noumenality of being) through the transcendental activity of cogitation, might claim to *see* it. Neither is Windham's personal consciousness the expression of such transcendentality, parenthesizing the flesh so that the body can be experienced as the bridge connecting agential intellectuality and the world of physical things. The point being that Windham's person is inextricably of the flesh, lives life as flesh. The flesh Windham speaks of is material, but it is not embodied, in the sense of corpuscles that combine to form a discrete entity. This flesh is not a fact or sum of facts. This flesh is not consecrated, nor could it ever have been consecrated. The long history of its consumption is not sacrificial, nor is it purely capitalistic. Douglass's distinction between devouring hard earnings and feeding on flesh catches the issue quite rightly. Returning, for a moment, to the earlier-mentioned legal definition of Negro as an alienable capital asset (*le nègre être meubles*), when this definition is embodied, that body, that Negro body, with all its inherent mental and physical capacities, is owned fully by its proprietor. Said proprietor also owns any use-value engendered or produced therewith, the commodification of which results in revenue—or as Douglass says, "earnings"—that is consumable by definition, leaving the body, a capital asset, to continue producing more over an extended time: a lifetime. The flesh of that same body, however, as a legal property of unfettered access, is the object of unbounded desire—the flesh of the slave belongs to one as much

as one's own flesh does, there being no personal other associated with it, no sovereign subject who is necessarily recognized as having superior prerogative. *This is the gist of Husserl's objection to the juridical treatment of human beings as things: it undermines the person of intersubjectivity; which is to say, it ultimately interferes with the actuality of human community.*

8 Feeding on the flesh has no capital use-value. Whether done through sexual violence, wherein the flesh feeds carnal desire as elemental, or through physical torture, when pieces of flesh are cut away and discarded, cooked, or branded, or when such flesh is fed to dogs, worms, or even other human beings, the act of consumption belongs to a condition of pleasure that is fueled by and sustains structures of desire and imagination epiphenomenal to the capitalist economics of slavery. "Whipping darkies was the joy of the white man back in those days," an ex-slave told Ophelia Settle Egypt of Fisk University in a 1929 interview.<sup>9</sup> Such enjoyment was inseparable from the expenditure and ravishment of the flesh, to paraphrase Hartman.<sup>10</sup> There is no redemption or salvation derived from this consumption of flesh; just sheer delight in the consumption, which abolitionists such as Lydia Maria Child and Theodore Dwight Weld abhorred and denounced as non-Christian and corrosive to the moral and social fabric of the republic. What was less apprehensible to them was how the scale of the quotidian enactments of violence against the Negro body was a practical actualization of the underlying speculative epistemology of modernity, which operates on the basis of its presumptive capacity to assimilate everything, all existence, to its structures: the theory of everything. Again, the flesh of Windham's statement is not consecrated, nor could it ever have been consecrated. It reverberates with the sense of the indissoluble animality of the human. "Us" connotes the actuality of human flesh thinking in the world and expresses that thinking in a communicative system of meaningful signification of the world. "Us" is performing subjectivity, which, in contradistinction to the transcendental ego-subject of theology and modern metaphysics, does not ground sociality but is articulated by and in relation to it—the myriad actualizations of which are in accord with the myriad possibilities of the actualized world, within its horizons, so to speak; and so speaking is to speak of a *nonegocentric* world. This not to say that there is no ego-subject, but that it does not exist a priori, or prior to the world, and is, in fact, given by the world in the continuous dynamic process of the meaningful signification of reality as *semiosis*, construing this to be the sort of mimetic activity Aristotle sought to describe. "Us" is fully cosmological, exscribing being-in-the-world while simultaneously being elemental to the world. The word need not become flesh; it was already flesh. Nor need flesh become parenthesized in order that the word, the transcendental ego-subject, can be seen in an attitude of mystical discovery. The issue is not about seeing, or even touching the flesh. It is about being flesh. To restate this

for the sake of a certain clarity, “Us” represents nothing but *signifies* everything. It can be said that in his taxonomy of sentient flesh, Windham’s anthropological distinction demarcates a profoundly semiotic *form of life*. Going one step further, it can also be said that cognition and consciousness are articulated *with* semiosis, in which our concepts and ideas are signs. Cognition as semiosis is neither an a priori—as in divinely revealed, or providential—nor merely an epiphenomenon of the flesh; it is actualized in the process of semiosis. Human flesh is sentient *in semiosis*—or to use a more familiar, although no less daunting expression, in its language-games.

*Sentient Flesh: Thinking in Disorder, Poiēsis in Black* is an interrogation of the relationship between the terms *Negro*, *poiēsis*, and *humanism*. The focus of that attention is the indicial force of the nominative. Names do more than designate things; they indicate an orientation in life, not in some abstract nominalist sense, but in the sense of a grammar that emerges out of a set of human practices in life that work in the creation of the world. In this sense, they are material indices of a particular semiosis. And, as shall be argued throughout this work, they may well be indices of multiplicitous semiosis, a dynamics referred to here as *para-semiosis*. Giving a full account of what *para-semiosis* means is the work of *Sentient Flesh*. The thing to keep in mind at this moment is the issue of what the usages of *Negro* and *poiēsis* have to do with each other and *humanism* as designators. The focus here is on the relationship between *poiēsis* and *humanism*; or rather, it is on a certain history of knowledge that presumptively identifies itself with humanism, with *the* humanism, as if there were such a thing, and claims *poiēsis* as its unique definitive property.

Returning to Spillers’s saying flesh comes before the body, the statement, which stems from her extended exploration of the relationship between fleshliness and persona, suggests the physiological basis of consciousness and intelligence. But if intelligence is always embodied, regardless of the morphology—so that intelligence is everywhere—then does that mean human flesh necessarily entails human intelligence, and if so, what is the character of that intelligence? Furthermore, to the extent that there are variations in the human morphology, however slight, does that suggest variations of intelligence? These questions are at least as old as Kant’s anthropology, beginning with his precritical essays *Of the Different Races of Human Beings* (1775) and *Determination of the Concept of Race* (1785), reaching a critical crescendo with *On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy*, published the same year as his *Critique of Practical Reason*, 1788. Kant’s theoretical engagement with these questions yields a theory of race that is physiological not moral; that is to say, it seemingly has little to do with his universalist moral theory, set out in *Toward Perpetual Peace* (1795). His postulating a natural hierarchy of races—delineated according to physiognomic distinctions held to be indicative of cognitive capacities, with

darker races, particularly the Negro and Amerind at the bottom and so most cognitively deficient—while also postulating that the realization of universal morality is grounded in the sovereignty of reason, yields an antinomy. It is an antinomy precisely because both Kant's theory of race and his theory of universal morals are *grounded* in reason. Yet, how can those who are existentially deficient in reason have access to the universal morals based on reason? Kant's answer, expressed in *On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy*, is that those races with deficient capacity of reason, particularly the Negro, fit within the imagined cosmopolitan order as a permanent labor force directed by Europeans.<sup>11</sup> Regarding Spillers's meditations on human flesh in light of Kant, the crucial question becomes: Is human flesh sentient flesh, and if it is, what makes it human?

10

That is the keynote question of *Sentient Flesh: Thinking in Disorder, Poïēsis in Black*, and it launches an exploration of what Du Bois refers to as “the thousand and one little actions which go to make up the group life taken as a whole” of those portions of humanity designated Negro. We might well term these *practices-of-living* to indicate their dynamic aspect as a doing of being in the world in relation to its conceptualization, but also their conventionality; that is, they entail transmissible traditions of knowing-how, comprising lineages of thinking about the human condition in the midst of the existential disorder attending the political economy of capitalism's advent as a global order, with its concomitant system of racialized slavery and colonialism. While that economy itself has been rigorously organized and predicated on a rigidly bifurcated order of being—*humans* and those *things* humans create, possess, and appropriate—its becoming a planet-wide system entailed the disarticulation of *practices-of-living-in-common* from their cosmogonies. In other words, interpolation into capitalism's terms of order, to paraphrase Cedric Robinson,<sup>12</sup> results in the dissolution of long-enduring formations of human community, engendering cosmic disorder by throwing disparate cosmogonies together under the anthropological rubric *primitive*. This term has a rather broad connotation, comprehending both an original inhabitant, an aboriginal, and a person belonging to a preliterate nonindustrial society, but also ancestral early man, or anything else that is archaic. It has been inclusively applied to a wide array of types of *natives*—also a conceptual category—engendered along the way in capitalism's global expansion and colonial rule. Not all colonial natives are designated primitive, however; there are those who belong to age-old civilizations, the effects of which, according to the narrative of *translatio*, transferred westward to feed the foundations of capitalism—outstanding examples of which are China, India, and most of the Muslim world. The distinction of having been civilizationally long-in-the-tooth does not mitigate the disordering effects of capitalist expansion, however. On the contrary, being construed as

archaic civilizational formations surpassed by Western capitalist modernity is another sense of primitive and tends to exacerbate the disordering effects with an aura of civilizational degradation and loss of authenticity. Terminologically, *primitive* and *Negro* share the same semantic space to the point of synonymy. Those populations designated Negro, however, are seemingly always primitive, this attributed state playing a role, almost as a neo-Aristotelian afterthought, in legitimating their designation: the absurdly Hegelian argument that the primitive, enslaved and made Negro, enters into civilization and thus benefits from the transformation. Be that as it may, whether as Negro, primitive, or native, all are subsumed by the logic of capitalist production and propriety, and so compelled to think in disorder.

This *thinking-in-disorder* is akin to what Alejo Carpentier sought to depict in the style he termed *lo real maravilloso*, “the marvelous real,” as that modality of being that truly eschews the *Entzauberung* (disenchantment) Max Weber claimed characterized capitalist modernity.<sup>13</sup> During his eleven-year exile in Paris, Carpentier became a member of André Breton’s surrealist movement writing for the journal *La Révolution surréaliste*. He came subsequently to disavow the beautiful marvelous celebrated in Breton’s *Surrealist Manifesto* as “produced by means of conjuring tricks, bringing together objects that would never normally meet: . . . the umbrella or lobster or sewing machine, or whatever it may be, on an operating table, in the interior of a desolate, in a desert of rocks.”<sup>14</sup> The fault Carpentier finds with surrealism is not its pursuit of the strange as marvelous, but rather that its representations of the marvelous are all manufactured outside of reality. In his judgment, the surrealists forget that the marvelous “arises from an unaccustomed or singularly favorable illumination of unnoticed riches of reality, . . . perceived with peculiar intensity by virtue of an exaltation of the spirit that leads to a kind of limit state.”<sup>15</sup> Even as a matter of aesthetics, or, rather especially as a matter of aesthetics, the marvelous must stem from a thinking investment—Carpentier calls it *faith*, which can be taken to mean what we might call *a-epistemic* knowledge and thinking—in a reality in which spirits, malevolent and beneficial, as well as saints and their miracles, actually exist. The surrealists’ marvelous “invoked in disbelief is never more than a literary trick [*artimaña*] that, over time, becomes as tedious as certain ‘fixed’ oneiric literature, certain eulogies of madness, with which we are all very familiar.”<sup>16</sup> But neither should Carpentier’s critique of surrealism’s marvelous be taken as an argument for realism, which, in his view, is gregariously charged with political significance, merely substituting the surrealist bag of literary tricks for “the commonplaces of the committed literati and the perverse eschatological pleasure of certain existentialists.”<sup>17</sup> No, the marvelous as an aesthetic mode must be of the real world. It is not a trivial fact that Carpentier’s principal experience of *lo real maravilloso* was during his 1943 visit to Haiti,



where he found himself “in daily contact with *lo real maravilloso*,” as he puts it, “treading on a land where thousands of men longing for freedom believed in the lycanthropic powers of Mackandal, to the point that this collective faith produced a miracle on the day of his execution”; this provides the motif of his second novel, *El reino de este mundo* (*The Kingdom of This World*).<sup>18</sup> Nor is it at all surprising that he would extrapolate a general theory of the Americas (*América entera*) out of his encounter with Afro-Haitian practices and thinking. That is concordant with Carpentier’s ethnographic investment, along with that of Fernando Ortiz, Lydia Cabrera, Rómulo Lachatañeré, Juan Marinello, and Nicolás Guillén, in *Afrocubánísimo*. His first novel, *¡Ecué-Yamba-O: Historia afro-cubana!*, which arguably sets the grounds for what will be his theory of *lo real maravilloso*, extrapolates from his ethnographic research on the secret Afro-Cuban men’s society, *Abakuá*.<sup>19</sup>

12

What is most germane about Carpentier’s *real maravilloso* here is his understanding that the something he encountered in Haiti was expressly beyond the pale of modern *epistēmē*. His sense of the Americas being constituted in the confluence of three heterogeneous cosmogonies, African, European, and Amerind—polyphorous lines that, like asymptotes of the hyperbola, ever approach one another without converging into one synthesizing line—which Carpentier proclaims to be a baroque reality without clean geometrical symmetry or uncluttered space, is resonant with the thinking-in-disorder being explicated here. Granting the resonance, however, there is a problematic aspect to Carpentier’s negrophilic elaboration of *real maravilloso*, which is the central fissure (*grieta central*) Juan Marinello discerned in *¡Ecué-Yamba-O: Historia afro-cubana!*: “the scuffle [*pelea*] between the desire to touch the black interior [*entraña negro*] while retaining the [neutral] European vantage point.”<sup>20</sup> This same problematic is at play in *El reino de este mundo*, where the narrative *allows* the blacks to believe in Mackandal’s magical transformation into a bird and escape from his execution by burning, only to explain, as an aside, how he was in fact thrust back into the fire by his executioners. Taking into account the problematic nature of Carpentier’s negrophilia, the asymptotic aspect of the confluent cosmogonies he describes raises some questions about the severe limitations of the category *human* as it has been elaborated in relation to the centuries-long tradition of philosophical ontology. Postulating the asymptotic confluence of disparate cosmogonies made to share common material historical grounds, but working that materiality in distinct ways, suggests that the arc of the world is not teleological, neither is it eschatological; it does not portend a synthesis that redeems the terrible violence of struggle as meaningful at the end. The struggle for the world, nevertheless, is a struggle of historical formation, of distinct sets of practices-of-living that may share comparable, even identical, values but have arrived at them following different courses, and those courses matter.

Along these lines, the phrase *poiēsis in black* designates a set of practices-of-living, which articulate conceptions of humanity that are appositional to the epistemology of racism and the concomitant anthropology predominant in capitalist modernity. *Poiēsis* is hacked here—to use Denise Ferreira da Silva’s term for a mode of critical engagement that “highjacks a concept in order to release its radical possibilities”<sup>21</sup>—from Aristotle’s *Poetics*, where it is a particular calibration of *μίμησις* (*mimesis*); remembering that for Aristotle, *mimesis* was a dynamic process of engaging reality—entailing some material media that expressed an object in a particular modality. Precisely because *poiēsis* formally exhibits what it exposit, change in action in a duration of time, we can understand it to connote human creating in *semiosis*, in saying possibility. That is to say, it is the species-activity of actualizing in discrete material forms any given conceptualization of being-in-the-world, in accordance with a specifiable set of practices-of-living. With respect to *poiēsis in black*, these practices-of-living, while concurrent with the Enlightenment *semiosis* of *Man*—which is capitalized and italicized here per Sylvia Wynter’s description of it as an abstraction predicated on the bio-economic taxonomy of life—articulate grammatically in apposition. Regarding the grammatical, or grammaticality, I have in mind the enacted conventional practices whereby a person is recognized as knowing *how* to act. In other words, what Cyril Lemieux’s defines as “that which enables the members of a community to judge correctly; that is to say, to correctly link the discontinuities occurring in the world (bodies, objects, material, gestures, discourses) to descriptions, and to relate experience to certain of those descriptions as a feeling of fact.”<sup>22</sup> Even more precisely, I mean something along the lines proposed by the eighth-century Arabic grammarian Sibawayhi, who thought of grammar as a technology of imagination through which a set of relations to things in reality and each other is articulated as constituting the human world. Again, this is a question of conventionality, or what Aristotle lists among the three constitutive elements of *mimesis* as *modality*: that which issues in the indissoluble relationship between mimetic media and modality—the *τέχνη* (*technē*) that works the mimetic media in relationship with its object. For, as Frantz Fanon says in this vein, “The talk [*parole*] of the nation, the verb of the nation prescribes the world by renewing it”; which is to say that with transformations of grammar—and grammars are always ultimately local—we encounter a transformative “dissonance [*bouleversement*] in basic perception, in the very world of perception.”<sup>23</sup>

Turning to this question of the relationship between language, perception, and imagination as a technology of life, which is where the poetic and sociality meet, Albert Murray provides guiding insight. Taking up Susanne Langer’s postulate that “what all art represents or expresses is human feeling, how human beings feel about what they are aware of,” Murray understands

this to “mean that local circumstances and predicaments and the idiomatic procedures evolved to cope with them may have worldwide implication and application. Indeed, such is the function of fiction, which is also to say poetry, which is to say metaphor.”<sup>24</sup> On another occasion, when talking with Don Noble about this relationship between fiction, metaphor, and thinking in the world as humans, Murray remarks that he thinks of fiction in terms of entropy, as “an attempt to order chaos” by creating conceptual form. “Everything is fiction,” he says. “It’s a matter of finding an adequate metaphor that would be commensurate with the complexities and possibilities of our surroundings . . . it means documenting concepts.” What serious fiction—such as poetry—“tries to do is bring the deepest, the most comprehensive insights to bear upon” that documentation.”<sup>25</sup>

Speaking of documenting concepts, that which Murray calls fiction, Ibn Rushd (aka Averroes, in the West), along with ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), and before them al-Fārābī, proceeded by al-Jāhīz along with al-Kindī, called this *المحاكاة* (*al-muḥākā*), which is the philosophical Arabic translation of *mimesis*. Following Aristotle, they held *poiēsis* as the most superior mode of *mimesis*. What Murray calls documentation they referred to as *الشعرية الأمة* (*al-umma aš-šīrīya*, the poetic or aesthetic community), by which they indicated the living community of humans articulated and sustained with the poetic expression of profound, serious imagination. By ibn Sīnā’s account, the performance of poetic expression animates the imaginative faculty, called *التخيل* (*takhyīl*), engendering affective excitement (*انفعال*, *infā’al*), from awe, sublime grandeur, and delight to belittlement, grief, and agony; without the purpose of what is said being to establish any ideological or chauvinistic conviction or belief (*اعتقاد*, *i’tiqād*) at all.<sup>26</sup> This precognitive mental activity—in the sense that the conscious mind, or psyche, is aroused to delight or dejection about a condition without conception or experiencing it perceptually—arranges the schemata of human behavior and activity in general, and is itself engendered by poetic expression. The imaginative representation generates assent through its use of *mimesis*, which involves generating a faithful image of some original, or thinking in images. The image is both a function of poetic statements, which are conventional as in historical and material—they have particular media and modality—as well as the imaging capacity of the mind, suggesting an isomorphic relationship between poetic representation (expression) and the mental activity of image creation, or imagination. In contrast to the apophantic syllogism, poetic expression does not achieve demonstrative knowledge about the physical world as objective reality, but exhibits the workings, the capacities of the type of mind capable of achieving such knowledge. The emphasis here is on the person as meaningfully discovered in the sheer pleasure of *المحاكاة* (*al-muḥākā*), of *mimesis*—that is, the pleasure of the resonance between



the expression and the world, and then discovering to be so in common with others. This conception of الشعريّة الأمة (*al-umma aš-šī'irīya*, the poetic or aesthetic community) is akin to Murray's understanding that all poetic expressions represent or express human feeling, how humans are constituted affectively; whereby there is no rigid bifurcation between feeling and conception. In fact, as Murray says, the poetic expression of feeling deepens conception. There is also a resonance here with Spillers's sense of performative persona. Holding the subject as the focus of poetic expression's activation of التخيل (*takhyīl*, imaginative faculty) engenders the aforementioned aesthetic community, which ibn Sīnā postulates is imbued with الاغراض المدنيّة (*al-aḡrād al-madanīya*, civic tendency), explicitly meaning the identification of character and sociality, or more precisely, the individual person's ethical action living in community. Further riffing on the Arabic line of thinking, this can be termed *poetic socialities*, holding such to be resonant with what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney call *undercommons*, and Tony Bogue's, *common association*. Because we are talking about documentation of discrete forms of human intelligence in relation to practices-of-living *as such*, these resonances matter.

A set of propositions form the confluence of Murray's fiction, the Arabic الشعريّة الأمة (*al-umma aš-šī'irīya*), and Spillers's performative persona. Practices-of-living, we may say, articulate specific ways of thinking and knowing-how—those being necessary to those practices. By that same token, ways of thinking articulate the possibilities for infinite modalities of living. One's way of living either facilitates one's openness to certain intelligences or not, and one's openness to certain intelligences enables certain ways of living. That certain ways of thinking have been expressed in terms of eschatology is beyond dispute. Arguably, such is the thinking of the already dead, the thinking that can have no hope or aspiration, but rushes toward the end of everything in order to find true justice and freedom. Simply put, there are known ways of thinking that seek to achieve a tightly regulated homeostasis between thinking and living, that aim to so conserve a specific balance of energy within the system that no free energy is allowable. All known eschatologies aim at such arresting of thinking into a rigid habit of thought and tightly policed way of life. This is so for the most rigorous *Entzauberung*-inflected positivism as much as it is for the most Pauline millenarianism. In truth, however, such ways of thinking are irrefutably dedicated to curtailing, even the ultimate ending of life—*eschaton*, the general theory of everything—and not its repair in the world.

Gramsci remarks in his *Notebooks* that the beginning of critical elaboration is “consciousness of what one really is, namely to ‘know yourself’ as a product of the historical process that has taken place so far and left in you an infinity of traces without the benefit of an inventory. What is needed is to initiate such an inventory,” he states. A different cord is struck, if we quietly change *process* into

*processes* and, taking a cue from Edward Said, *inventory* into *itinerary*. So now we are going somewhere having been *somewheres* else, and the task is to come up with a plan of travel on the spot with no true bearing other than where we are now—which is with Fanon when he declares, and I will quote him from the original French, followed by an English shadow so as not to lose the affect altogether:

Je demande qu'on me considère à partir de mon Désir. Je ne suis pas seulement ici-maintenant, enfermé dans la choséité . . . Je réclame qu'on tienne compte de mon activité négatrice ~~en tant que je poursuis autre chose que la vie~~; en tant que je lutte pour la naissance d'un monde humain, c'est-à-dire d'un monde de reconnaissances réciproques.

From the moment I desire, I demand to be considered. I am not merely here-now circumscribed by this thingness . . . I insist that my negative activity be taken into account, ~~to the extent that I am in pursuit of something other than life~~, that I am struggling for the birth of a humane world; that is to say, a world of reciprocal recognitions.<sup>27</sup>

The struck clause could just as well have been paraphrastically qualified to read, “in pursuit of something other than [mere] life.” But that would be tantamount to reinstating the taxonomic division *Sentient Flesh* plays no part in: the ontological division between what Aristotle refers to as ζώή (*zōē*, mere physical biological existence) and ἄνθρωπος (*anthrōpos*, human). Striking the clause through puts it under erasure, thereby marking the struggle in Fanon's own thinking to slip the tentacle-grasp of ontology. In that struggle, his recognizing the importance of poetic invention in the formation of popular imagining about our collective reality calls us to ponder whether *poiēsis* as mimesis can foster a social formation analogous to the intellectual class so essential to the historical formation of the bourgeoisie in modernity as a transformative force. It may very well be the case that *poiēsis* fosters the formation of certain ways of thinking and conceiving, indeed perceiving the world—let us say imagining the world. The question is whether those ways are, or can ever be arranged into community, capable of articulating and sustaining a tradition of thinking, a historiography of intelligence in relation to polity or social formation. We would need to call this something other than “ideology.” A viable candidate in this context may simply be “poetry,” but poetry in relation to consciousness as an issue of love and understanding—“hantée par le problème de l'amour et de la compréhension [haunted by the problem of love and understanding],” Fanon says—which brings to the fore the question of how desire functions or is articulated as an element of techniques of thinking.<sup>28</sup> Alternatively, staying with Fanon, we might refer to this as rhythmic attitude (*attitude rythmique*), in the sense of timely or eventful thinking; and as he says, the adjective should

be given its full weight, for its expression as well as its source is a poetic practice that is a living style of spontaneous creation. But what can be meant by spontaneous creation except that the poetic image is a material form of imagination as the technique of living essential to thinking *in the world as humans*. The question still remains: What is the human, according to whom?

The human condition is perennially transitional, or to use an older language, metabolic. Indeed, we cannot speak here in any way that is generatively meaningful or enabling, of “the part of no part,” or the propertyless—the *Eigentumslosen*—as either being the subjects *of* politics or subjects *in* politics. It bears noting that what Etienne Balibar, in keeping with Jacques Rancière, designates as the propertyless and de-propertyed the poet Claude McKay aptly called *vagabondage*, referring to what he took as a constitutive element of radical humanism. A personification of this vagabondage is found in his novel *Banjo*, where the dissolution of aesthetic distinction is not indicative of a desire for return to proper corporeal integrity in relation to things; rather, it indicates the desire to be free among things. As the Haitian exile, Ray, thinks to himself reflecting on Banjo’s vagabondage: “Man loves individuals. Man loves things. Man loves places. And the vagabond lover of life finds individuals and things in many places and not in any one nation.”<sup>29</sup> In this sense, yes, the vagabond is poetic but not as Benjamin understood the *flâneur* to be so.

W. E. B. Du Bois, whose work looms large in the lineage of thinking in disorder, designated this desire to be free among things “intellect-in-action,” a dynamic process of becoming, occurring, in his account, “between chance and law . . . possibility and necessity.” All of these terms were his descriptors for an existential attitude, the most apt figuration of which cannot be the *flâneur*, but rather Ellison’s rhythmical Zoot-suited boys, who are “men outside of historical time, who were untouched and did not believe in [political] Brotherhood, no doubt had never heard of it; . . . men of transition whose faces were immobile.”<sup>30</sup> These rhythmical elaborately stylized beings are ontologically incomprehensible and uncomprehending, which means that they cannot be persuaded of their inequality. It is not that they make sounds that have no voice and do not signify. Their voice is soundless. It is not a cacophonous noise transformed into reasonable speech through the action of civil discourse. Their jive-talk is not the force of a new deal. It does not articulate a conflict over the terms of order and distribution. This is why Du Bois’s intellect-in-action is aptly paraphrased as “thinking-in-action” distinguishing it from a vitalist *Lebensphilosophie* (philosophy of life), or even the sense of thinking as merely the mediating agency between experience and knowledge—which is to say, it is a *thinking-in-disorder*. The question of sentient flesh is a paramount aspect of Du Bois’s extended investigations of the Negro, precisely because the general problem guiding those investigations is the relation of consciousness to the

world. Consciousness is more than merely grounded in its historical occasion, in the milieu, but is primarily a function of milieu. It is a socially extended consciousness. Not in the sense that the individual mind extends into the world, but rather in the sense that the mind is constituted in the world. The world, in Du Bois's account, is the complexity of material environmental forces, including the activity of humanity that constitutes and sustains society and its various institutional practices of what he calls interchangeably "culture" and "civilization." This sense of human society as a function of material, natural—as opposed to supernatural—forces is central to his phylogenetic account of civilizational diversity in "The Conservation of Races." Yet, in *The Souls of Black Folk*, as well as the preponderance of his writings expressly concerned with the constitution of consciousness, Du Bois emphasizes the societal, across the full range of its institutions, over the physiological. In this, he departs from the neutral monism of his avowed mentor in psychology, William James—according to which reality is *neither* mental nor physical but has a distinct, and seemingly intrinsically mysterious, basic character that can be regarded as either mental or physical from certain viewpoints. It is certainly not a trivial fact that Du Bois already saw an indissoluble connection between the novel as a form and modern psychology—both in the sense of the formation of individual personality types and the nascent scientific study of them—in his Harvard school days. He expressly makes that connection in a paper titled "The Renaissance of Ethics," which was written for the philosophy course he took with James during the 1888–1889 academic year. Already in that essay, there is a discernable move in Du Bois's thinking contra the Kantian formulation of the transcendental *I* out of time in favor of the person in time who is fully situational, in Spillers's sense. Time is not something the *I* imposes; rather, the *I* is given with time and so is an affect, one could even say a function, of the world as horizon. And the latter is historical and actualized in the cumulative species activity of mimesis: we make the world as one of the elements and forces on earth in *community* in time. And it is important to remember the beat, as Rufus Scott's father tells him in Baldwin's novel *Another Country*: "A nigger . . . lives his whole life, lives and dies according to the beat. Shit, he humps to that beat and the baby he throws up in there, well, he jumps to it and comes out nine months later like a goddamn tambourine."<sup>31</sup> This, in some measure, is what Ignace Meyerson was aiming to account for with historical psychology and what Gilbert Simondon subsequently elaborates as the problem of animality and humanity.<sup>32</sup> Yet, the resonance between their thinking and thinking-in-disorder is only up to a point. Even those efforts are a writing over the flesh, whereas the persona in-and-of-the beat that Scott's father declaims is written *with* the flesh. The intellect-in-action Du Bois remarks, which is to say, *thinking-in-disorder*, is in itself not a condition of sociality, but an inevitable affect, as in disposition, of

sociality—it does not ground sociality, but is articulated by and in relation to it—the myriad actualizations of which are in accord with the myriad possibilities of the actualized world, within its horizons, so to speak. We do not fall into the world, we exist in the world; which is to say, we exist in common. As a species, as a form of life, we will always be worldly, be worlding, but that need not be transcendent, transcendental, or even propositionally phenomenological, which is the same as transcendental. Rather, the existence of any given particular population as a collective actor in history, and supposedly therefore an agent of change, is a function of known and discernable configurations and transformations of power. One might well add that these configurations and transformations of power are exclusively in the mode of human institutions that delineate ranges of possible activity, usually through directing our desires by capturing or managing our imagination, and so spawning certain types, certain ways of living a life. Given that Kant’s project of practical moral society and community is predicated on the priority and hyper-importance (hypostatization) of the transcendental *I* as the instantiation of self-consciousness, to displace it from its perch calls for a different ethics, one not grounded in the subject/object distinction. We should bear in mind while taking up the *quaestio* of sentient flesh that “fleshliness” has a long theological provenance, in which it is opposed to the active intelligence of the divine. It is the antithesis of thinking and so is an earthly threat to the being, to salvation of the immortal soul. Perhaps a way forward is something like “fleshlily thinking” in contrast to the personal embodiment—to think with world and earth both in view, and not situate thinking somewhere outside the flesh.

The principal proposition of *Sentient Flesh: Thinking in Disorder, Poiēsis in Black* is that those populations designated and constituted within the political economy of capitalist modernity as Negro enact practices-of-living, *poiēsis in black*, which are not fully comprehensible by the semiosis of that economy, particularly its grammar of ontology. More importantly, however, those practices articulate appositionally, opening up infinities of other ways of being human in community becoming, ever becoming. Invoking Fanon once more, he is often quoted as saying, “the black has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the White.” But, let us give this in its full context freeing it from the shadow cast by Charles Lam Markmann’s and Richard Philcox’s respective translations:

Ontology, once we have admitted once and for all that it leaves aside existence [*laisse de côté l’existence*], does not enable us to understand the existence of the black [*l’être du Noir*]. For the black no longer has to be black [*n’a plus à être noir*], except in front of [*en face du*] the White. Some will take it into their head to remind us that the situation is two-way [*est à double sens*]. We respond, that is false. The black [*le Noir*] has no ontological



resistance in the eyes of the White. The Negro [*Les nègre*], suddenly [*jour au lendemain*], had two systems of reference in relation to which they had to situate themselves [*leur a fallu se situer*]. Their metaphysics, or less pretentiously their customs and the instances to which they referred, were abolished because they were found to be in contradiction with a civilization they did not know and which was imposed on them.<sup>33</sup>

Taken in its full context, this is seemingly an engagement with Heidegger's critique of the project that began with Plato and Aristotle, but was truly elaborated by the Latin Scholastics, which skips over (*überspringen*) the question of existence qua existence by concentrating on the systematic study of existent entities. Admitting that skip is a preliminary move in Heidegger's effort to retrieve the pre-Socratic Greek investigation of being, what he calls "fundamental ontology." Then again, carefully attending to Fanon's remark reveals that it is also stating the epistemic defaillance of even that fundamental ontology regarding the black way of talking about existence. There is the notable casually abrupt shift of grammatical subject from "the black [*le Noir*]" to "the Negro [*les nègres*]"—which Markmann carries over into his translation by rendering "le Noir" as "the black man" and "les nègres" as "the Negro," but which Philcox elides altogether by following suit with "le Noir" but rendering "les nègres" as "the Blacks." Two points of reference are at issue with this shift. The one is that of what Fanon refers to as the "black existence [*l'être du Noir*]," about which he says, "Ontology, when we have admitted once and for all that it leaves existence aside, does not allow us to understand." The other, that of the Negro, is situated in a definite relationship to ontology's system of reference, along with some other referential systems—the Negro's metaphysics. The incomprehensibility of the black refers to the dynamic practices-of-living and conceptualizing being that articulate the existence of the black, which ontology cannot explain because, even as manifest things that plainly indicate some system of referentiality is at play, that referentiality is so discordant with ontology's it cannot be analyzed or explained. As we shall see later on when further elaborating the notion of *poïsis in black*, Heidegger himself admits this epistemic defaillance of ontology regarding the black. By using the term *nègre* in a way that clearly evokes its juridical political-economic genealogy—the 1685 Code Noir—Fanon is marking its indicating a crossroad, a nexus of distinct semiosis, of systems of referentiality. There are multiple systems of referentiality that traverse the crossroad, including those metaphysics Fanon proclaims to have been abolished. The historical decreeing of Negro as some *thing*, a fungible commodity, is indisputably indicative of the semiosis of capitalist modernity in precisely the sense Du Bois accounts for the "color-line" as worldwide. Fanon hinders his own prospective account of the multiple semiosis confluent at the

crossroads by erroneously proclaiming that the Negro's metaphysics have been abolished. Correcting for that error, we can follow how the black and the Negro are also confluent at the crossroads, that what he calls the ontologically unfathomable "black existence," but also "the black lived experience [*l'expérience vécue du Noir*],"<sup>34</sup> is the perpetually recombinant flow of *para-semiosis*. This *para-semiosis* of *poiēsis in black* is not only incomprehensible to ontology; it also articulates a way of being human that is nonontological. Elaborating the theory of *para-semiosis* as poetic sociality is not indicative of a desire for the return to proper corporeal integrity in relation to things, but rather the desire to be free among things. The charge, then, is to take seriously what Michel Foucault called "practices of freedom,"<sup>35</sup> to carefully explore and engage their potentialities, ever mindful of their limitations. This is not a search for a way out, or even forward; rather, it is an effort to keep on flying, to take heed of the call to "fly right."

## Preface

- 1 John Smith, *Generall Historie of Virginia*, 126.
- 2 *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “Negro, n. and adj.,” March 2020, <https://www.oed-com.pitt.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/125898>. Also see Richard Grenville in Hakluyt, *Principall Navigations*, 734.

## Introduction

- 1 Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, 4–5.
- 2 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 5.
- 3 Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?,” in *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series 1*, 2:369.
- 4 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 448.
- 5 Locke, *Human Understanding*, 448.
- 6 Mattie Erma Edwards Parker, ed., *The North Carolina Colonial Records*, 1:187–205; John Locke, *The Fundamental Constitution of Carolina*, 175.
- 7 Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” 206.
- 8 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l’invisible*, 119.
- 9 Fisk University Social Science Institute, *Unwritten History of Slavery: Autobiographical Accounts of Negro Ex-Slaves*, 85.
- 10 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 78.
- 11 Immanuel Kant, *Ueber den Gebrauch teleologischer Principien in der Philosophie*, 174 fn.
- 12 See Cedric Robinson, *The Terms of Order: Political Science and the Myth of Leadership*.
- 13 See Alejo Carpentier, Prólogo a *El reino de este mundo*. The prologue was originally republished as the essay “Lo real maravilloso de América” in *El Nacional*, April 8, 1948. It was subsequently republished with significant modification and additional material under that title in Alejo Carpentier, *Tientos y diferencias* (Montevideo: Arca, 1967), 96–112. Carpentier gave another version of it in a paper entitled “Lo barroco y lo real maravilloso,” which he presented on May 22, 1975, to the Razón de Ser Conference at Ateneo de Caracas, in Venezuela.
- 14 Carpentier, Prólogo a *El reino de este mundo*, 1.
- 15 Carpentier, Prólogo a *El reino de este mundo*, 2.
- 16 Carpentier, Prólogo a *El reino de este mundo*, 2.
- 17 Carpentier, Prólogo a *El reino de este mundo*, 2.
- 18 Carpentier, Prólogo a *El reino de este mundo*, 3.
- 19 See Alejo Carpentier, *¡Ecué-Yamba-O: Historia afro-cubana!* (Madrid: Editorial España, 1933). Carpentier began this novel in 1927, while he was imprisoned for having signed a democratic anti-imperialist manifesto against the Gerardo Machado y Morales regime; it was completed and published in 1933. The novel’s title is the Lucumí expression used by the society’s members, *los ñañigos*, in their ritual dance; the