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Author(s): Fred Moten

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THE CASE OF BLACKNESS

Fred Moten

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The cultural and political discourse on black pathology has been so pervasive that it could be said to constitute the background against which all representations of blacks, blackness, or (the color) black take place. Its manifestations have changed over the years, though it has always been poised between the realms of the pseudo-social scientific, the birth of new sciences, and the normative impulse that is at the heart of—but that *strains against*—the black radicalism that *strains against* it. From the origins of the critical philosophy in the assertion of its extra-rational foundations in teleological principle; to the advent and solidification of empiricist human biology that moves out of the convergence of phrenology, criminology, and eugenics; to the maturation of (American) sociology in the oscillation between good-and-bad-faith attendance to “the negro problem”; to the analysis of and discourse on psychopathology and the deployment of these in both colonial oppression and anticolonial resistance; to the regulatory metaphysics that undergirds interlocking notions of sound and color in aesthetic theory: blackness has been associated with a certain sense of decay, even when that decay is invoked in the name of a certain (fetishization of) vitality.

Black radical discourse has often taken up, and held itself within, the stance of the pathologist. Going back to David Walker, at least, black radicalism is animated by the question, What’s wrong with black folk? The extent to which radicalism (here understood as the performance of a general critique of the proper) is a fundamental and enduring force in the black public sphere—so much so that even black “conservatives” are always constrained to begin by defining themselves in relation to it—is all but self-evident. Less self-evident is the normative striving against the grain of the very radicalism from which the desire for norms is derived. Such striving is directed toward those lived experiences of blackness that are, on the one hand, aligned with what has been called radical and, on the other hand,

aligned not so much with a kind of being-toward-death but with something that has been understood as a deathly or death-driven nonbeing. This strife between normativity and the deconstruction of norms is essential not only to contemporary black academic discourse but also to the discourses of the barbershop, the beauty shop, and the bookstore.

I'll begin with a thought that doesn't come from any of these zones, though it's felt in them, strangely, since it posits the being of, and being in, these zones as an ensemble of specific impossibilities:

As long as the black man is among his own, he will have no occasion, except in minor internal conflicts, to experience his being through others. There is of course the moment of "being for others," of which Hegel speaks, but every ontology is made unattainable in a colonized and civilized society. It would seem that this fact has not been given enough attention by those who have discussed the question. In the *Weltanschauung* of a colonized people there is an impurity, a flaw, that outlaws [*interdit*] any ontological explanation. Someone may object that this is the case with every individual, but such an objection merely conceals a basic problem. Ontology—once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by the wayside—does not permit us to understand the being of the black man. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. Some critics will take it upon themselves to remind us that the proposition has a converse. I say that this is false. The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man.¹

This passage, and the ontological (absence of) drama it represents, leads us to a set of fundamental questions. How do we think the possibility and the law of outlawed, impossible things? And if, as Frantz Fanon suggests, the black cannot be an other for another black, if the black can only be an other for a white, then is there ever anything called black social life? Is the designation of this or that thing as lawless, and the assertion that such lawlessness is a function of an already extant flaw, something more than that trying, even neurotic, oscillation between the exposure and the replication of a regulatory maneuver whose force is held precisely in the assumption that it comes before what it would contain? What's the relation between explanation and resistance? Who bears the responsibility of discovering an ontology of, or of discovering *for* ontology, the ensemble of political, aesthetic,

and philosophical derangements that comprise the being that is neither for itself nor for the other? What form of life makes such discovery possible as well as necessary? Would we know it by its flaws, its impurities? What might an impurity in a worldview actually be? Impurity implies a kind of non-completeness, if not absence, of a worldview. Perhaps that non-completeness signals an originarily criminal refusal of the interplay of framing and grasping, taking and keeping—a certain reticence at the ongoing advent of the age of the world picture. Perhaps it is the reticence of the grasped, the enframed, the taken, the kept—or, more precisely, the reluctance that disrupts grasping and framing, taking and keeping—as epistemological stance as well as accumulative activity. Perhaps this is the flaw that attends essential, anoriginal impurity—the flaw that accompanies impossible origins and deviant translations.²

What's at stake is fugitive movement in and out of the frame, bar, or whatever externally imposed social logic—a movement of escape, the stealth of the stolen that can be said, since it inheres in every closed circle, to break every enclosure. This fugitive movement is stolen life, and its relation to law is reducible neither to simple interdiction nor bare transgression. Part of what can be attained in this zone of unattainability, to which the eminently attainable ones have been relegated, which they occupy but cannot (and refuse to) own, is some sense of the fugitive law of movement that makes black social life ungovernable, that demands a para-ontological disruption of the supposed connection between explanation and resistance.³ This exchange between matters juridical and matters sociological is given in the mixture of phenomenology and psychopathology that drives Fanon's work, his slow approach to an encounter with impossible black social life poised or posed in the break, in a certain intransitive evasion of crossing, in the wary mood or fugitive case that ensues between the fact of blackness and the lived experience of the black and as a slippage enacted by the meaning—or, perhaps too “trans-literally,” the (plain[-sung]) sense—of things when subjects are engaged in the representation of objects.

The title of this essay, “The Case of Blackness,” is a spin on the title of the fifth chapter of Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks*, infamously mistranslated as “the fact of blackness.” “The lived experience of the black” is more literal—“experience” bears a German trace, translates as *Erlebnis* rather than *Tatsache*, and thereby places Fanon within a group of postwar Francophone thinkers encountering phenomenology that includes Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emmanuel Levinas, and Tran Duc Thao.⁴ The phrasing indicates Fanon's veering off from an analytic engagement with the world as a set of facts that are available to the natural scientific attitude, so it's possible to feel the vexation of certain commentators with what might

be mistaken for a flirtation with positivism. However, I want to linger in, rather than quickly jump over, the gap between fact and lived experience in order to consider the word “case” as a kind of broken bridge or cut suspension between the two. I’m interested in how the troubled, illicit commerce between fact and lived experience is bound up with that between blackness and the black, a difference that is often concealed, one that plays itself out not by way of the question of accuracy or adequation but by way of the shadowed emergence of the ontological difference between being and beings. Attunement to that difference and its modalities must be fine. Perhaps certain recalibrations of Fanon—made possible by insights to which Fanon is both given and blind—will allow us to show the necessity and possibility of another understanding of the ontological difference. In such an understanding, the political phonochoreography of being’s words bears a content that cannot be left by the wayside even if it is packaged in the pathologization of blacks and blackness in the discourse of the human and natural sciences and in the corollary emergence of expertise as the defining epistemological register of the modern subject who is in that he knows, regulates, but cannot be black. This might turn out to have much to do with the constitution of that locale in which “ontological explanation” *is* precisely insofar as it is against the law.

One way to investigate the lived experience of the black is to consider what it is to be the dangerous—because one is, because we are (Who? We? Who is this we? Who volunteers for this already given imposition? Who elects this imposed affinity? The one who is homelessly, hopefully, less and more?) the constitutive—supplement. What is it to be an irreducibly disordering, deformational force while at the same time being absolutely indispensable to normative order, normative form? This is not the same as, though it does probably follow from, the troubled realization that one is an object in the midst of other objects, as Fanon would have it. In their introduction to a rich and important collection of articles that announce and enact a new deployment of Fanon in black studies’ encounter with visual studies, Jared Sexton and Huey Copeland index Fanon’s formulation in order to consider what it is to be “the thing against which all other subjects take their bearing.”⁵ But something is left unattended in their invocation of Fanon, in their move toward equating objecthood with “the domain of non-existence” or the interstitial space between life and death, something to be understood in its difference from and relation to what Giorgio Agamben calls naked life, something they call raw life, that moves—or more precisely cannot move—in its forgetful non-relation to that quickening, forgetive force that Agamben calls the form of life.⁶

Sexton and Copeland turn to the Fanon of *Black Skins, White Masks*, the phenomenologist of (the lived experience of) blackness, who provides for them the following epigraph:

I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects. (*Black Skins*, 77)

[J'arrivais dans le monde, soucieux de faire lever un sens aux choses, mon âme pleine du désir d'être à l'origine du monde, et voici que je me découvrais objet au milieu d'autres objets.]⁷

Fanon writes of entering the world with a melodramatic imagination, as Peter Brooks would have it—one drawn toward the occult installation of the sacred in things, gestures (certain events, as opposed to actions, of muscularity), and in the subterranean field that is, paradoxically, signaled by the very cutaneous darkness of which Fanon speaks. That darkness turns the would-be melodramatic subject not only into an object but also into a sign—the hideous blackamoor at the entrance of the cave, that world underneath the world of light that Fanon will have entered, who guards and masks “our” hidden motives and desires.⁸ There’s a whole other economy of skins and masks to be addressed here. However, I will defer that address in order to get at something (absent) in Sexton and Copeland. What I am after is something obscured by the fall from prospective subject to object that Fanon recites—namely, a transition from thing(s) (*choses*) to object (*objet*) that turns out to version a slippage or movement that could be said to animate the history of philosophy. What if we bracket the movement from (erstwhile) subject to object in order to investigate more adequately the change from object to thing (a change as strange as that from the possibility of intersubjectivity that attends majority to whatever is relegated to the plane or plain of the minor)? What if the thing whose meaning or value has never been found finds things, finds things? What if the thing will have founded something against the very possibility of foundation and against all anti- or post-foundational impossibilities? What if the thing sustains itself in that absence or eclipse of meaning that withholds from the thing the horrific honorific of “object”? At the same time, what if the value of that absence or excess is given to us only in and by way of a kind of failure or inadequacy—or, perhaps more precisely, by way of a history of exclusion, serial expulsion,

presence's ongoing taking of leave—so that the non-attainment of meaning or ontology, of source or origin, is the only way to approach the thing in its informal (enformed/enforming, as opposed to formless), material totality? Perhaps this would be cause for black optimism or, at least, some black operations. Perhaps the thing, the black, is tantamount to another, fugitive, sublimity altogether. Some/thing escapes in or through the object's vestibule; the object vibrates against its frame like a resonator, and troubled air gets out. The air of the thing that escapes enframing is what I'm interested in—an often unattended movement that accompanies largely unthought positions and appositions. To operate out of this interest might mispresent itself as a kind of refusal of Fanon.⁹ But my reading is enabled by the way Fanon's texts continually demand that we read them—again or, deeper still, not or against again, but for the first time. I wish to engage a kind of preop(tical) optimism in Fanon that is tied to the commerce between the lived experience of the black and the fact of blackness and between the thing and the object—an optimism recoverable, one might say, only by way of mis-translation, that bridged but unbridgeable gap that Heidegger explores as both distance and nearness in his discourse on “The Thing.”

Michael Inwood moves quickly in his explication of Heidegger's distinction between *Ding* and *Sache*: “*Ding*, ‘thing,’ is distinct from *Sache*, ‘thing, (subject-)matter, affair.’ *Sache*, like the Latin *res*, originally denoted a legal case or a matter of concern, while *Ding* was the ‘court’ or ‘assembly’ before which a case was discussed.”¹⁰ In Heidegger's essay “*Das Ding*,” the speed of things is a bit more deliberate, perhaps so that the distinction between things and human affairs can be maintained against an explicatory velocity that threatens to abolish the distance between, which is also to say the nearness of, the two: “[T]he Old High German word *thing* means a gathering, and specifically a gathering to deliberate on a matter under discussion, a contested matter. In consequence, the Old German words *thing* and *ding* become the names for an affair or matter of pertinence. They denote anything that in any way bears upon men, concerns them, and that accordingly is a matter for discourse.”¹¹ The descent from Old High German to Old German is held here and matters. The trajectory of that descent is at issue such that we are to remain concerned with the detachment and proximity of “a gathering to deliberate” and “contested matter.” It might even be worthwhile to think of the gathering *as* contested matter, to linger in the break—the distance and nearness—between the thing and the case in the interest of the ones who are without interests but who are nevertheless a concern precisely because they gather, as they are gathered matter, the internally differentiated materiality of a collective head. The thing of it is, the case of blackness.

For Heidegger, the jug is an exemplary thing. The jug is a vessel; it holds something else within it. It is also “self-supporting, or independent.” But “[d]oes the vessel’s self-support alone define the jug as a thing?”

The potter makes the earthen jug out of earth that he has specially chosen and prepared for it. The jug consists of that earth. By virtue of what the jug consists of, it too can stand on the earth, either immediately or through the mediation of table and bench. What exists by such producing is what stands on its own, is self-supporting. When we take the jug as a made vessel, then surely we are apprehending it—so it seems—as a thing and never as a mere object.

Or do we even now still take the jug as an object? Indeed. It is, to be sure, no longer considered only an object of a mere act of representation, but in return it is an object which a process of making has set up before and against us. Its self-support seems to mark the jug as a thing. But in truth we are thinking of this self-support in terms of the making process. Self-support is what the making aims at. But even so, the self-support is still thought of in terms of objectness, even though the over-againstness of what has been put forth is no longer grounded in mere representation, in the mere putting it before our minds. But from the objectness of the object, and from the product’s self-support, there is no way that leads to the thingness of the thing. (Heidegger 167)

This is to say, importantly I think, that the “jug remains a vessel whether we represent it in our minds or not” (167). (Later Heidegger says: “Man can represent, no matter how, only what has previously come to light of its own accord and has shown itself to him in the light it brought with it” [171].) Its thingliness does not inhere in its having been made or produced or represented. For Heidegger, the thingliness of the thing, the jug, is precisely that which *prompts* its making. For Plato—and the tradition of representational thinking he codifies, which includes Fanon—everything present is experienced as an object of making where “object” is understood, in what Heidegger calls its most precise expression, as “what stands forth” (rather than what stands before or opposite or against). In relation to Fanon, Kara Keeling calls upon us to think that which stands forth as project and as problem. Accordingly, I am after a kind of shadow or trace in Fanon—the moment in which phenomenology strains against its own, shall we say, reification of a certain philosophical experience, its own problematic commitment to what

emerges from making, in order to get at “a meaning of things.” Though decisive and disruptive in ways that remain to be thought, that strain is momentary in Fanon, momentarily displaced precisely by that “representation of what is present, in the sense of what stands forth and of what stands over against as an object” that never, according to Heidegger, “reaches to the thing *qua* thing” (168–69).

For Heidegger, the jug’s being, as vessel, is momentarily understood as being-in-its emptiness, the empty space that holds, the impalpable void brought forth by the potter as container. “And yet,” Heidegger asks, “Is the jug really empty” (169)? He argues that the jug’s putative emptiness is a semi-poetic misprision, that “the jug is filled with air and with everything that goes to make up the air’s mixture” (169). Perhaps the jug, as thing, is better understood as filled with an always already mixed capacity for content that is not made. This is something other than either poetic emptiness or a strictly scientific fullness that understands the filling of the jug as simple displacement. As Heidegger puts it, “Considered scientifically, to fill a jug means to exchange one filling for another.” He adds,

These statements of physics are correct. By means of them, science represents something real, by which it is objectively controlled. But—is this reality the jug? No. Science always encounters only what *its* kind of representation has admitted beforehand as an object possible for science.

. . . Science makes the jug-thing into a nonentity in not permitting things to be the standard for what is real.

Science’s knowledge, which is compelling within its own sphere, the sphere of objects, already had annihilated things as things long before the atom bomb exploded. The bomb’s explosion is only the grossest of all gross confirmations of the long-since-accomplished annihilation of the thing: the confirmation that the thing as a thing remains nil. The thingness of the thing remains concealed, forgotten. The nature of the thing never comes to light, that is, it never gets a hearing. This is the meaning of our talk about the annihilation of the thing. (170)

“The Lived Experience of the Black” bears not only a lament over Fanon’s own relegation to the status of object; it also contains a lament that it suppresses over the general annihilation of the thing to which transcendental phenomenology contributes insofar as it is concerned with *Sachen*, not *Dinge*, in what remains untranslatable as its direction toward the things themselves. Insofar as blackness remains the object of a complex disavowing claim in Fanon, one bound up precisely with his understanding of blackness

as an impure product—as a function of a making that is not its own, an intentionality that could never have been its own—it could be said that Fanon moves within an economy of annihilation even though, at the same time, he mourns his own intentional comportment toward a hermeneutics of thingliness. Is blackness brought to light in Fanon’s ambivalence? Is blackness given a hearing—or, more precisely, does blackness give itself to a hearing—in his phenomenological description (which is not but nothing other than a representation) of it? Studying the case of blackness is inseparable from the case blackness makes for itself in spite and by way of every interdiction. In any case, it will have been as if one has come down with a case of blackness.

Meanwhile, Heidegger remains with the question of the essential nature of the thing that “has never yet been able to appear” (171). He asks, What does the jug hold and how does it hold? “How does the jug’s void hold” (171)? By taking and keeping what it holds but also, and most fundamentally, in a way that constitutes the unity, the belonging together, of taking and keeping, in the *outpouring* of what is held. “The holding of the vessel occurs in the giving of the outpouring. . . . We call the gathering of the twofold holding into the outpouring, which, as being together, first constitutes the full presence of giving: the poured gift. The jug’s jug-character consists in the poured gift of the pouring out. Even the empty jug retains its nature by virtue of the poured gift, even though the empty jug does not admit of a giving out” (172). What is it to speak of this outpouring, to speak of the thing, the vessel, in terms of what it gives, particularly when we take into account the horror of its being made to hold, the horror of its making that it holds or bears? This question is necessary and decisive precisely insofar as it insists upon a rough-hewn accompaniment to Heidegger’s talk of gift and consecration. Sometimes what is given is refusal. How does refusal elevate celebration? Heidegger invokes the “gush” as strong outpouring, as sacrificial flow, but perhaps what accentuates the outpouring, what makes it more than “mere filling and decanting,” is a withholding that is aligned with refusal, a canted secret (173). At any rate, in the outpouring that is the essence of the thing/vessel dwells the Heideggerian fourfold of earth, sky, divinity, and mortals that precedes everything that is present or that is represented. The fourfold, as staying and as appropriation is where thing approaches, if not becomes, event. This gathering, this event of gathering, is, for Heidegger, what is denoted in the Old High German word “thing.” By way of Meister Eckhart, Heidegger asserts that “*Thing* is . . . the cautious and abstemious name for something that is at all.” He adds:

Because the word *thing* as used in Western metaphysics denotes that which is at all and is something in some way or other, the meaning of the name “thing” varies with the

interpretation of that which is—of entities. Kant talks about things in the same way as Meister Eckhart and means by this term something that is. But for Kant, that which is becomes the object of a representing that runs its course in the self-consciousness of the human ego. The thing-in-itself means for Kant: the object-in-itself. To Kant, the character of the “in-itself” signifies that the object is an object in itself without reference to the human act of representing it, that is, without the opposing “ob-” by which it is first of all put before the representing act. “Thing-in-itself,” thought in a rigorously Kantian way, means an object that is no object for us, because it is supposed to stand, stay put, without a possible before: for the human representational act that encounters it. (176–77)

Meanwhile, in contradistinction to Kant, Heidegger thinks being neither as idea nor as position/objectness (the transcendental character of being posed) but as thing. He might be best understood as speaking out of a clearing, or a flaw, that also constitutes a step back or away from the kind of thinking that produces worldviews or, at least, that particular worldview that accompanies what, for lack of a better turn, might be called intersubjection. Fanon offers, by way of retrospection, a reversal of that step back or away. In briefly narrating the history of his own becoming-object, the trajectory of his own being-positioned in and by representational thinking, Fanon fatefully participates in that thinking and fails to depart from the “sphere of mere attitudes” (Heidegger 181). At the same time, Fanon, and the experience that he both carries and analyzes, places the Heideggerian distinction between being (thing) and *Dasein*—the being to whom understandings of being are given; the not, but nothing other than, human being—in a kind of jeopardy that was already implicit, however much it is held within an interplay between being overlooked and being overseen.

So I’m interested in how the ones who inhabit the nearness and distance between *Dasein* and things (which is off to the side of what lies between subjects and objects), the ones who are attained or accumulated unto death even as they are always escaping the Hegelian positioning of the bondsman, are perhaps best understood as the extra-ontological, extra-political constant—a destructive, healing agent; a stolen, transplanted organ always eliciting rejection; a salve whose soothing lies in the abrasive penetration of the merely typical; an ensemble always operating in excess of that ancient juridical formulation of the thing (*Ding*), to which Kant subscribes, as that to which nothing can be imputed, the impure, degraded, manufactured (in)

human who moves only in response to inclination, whose reflexes lose the name of action. At the same time, this dangerous supplement, as the fact out of which everything else emerges, is constitutive. It seems to me that this special ontic-ontological fugitivity of/in the slave is what is revealed as the necessarily unaccounted for in Fanon. So that in contradistinction to Fanon's protest, the problem of the inadequacy of any ontology to blackness, to that mode of being for which escape or apposition and not the objectifying encounter with otherness is the prime modality, must be understood in its relation to the inadequacy of calculation to being in general. Moreover, the brutal history of criminalization in public policy, and at the intersection of biological, psychological, and sociological discourse, ought not obscure the already existing ontic-ontological criminality of/as blackness. Rather, blackness needs to be understood as operating at the nexus of the social and the ontological, the historical and the essential. Indeed, as the ontological is moving within the corrosive increase that the ontic instantiates, it must be understood that what is now meant by ontological requires special elucidation. What is inadequate to blackness is already given ontologies. The lived experience of blackness is, among other things, a constant demand for an ontology of disorder, an ontology of dehiscence, a para-ontology whose comportment will have been (toward) the ontic or existential field of things and events. That ontology will have had to have operated as a general critique of calculation even as it gathers diaspora as an open set—or as an openness disruptive of the very idea of set—of accumulative and unaccumulable differences, differings, departures without origin, leavings that continually defy the natal occasion in general even as they constantly bespeak the previous. This is a Nathaniel Mackey formulation whose full implications will have never been fully explorable.¹² What Fanon's pathontological refusal of blackness leaves unclaimed is an irremediable homelessness common to the colonized, the enslaved, and the enclosed. This is to say that what is claimed in the name of blackness is an undercommon disorder that has always been there, that is retrospectively and retroactively *located* there, that is embraced by the ones who stay there while living somewhere else. Some folks relish being a problem. As Amiri Baraka and Nikhil Pal Singh (almost) say, "Black(ness) is a country" (and a sex) (that is not one).¹³ Stolen life disorders positive value just as surely as it is not equivalent to social death or absolute dereliction.

So if we cannot simply give an account of things that, in the very fugitivity and impossibility that is the essence of their existence, resist accounting, how do we speak of the lived experience of the black? What limits are placed on such speaking when it comes from the position of the black, but also what constraints are placed on the very concept of lived experience, particularly in

its relation to the black when black social life is interdicted? Note that the interdiction exists not only as a function of what might be broadly understood as policy but also as a function of an epistemological consensus broad enough to include Fanon, on the one hand, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, on the other—encompassing formulations that might be said not only to characterize but also to initiate and continually re-initialize the philosophy of the human sciences. In other words, the notion that there is no black social life is part of a set of variations on a theme that include assertions of the irreducible pathology of black social life and the implication that (non-pathological) social life is what emerges by way of the exclusion of the black or, more precisely, of blackness. But what are we to make of the pathological here? What are the implications of a social life that, on the one hand, *is not what it is* and, on the other hand, is irreducible to what it is used for? This discordant echo of one of Theodor W. Adorno's most infamous assertions about jazz implies that black social life reconstitutes the music that is its phonographic.¹⁴ That music, which Miles Davis calls “social music,” to which Adorno and Fanon gave only severe and partial hearing, is of interdicted black social life operating on frequencies that are disavowed—though they are also amplified—in the interplay of sociopathological and phenomenological description. How can we fathom a social life that tends toward death, that enacts a kind of being-toward-death, and which, because of such tendency and enactment, maintains a terribly beautiful vitality? Deeper still, what are we to make of the fact of a sociality that emerges when lived experience is distinguished from fact, in the fact of life that is implied in the very phenomenological gesture/analysis within which Fanon asserts black social life as, in all but the most minor ways, impossible? How is it that the off harmony of life, sociality, and blackness is the condition of possibility of the claim that there is no black social life? Does black life, in its irreducible and impossible sociality and precisely in what might be understood as its refusal of the status of social life that is refused it, constitute a fundamental danger—an excluded but immanent disruption—to social life? What will it have meant to embrace this matrix of im/possibility, to have spoken of and out of this suspension? What would it mean to dwell on or in minor social life? This set of questions is imposed upon us by Fanon. At the same time, and in a way that is articulated most clearly and famously by W. E. B. Du Bois, this set of questions is the position, which is also to say the problem, of blackness.

2

Now I want to place the problem of blackness, and the question of dwelling on and in minor social life in relation to the work of art, to the question

of the artwork's thingliness, its madness, its lateness. I'd like to bring the set of questions that is black social life into relief by way of, and by passing through, the notion of chromatic saturation and the illicit commerce it bears between the language of music and the language of vision. I'll do so by turning to an audiovisual ensemble comprising Ad Reinhardt and Cecil Taylor, Albert Ammons and Piet Mondrian. Something is unhinged in this set that might recalibrate in multiple ways our sense of the black/white encounter, particularly insofar as we acknowledge certain possibilities that emerge in and from impossible black social life when the city is about to be born and when minor conflict—its outlaw ontology, and its interdicted, criminal life—tends toward death but, escaping all ends, moves in relation to thrown ends, to a vast, stupendous range of throwing ends. I'll argue that Mondrian is deregulated by the urban underground he'd been dreaming of; that his great, final picture, *Victory Boogie Woogie*, is all black, is all of what had been absorbed in black, is the explication of a dissonant, chromatic saturation, the inhabitation of a break or border, the disruption embedded in the grid's boundaries. I want to amplify (Ammons, father of the jug, in Mondrian and) Taylor in Reinhardt, where Taylor is severely threatened with submergence in Reinhardt's intractable misunderstanding of what is done through Reinhardt, by forces Reinhardt can neither understand nor assimilate due to his attempt to encompass what pierces and absorbs him. I'll try to illuminate Taylor's attempt to open things up in exchange with Reinhardt: embodying sound in a discourse of sight, making sound matter like an irruptive thing, enacting the victory of refusing to arrive, saying—Here we are, never having got here, dancing an insistent after effect evading each and every fatal occasion, each minor occasion that is not one.

(There are other resonances that I know I won't get to: broken speeches of fugitive ontologies recorded in the texture of a black line; a boundary diffused into epiphenomenal swatches, later to become what seems to be unrecorded but showing up sounding everywhere; black differences, not only the collective heads in Reinhardt's unacknowledged black social thingliness, but also an unstable black cube named Gene Smith, mugging rapped-up proprieties like an other Tony Smith [Saginaw, Michigan] blowing up Michael Fried from way downtown, way outside. [I have gone off privately in public, in Fred Oakley's club, the *Neue Plastik*, just outside of Fordyce, Arkansas, in order to talk to somebody. Gone to curve angles. Bend and drop these notes right where you lost them, to get at what remains—unattainable, unrepresentable—of the thing. My flaw.]

In *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, there is a text called "Black as Symbol and Concept."¹⁵ Barbara Rose, the volume's editor, tells us that it's a transcript of Reinhardt's contribution to a discussion involving

Taylor and five other artists based in New York or Toronto: Aldo Tambellini, Michael Snow, Arnold Rockman, Stu Broomer, and Harvey Cowan. I am particularly interested in the encounter between Taylor and Reinhardt that Rose's transcription erases. That encounter is, I think, part of a far larger structure of impossible erasures (of the impossible). This is to say that there seem to be some fundamental incommensurabilities that animate the encounter. One is black and the other white, which means not just different experiences that differently color their thinking about color but also Reinhardt's palpable inability to take Taylor seriously, a handicap that more often than not still structures interracial intellectual relations. The more important one, at least for my purposes, has to do with the fact that one is a musician and the other a painter, and this means they speak in those different, seemingly incommensurable languages about that for which the term "chromatic saturation" is only a beckoning gesture. Unfortunately, as we'll see, Reinhardt reads blackness at sight, as held merely within the play of absence and presence. He is blind to the articulated combination of absence and presence in black that is in his face, as his work, his own production, as well as in the particular form of Taylor. Mad, in a self-imposed absence of (his own) work, Reinhardt gets read a lecture he must never have forgotten, though, alas, he was only to survive so short a time that it's unclear how or whether it came to affect his work.

On August 16, 1967, with the cooperation of Bell Telephone Company and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, *Arts/Canada* magazine organized this "simultaneous conversation," devoting a full issue to this discourse on "[b]lack as a special concept, symbol, paint quality; the social-political implications of the black; black as stasis, negation, nothingness and black as change, impermanence and potentiality."¹⁶ Reinhardt initiates things by saying black is interesting "not as a colour but as a non-colour and as the absence of colour." He adds, "I'd like then to talk about black in art—monochrome, monotone, and the art of painting versus the art of culture" ("Black," 3). In the notion of blackness as absolute dereliction, as absence of color and antithetical to admixture, Reinhardt moves on a parallel track to Fanon or, at least, to a certain reading of Fanon. He proceeds by way of a bad or, at least, meaningless example: "Here is a quotation from [Japanese landscape painter Katsushika] Hokusai: 'there is a black which is old and a black which is fresh. Lustrous black and dull black, black in sunlight and black in shadow. For the old black one must use an admixture of blue, for the dull black an admixture of white, for the lustrous black, gum must be added. Black in sunlight must have grey reflections.' I want to read that because that doesn't have any meaning for us" (3). One wants to consider the relation between what Reinhardt understands to be meaningless—a small treatise on the

relation between impurity and internal difference in the case of the color black—and what Fanon understands as rendering ontological explanation criminal. What does the color black do to the theory of color (as the manifestation of absence turned to the excessive, invaginative more-than-fullness of impurity)? What does the black or blackness do to ontological explanation (as fugal, centrifugal, fugitive ontological, and epistemological disruption)? For Reinhardt, the multiplicity of symbolic meanings that have been attached to the color black—sinfulness, evil, femininity, maternity, formlessness, and the “yearning for whiteness in the West that counters and accompanies these meanings”—are and must be detachable from the absence (of difference) that defines and is internal to the color black (3). This detachment is in the interest of “the negativeness of black” (3), which interests Reinhardt and which can, again, be understood in relation to something Fanon both desires and desires to oppose.

A bit later in the conversation, Taylor intervenes.

I think for my first statement I would like to say that the experience is two-fold and later, I think you'll see how the two really merge as one experience.

“Whether its bare pale light, whitened eyes inside a lion's belly, cancelled by justice, my wish to be a hued mystic myopic region if you will, least shadow at our discretion, to disappear, or as sovereign, albeit intuitive, sense my charity, to dip and grind, fair-haired, swathed, edged to the bottom each and every second, minute, month: existence riding a cloud of diminutive will, cautioned to waiting eye in step to wild, unceasing energy, growth equaling spirit, the knowing, of black dignity.”

Silence may be infinite or a beginning, an end, white noise, purity, classical ballet; the question of black, its inability to reflect yet to absorb, I think these are some of the complexes that we will have to get into. (4)

Taylor's musico-poetic intervention, which quotation marks mark as an intervention within an intervention, is a re-inaugural rupture. Taylor interrupts himself and the conversation he joins by raising the question of black dignity in a discourse on black art. He moves differently to Reinhardt, whose opening of the discussion is followed and carried forth in a kind of uninterrupted seriality by other participants in the conversation—Arnold Rockman, Michael Snow, Harvey Cowan, and Stu Broomer—before Taylor leaps, or breaks, in. Reinhardt will brook no interruption; this is confirmed

in Rose's reproduction of "his" text. In interrupting and/or starting over, Taylor speaks, at the same time, in a kind of counterpoint to or with Reinhardt. Moreover, his speaking is, immediately, of an experience of black/blackness that places his intervention in a Fanonian phenomenological mode. To speak of experience and, later, of existence, is to move counter to Reinhardt's overly stringent essentialism. Deeper still, Taylor speaks by way of hue, mysticism, and myopia, all of which show up for Reinhardt as derangements. ("There is something wrong, irresponsible and mindless about colour," he says, "something impossible to control. Control and rationality are part of any morality" [6].) Taylor moves against Reinhardt (in his best Kantian/Greenbergian aesthetico-ethical mode) in a set of lyric gestures charting a trajectory to "spirit, the knowing, of black dignity" (4). In this sense he speaks not only out of but also of the lived experience of the black. This is to say that Taylor moves, by way of but also through Fanon, in the wake of an experience, an aesthetic sociality, that Fanon never can fully embrace insofar as he never really comes to believe in it, even though it is the object, for Fanon, of an ambivalent political desire and a thing (of darkness) he cannot acknowledge as his own. In other words, Taylor speaks of and out of the possibilities embedded in a social life from which Fanon speaks and of which he speaks but primarily as negation and impossibility. This simultaneous conversation becomes, by way of a kind of ghostly transversality, a dialogue between Taylor and Fanon in which Reinhardt serves as the medium.

Other remote participants might later emerge, in addition to the tentative, minimal address to the things Taylor says we'll have to get into. Taylor and Fanon are the underground of this conversation, all up in wherever black/ness and color hang. It remains for Taylor to make his claim on black aesthetico-social life, on the "spirit, the knowing, of black dignity," more explicit in his next intervention:

I think Richard Wright wrote a book . . . called *Black Power*. Unfortunately, newspapers must sell, and I think they give a meaning of the moment to something which has long been in existence. The black artists have been in existence. Black—the black way of life—is an integral part of the American experience—the dance, for instance, the slop, Lindy hop, applejack, Watusi. Or the language, the spirit of the black in the language—"hip," "Daddy," "crazy," and "what's happening," "dig." These are manifestations of black energy, of black power, if you will. Politically speaking, I think the most dynamic force in American political life since the mid-1950s has been the black surge for equal representation, equal opportunities and it's becoming an active ingredient in American life. (6)

It's a kind of Ralph Ellison formulation that might seem more characteristic of Wynton Marsalis than Taylor but for the fact that it waits upon a Fanonian understanding of mixture or impurity as disruption even as it waits for Fanon to get to the related nonexcluded, nonexclusive understanding of mixture, of color, as constitutive of blackness and of blackness or black as a constitutive social, political, and aesthetic power. It's a kind of Stokely Carmichael formulation.

Meanwhile, between Taylor's formulation and Reinhardt's next intervention, Rockman offers a kind of regulative mediation that displaces Taylor's invocation of the priority and inevitability of another mixture that black instantiates and is by calling upon a certain discourse or structure of (black) feeling. He refers to the poem that erupts out of Taylor's first intervention as "a very moving experience" (6). He also invokes an earlier point in the discussion when Snow referred to his father's blindness. Blindness, according to Rockman, is an internal blackness that is opposed to the exterior or inessential blackness of which Taylor speaks in his invocation of black life, energy, and power. He adds, in a Fanonian vein, that "the whole negro bit is a creation of the white world" (7). This moment is important in that it mediates between Taylor and Reinhardt, allows Reinhardt to avoid Taylor's intervention, his invocation of the social even as it places Taylor between Rockman's feelings and Reinhardt's antisocial frigidity, both of which emerge against a black background. Reinhardt follows this apparent escape route, which moves by way of the assumed inessentiality of black life, in his objection to the introduction of blindness as sentimental. For Reinhardt, issues of blindness, space, and sexuality move away from what he calls "the highest possible discussion," which would be on "an aesthetic level" (7). Taylor's invocation of a necessarily social aesthetic, a black aesthetic and sociality whose essence is a politics of impure or impurifying facticity, is bypassed. Reinhardt is disturbed by Taylor's intervention. Though he never really addresses it, he is clearly unhappy with its power to make the discussion "go off into too many subjects" (7). Reinhardt adds:

Well, of course, we have enough mixed media here. I just want to again stress the idea of black as intellectuality and conventionality. There is an expression "the dark of absolute freedom" and an idea of formality. There's something about darkness or blackness that has something to do with something that I don't want to pin down. But it's aesthetic. And it has *not* to do with outer space or the colour of skin or the colour of matter. . . . And the exploitation of black as a kind of quality, as a material quality, is really objectionable. Again I'm talking on another level, on an intellectual level. (7)

One can feel Taylor fuming from an underground to which Reinhardt would have relegated him without mentioning him in his Friedian rejection of mixture-as-theatricality. And yet Taylor's occupation of this underground, precisely in the richness of its black aesthetic and intellectual content, is inhabited by way of Taylor's refusal and not his being rendered or regulated. Rockman, duly chastened by the dismissal of his sentimentalism, meekly asks Reinhardt to explain his objection to glossy black. Interestingly, Reinhardt dislikes glossy black because it reflects and because it is "unstable" and "surreal" (7). The reflective quality of the color black—as well as the capacity of the black to reflect—have, of course, been introduced by Taylor. Only now, however, can these issues be addressed by Reinhardt on his own high level. Glossy black disturbs in its reflective quality. "It reflects all the necessarily social activity that's going on in a room" (7). But this is also to say that glossy black's reflection of the irreducibly social is problematic precisely because it disrupts the solipsism of genuine intellectual reflection that painting is supposed to provide. Glossy black denies the individual viewer's absorption into a painting that will have then begun to function also as a mirror, but a mirror that serves to detach the viewer from the social and that characterizes that detachment as the very essence of intellectual and aesthetic experience. Reinhardt wants what he refers to as "less distractions and less intrusions tha[n] colour or light or other things might make" (8). Taylor, having spoken of and from blackness as aesthetic sociality, of and from the eternal, internal, and subterranean alien/nation of black things in their unregulatable chromaticism, must have been fuming.

The discussion moves again along the lines and laws that Reinhardt lays down. Objection to Reinhardt is held within an old discourse that combines primitivism, futurism, and blackness as the disavowal of physicality. I'm speaking of Tambellini's invocation of the Soviet cosmonaut who, upon experiencing outer space, says, "Before me—blackness, an inky-black sky studded with stars that glowed but did not twinkle; they seemed immobilized." Tambellini continues:

Here again is a primitive man, a caveman, but he's the cave-man of the space era. I see him as the most important man. It's immaterial who he is; it's even immaterial what his name is. But that's what our children are going to be, that's what the future is going to be, and this is what the extension of man has got to. He's got to get rid of this whole concept of black pictures or of black anything as a physical object. He's got to realize that he is black right now. (12)

Against the grain of Tambellini's enthusiasm for whatever transcends the material, out of his own particular and exclusionary intellectualism, and taking up the question of sentiment or emotion again, Reinhardt responds: "The reason for the involvement of darkness and blackness is, as I've said, an aesthetic-intellectual one, certainly among artists. And it's because of its non-colour. Colour is always trapped in some kind of physical activity or assertiveness of its own; and colour has to do with life. In that sense it may be vulgarity or folk art or something like that. But you'd better make sure what you mean by emotion, that's what I would say" (12–13). And now the encounter between Taylor and Reinhardt can really begin, interrupted only by a couple of brief but telling interjections by Tambellini (though it should be noted that for Reinhardt the encounter brings into play other ghostly eminences for whom Taylor is a medium: Marcel Duchamp, whose theatrical excess, which Taylor might be said to embody, is an object of Reinhardt's particular anti-theatrical prejudice; and Piet Mondrian, whose dramatic politics, which Taylor might be said to embody, Reinhardt mistakes for asceticism.¹⁷

Taylor: Would you give us a definition?

Reinhardt: Well, Clive Bell made it clear that there was an aesthetic emotion that was *not* any other kind of emotion. And probably you could only define that negatively. Art is always made by craftsmen—it's never a spontaneous expression. Artists always come from artists and art forms come from art forms. At any rate, art is involved in a certain kind of perfection. Expression is an impossible word. If you want to use it I think you have to explain it further.

Taylor: In pursuit of that perfection, once it is attained, what then? What is your reaction to that perfection?

Reinhardt: Well, I suppose there's a general reaction. I suppose in the visual arts good works usually end up in museums where they can be protected.

Taylor: Don't you understand that every culture has its own mores, its way of doing things, and that's why different art forms exist? People paint differently, people sing differently. What else does it express but my way of living—the way I eat, the way I walk, the way I talk, the way I think, what I have access to?

Reinhardt: Cultures in time begin to represent what artists did. It isn't the other way around.

Taylor: Don't you understand that what artists do depends on the time they have to do it in, and the time they have to do

it in depends upon the amount of economic sustenance which allows them to do it? You have to come down to the reality. Artists just don't work, you know, just like that—the kind of work, the nature of their involvement is not separate from the nature of their existence, and you have to come down to the nature of their existence. For instance, if they decide to go into the realm of fine art, there are certain prerequisites that they must have.

Tambellini: This guy floating in space has more to do with the reality that I'm living in than some idiotic place with walls and pictures in it. This man made one of the most poetic statements I've heard in my life. And furthermore I recognize the act he performs out there; he's destroying every possible square idea I've ever known, every possible notion that man can any longer be up and down. In the tradition of Mondrian you have the floor and the top; the tradition of Egyptian and western man is in the horizontal and the vertical. I don't work with that concept. It is the concept of nature. But he's telling me what's going on there. When the black man breaks out of his tradition, he's telling me what he's feeling, he's telling me what western man has done. He's telling me about segregation, he's telling me directly "see what your museums are, preservation of your own culture," "see what the radio is, the propaganda for your own culture," "see what this newspaper is, the propagation of your own . . ." and this space guy says to me, "see what the universe is up there, something which has no ups and downs," "see what space is, total darkness." He's telling me something I have to deal with. I have to create some kind of images. ("Black," 13–14)

The distinction between what Tambellini has and doesn't have to deal with, along with Tambellini's off translation of Taylor's formulations, given in a manner that is foreshadowed by Rockman's, serve to sanction Reinhardt's dismissal, and provide another context for the relegation, of Taylor's appeal. It is, after all, Reinhardt who makes judgments, who speaks with a kind of juridical authority. But Reinhardt is not trying to hear the case Taylor makes for (another understanding of) blackness. Reinhardt continues, in response now to Tambellini (and setting up Taylor's final disruption, an invocation to something like a phenomenological description of the artist's routine):

Reinhardt: This hasn't anything to do with your day-to-day problems.

Taylor: Day-to-day problems? What do you mean by day-to-day problems?

Reinhardt: The artist has a day-to-day routine.

Taylor: What is that routine specifically?

Reinhardt: It is boring, drudging . . .

Taylor: My work gives me pleasure. But the minute I walk outside there is enough that is evil and ugly and full of that which I call drudgery and boredom for me not to want it in my work and around me. Poverty is not a very satisfying thing.

Aldo said it very clearly, western art is involved and has been involved with one perspective, one idea, one representation of one social-racial entity and aesthetic; and I'm saying that I must be aware of that, in what that has meant to black men or to the Indians. I have to be aware of the social dynamics of my society in order to function. I don't only have a responsibility to myself, I have a responsibility to my community.

Reinhardt: As a human being, not as an artist.

Taylor: Now look, you are not the one, you are positively not the one to talk about human beings, since you rule out the human element in your art. That kind of dichotomy is very common in the west, and it has resulted in paranoia.

And so, therefore, I'm involved in making people aware of the black aesthetic. That fine art which you talk about is an exclusive art, and it excludes not according to ability, but according to wealth.

Tambellini: I don't even go to the god damn museums any more. I get the creeps, god damn it, I get depressed for months—it reminds me what the fucking black man must feel when he walks in the damn upper class of this society. I see the god damn slums in this country. I know how it feels to be black and walking the streets of a white society and as a white man, I feel what this damn ruling class is doing to anybody creative. They are set up there to destroy, because I can not go along with this intellectualization of protecting this particular class, this particular structure.

Reinhardt: There was an achievement in separating Fine Art from other art.

Taylor: The Russian ballet masters took the peasants and made them fine dancers; but the spirit of the ballet comes from the peasant.

Reinhardt: Tambellini suggested that we may abandon the historical approach to art, and get into a kind of simultaneity in which you have all twenty-five thousand years of art and you have to think about it. Quoting an astronaut isn't meaningful.

Tambellini: To me it's essential and meaningful.

Reinhardt: Not you as an artist, but maybe as a human being. It is certainly interesting to me as a human being.

Taylor: It is interesting to me as a musician, because it has to do with space, and space automatically implies time. Like I'm involved with rhythm, and rhythm is like the marginal division of time. Of course Reinhardt visualizes blackness as some kind of technical problem. I visualize it as the quality that shapes my life, in terms of the quality of the acceptance that my work gets or does not get based on the fact that it is from the Afro-American community.

Reinhardt: But your art should be free from the community. ("Black," 14–16)

As their encounter and their general contribution to the discussion concludes, it becomes clear that Reinhardt operates within a strict antipathy to thingliness—which Reinhardt mistakes, perhaps after Michael Fried, for objecthood—in or as artworks, which, in turn, requires the freedom (which, for Reinhardt, is associated in its absoluteness with darkness and an idea of formality) of art and the artist from the community, from politico-theatricality, from the city or *polis* as world stage.¹⁸ That antipathy is anticipated in the art criticism of Clement Greenberg and, even more stringently, in that of Greenberg's protégé, Fried, both of whom move within what Yve-Alain Bois, in an essay on Reinhardt, describes as "a clear demarcation between pictoriality and objecthood" ("Limit," 15). Reinhardt believes intensely in the legitimacy of the demarcations between art/ists and community, pictoriality and (objecthood-as-)thingliness, but those demarcations are irreparably blurred by Reinhardt's most important work, his celebrated series of black paintings. This blurring is a source of anxiety for Reinhardt, whose allergy to mixture is an allergy to thingliness. That intolerance of the blurring of art and life, in the words of Marcel Duchamp and Allen Kaprow, is famously formulated by Fried as a disavowal of theater, which is associated with the thingly in art, with what Bois intimates that Greenberg might have

called “the passage of the picture into the realm of things” (“Limit,” 16). Painting becomes something like a new kind of sculpture, according to Greenberg, and Bois describes this logic as that which led Frank Stella’s black paintings, and presumably Reinhardt’s, to look *almost* like objects. Reinhardt’s formulations on black are meant to stave off the slide into thingliness, the complete fall into the world of things. He wants his work to represent (which is to say to present themselves as)—as Mondrian’s paintings do, according to Greenberg, and in spite of their overallness, their sculpturality—“the scene of forms rather than . . . one single, indivisible piece of texture.”¹⁹ To insist upon the distinction between the canvas as scene and the canvas as thing is to detach oneself from the scene as much as it is also to represent the scene. It is to establish something like a freedom *from the community* in the most highly determined, regulative, *legal* sense of that word, in the sharpest sense of its constituting a field in which the human and the (disorderly) thing are precisely, pathologically, theatrically indistinct. Let’s call this community the black community, the community that is defined by a certain history of blackness, a history of privation (as Taylor points out) and plenitude, pain and (as Taylor points out) pleasure. It is from and as a sensual commune, from and as an irruptive advent, at once focused and arrayed against the political aesthetics of enclosed common sense, that Taylor’s music—I’m thinking in particular of a recent work titled *All the Notes*—emerges.

Interestingly, Mondrian is invoked by both Greenberg and Reinhardt in the interest of, on the one hand, establishing the difference between easel painting’s representational essence and minimalist, literalist, thingliness and, on the other hand, maintaining the separation of art and life that Duchamp and his minimalist descendants desired. At the same time, there is a syntactic, compositional “equivalence”—a social life of forms within the painting—that animates Mondrian’s work. It is not merely an accident that this social life—of which Mondrian writes a great deal in his extended meditation on neo-plastic art production’s relation to the city, to the bar, to jazz—is spoken of in theatrical terms as “the scene of forms” by Greenberg, who recognizes (or at least reveals) more clearly than Reinhardt or Fried an *irreducible* theatricality.²⁰

That theatricality or social life has a politics as well, which Taylor constantly recognizes and invokes, but to deaf ears. And it’s important to note that deafness places the severest limitations on the visual imagination. Reinhardt cannot, or refuses to, hear, if you will, a certain chromatic saturation that inhabits black as that color’s internal, social life. The many colors that are absorbed and reflected in the color black, and in and as black social life,

on the other hand, flow with an extraordinary theatrical intensity in *Victory Boogie Woogie*. It is as if they were poured out of (the father of) the jug, which is and is more than its “absence”; as if Ammons’s rhythms inhabit and animate the painting, thereby challenging formulations regarding either its emptiness or its flatness, and vivify it as a scene in the form of tactile and visual translation and rearticulation of sound. But this is not all. The intensity of Mondrian’s last work, as Harry Cooper argues, constitutes something like a critique of neo-plasticism’s insistence on the dualistic equivalence—which is necessarily a reduction—of differences within the paintings by way of the unleashing of a certain occult instability, to which I shall return.²¹ Such mixture, in which painting becomes phonotopography, would seem profoundly against the grain of Reinhardt, who claims Mondrian as an ancestor. However, the texture and landscape of black social life, of black social music, are given in *Victory Boogie Woogie*, making visible and audible a difference that exists not so much between Reinhardt’s and Mondrian’s paintings but between the way they deal with what might be understood as the social chromaticism of the color black and of blackness-in-color in their paintings. Taylor is more attuned, in the end, to what he might call the “sliding quadrants” that demarcate Mondrian’s late New York rhythms, rhythms that don’t blur so much as restage the encounter between art and life.²² *Victory Boogie Woogie* is a scene of forms as well as a thing within the black community of things.

This becomes clearer by way of Bois, who concludes his essay “Piet Mondrian, *New York City*” in this way: “When . . . asked . . . why he kept repainting *Victory Boogie Woogie* instead of making several paintings of the different solutions that had been superimposed on this canvas, Mondrian answered, ‘I don’t want pictures. I just want to find things out.’”²³ Cooper thinks the recollection of this exchange comes through the filter of the post-Pollock mythology of the action painter, as Bois calls it; but no one is more vigilant regarding that mythology than Bois, who places Reinhardt against it, and Cooper himself takes note of Mondrian’s increasing obsession with revision, which we might think not only as repetition but also as a kind of pianistic repercussion (Bois, “Piet Mondrian,” 134). If action-painter-style expression is understood as a sort of choreographically induced interior voyage, this seems not at all what Mondrian had in mind. The question, of course, concerns finding things out precisely in their relation to obsessional revision, and perhaps Mondrian knew what Taylor knew and Reinhardt did not: that repercussive revision and a certain inventive discovery are fundamental protocols of black socio-aesthetic activity. This is a question concerning sound and movement or, more precisely, a kind of audio-theatricality that is the essence of political consciousness.

And Mondrian's paintings are political if Bois is correct when he says that "an 'optical' interpretation of Mondrian, conceived in the assurance of immediate perception, cannot account for his New York paintings" ("Piet Mondrian," 182). This is to say that the political in Mondrian is initialized as an excess, though not an erasure, of the optical, as an interplay of the sensual and social ensembles in the constant cutting and augmentation of their fullness. Cooper moves us more firmly in the direction of a mediated, more than visual perception and interpretation of Mondrian's work not only by attending carefully to the structural trace of boogie-woogie piano in Mondrian's improvisatory, revisionary compositional practice but also by offering a brief history of the color black's career in Mondrian's late phase. He notes, along with Bois, that the black lines that instantiated dualistic equilibrium by "bounding color planes" proliferate and are made glossier, more reflective before Mondrian, in exile and at the unfinished end of a twenty-year project, under the influence of boogie-woogie, "burst[s] the pod of painting and disseminated its elements across a broken border" (Cooper, "Mondrian," 136, 142). This is to say not only that the border is crossed, that something moves through it; it is also to say, or at least to imply, that the border is (already) broken, that what it had contained within itself pours out. Any accounting of what the limit contains must also be an accounting of the contents of the limit. This is a matter of touch—of painterly and pianistic feel. Color pouring from as well as across the border records and reverses the sound, the social music, which had been poured into the painting. The rhythmic story of left hand, right hand, explodes into every note that can and can't be played, in every possible shade and shading of that note. Implicature erupts from the primary and the tonic as if the painting were one of Taylor's cluster bombs, his detonated rainbows, his inside figures played outside. Mondrian all but discovers certain ochres and blues in his strange, estranged homecoming, in appositional placements of the primary that allow for the secondary, for the minor that had been repressed, to emerge. He could be said to interpret, from the standpoint of a radical political-aesthetic, the rhythmic images of his country. He joins Ammons in joining what we will see Fanon come to recognize as "that fluctuating movement which [the] people are just giving shape to, and which, as soon as it has started, will be the signal for everything to be called into question."²⁴ That country, that broken body, is black. That crossed, broken border is also a broken vessel. Crossing borders and oceans in serial exile, crossing over into the dead zone, involves staging the appositional encounter, which has always already started, of blackness and color for Mondrian. The native returns to places he's never been to get ready for one last trip. We're always crossing this frontier we carry. The smuggler who crosses is the border, its contents pouring

out. Invasion out from the outside continues. Black explodes violently, victoriously in Mondrian's last painting, his careful, painstaking ode to proliferation, impurity, and incompleteness. It is the victory of the unfinished, the lonesome fugitive; the victory of finding things out, of questioning; the victorious rhythm of the broken system. Black(ness), which is to say black social life, is an undiscovered country.

Du Bois might say that it is the evident incalculability in human action that infuses *Victory Boogie Woogie*. He might claim, more pointedly, that Mondrian brings to certain fields of attention and inattention the evident incalculability of black life that corresponds to black life's evident rhythms in spite of how those rhythms might seem to lend themselves to the easy arithmetic of so many births and deaths or so many heavy beats to the bar.²⁵ In fact, it is the evidently incalculable rhythm of the life of things that Mondrian had been finding out in New York City, that he had been after for a long time if his meditations on the relationship between jazz and neo-plastic are any indication. In the end, what remains is Mondrian's insistence on his late paintings as a mode of "finding things out," as things bodying forth a self-activated, auto-excessive inquiry into the possibility of a politics of the melodramatic social imagination. In Mondrian's city, things making and finding one another out actively disrupt the grids by which activities would be known, organized, and apportioned. Mondrian's late paintings show the true colors with which blackness is infused. The paintings are an open, textured, mobile, animated, content-laden border, a sculptural, audio-theatrical outskirts, whose chromatic saturation indicate that Mondrian's late, exilic, catastrophic work was given over to a case of blackness.

Like the more than mindless, more than visceral, events and things whose meaning is unattained even as their political force is ascertained, for Fanon, chromatic saturation has repercussions:

If we study the repercussions of the awakening of national consciousness in the domains of ceramics and pottery-making, the same observations [regarding the artist's forging of an invitation to participate in organized movement] may be drawn. Jugs, jars, and trays are modified, at first imperceptibly, then almost savagely. The colors, of which formerly there were but few and which obeyed the traditional rules of harmony, increase in number and are influenced by the repercussion of the rising revolution. Certain ochres and blues, which seemed forbidden to all eternity in a given cultural area, now assert themselves without giving rise to scandal. (*Wretched*, 242)

Fanon speaks of repercussions that we might take to be the rhythmic accompaniment to this new harmonic disruption of the traditional, of the very idea of the authentic and any simple recourse to it. Yet repercussion implies a repetition, however different and differentiating, of a beat that, when it is understood as resistance in the broadest sense, lies radically and anoriginally before us. Moreover, while the repercussive chromaticism of which Fanon speaks is no simple analogue to the primary rhythms of Mondrian in New York, one cannot help but hear in his paintings a striving for what is underground and anoriginal in the city, for what is held in and escapes the city's limits, the interiority of its black border or bottom, the bottom in which its unwelcome bo(a)rders dwell politically as well as poetically.

Fanon shares Du Bois's Kantian ambivalence toward the tumultuous derangements that emerge from imagination and that are inseparable from the imaginative constitution of reason and reality. The ambiguity is shown in what elsewhere appears as a kind of valorization of the depths that are held and articulated in the surface of actual events, as the call for intellectuals to linger in the necessarily rhythmic and muscular music of the "*lieu de déséquilibre occulte*" (which Constance Farrington translates as "zone of occult instability" and Richard Philcox translates as "hidden fluctuation") wherein "*son âme et que s'illuminent sa perception et sa respiration*" (Farrington: "our lives are transfused with light"; Philcox: "their perception and respiration [is] transfigured.")²⁶ Note in the choice of translations a return to one of the problems with which we started, crystallized here in the distinction between our lives and their perception and respiration. The difference between "our" and "their" does not displace, by way of a politico-intellectual detachment, nearness with absolute distance. Rather, it attends the claim—which is to say that imaginative flight, that descent into the underground—that finding (the) people and things requires. On the other hand, it most certainly can be said to recover a gap, a border of black color, that in the end Fanon demands that we inhabit alongside the ones who have always been escaping the absolute dereliction of the reality to which they have been yoked.

Meanwhile, Reinhardt sees black as a kind of negation even of Mondrianic color, of a certain Mondrianic urban victory. Like all the most profound negations, his is oppositional. This is to say that in the end the black paintings stand alongside Mondrian's late work and stand as late work in the private and social senses of lateness. Insofar as blackness is understood as the absence and negation of color, of a kind of social color and social music, Reinhardt will have had no music playing, or played as he painted, or as you behold—neither Ammons's strong left hand or Taylor's exploded and exploding one. But blackness is not the absence of color. So far is black art also

always late work, correspondent to the victory of escape. The blackness of Mondrian's late work is given in Reinhardt's black negation of it just as Taylor amplifies and instantiates a black sociality hidden and almost unreplicable in Reinhardt and his paintings that overwhelms or displaces the antisociality of a black-and-white exchange that never really comes off either as instrumentalist dismissal or objectifying encounter. We could call such instantiation, such violence, the accomplishment of the unfinished, the incomplete, the flawed. It's a victory given in left-out left hands and their excluded handiwork, in impossible recordings on tape, on taped-over rerecordings, on broken flutes and fluted wash stands in which maker's wash their right hands and their leftout left left hands. It is the unfinished accomplishment of a victory that finished accomplishment takes away. Mondrian's victory is Harriet Jacobs's—it occurs in a cramped, capacious room, a crawl space defined by interdicted, impossible, but existent seeing and overhearing. It's a victory that comes fully into relief only when taken by way of the gift of one's freedom. What one desires, instead, is the unfinished victory of things who can't be bought and sold especially when they are bought and sold. Left hands stroll in the city, fly off the handle like left eyes, burn playhouses down, fly away, crash and burn sometimes then come out again next year on tape and fade away.

Meanwhile, Reinhardt's dream of a painting freed from the city would return whatever animates what Cooper calls the "riot of blocks" that animate *Victory Boogie Woogie* to its cell ("Mondrian," 140). Reinhardt might have said, might be one of the inspirations for, what Adorno writes in "Black as an Ideal": "To survive reality at its most extreme and grim, artworks that do not want to sell themselves as consolation must equate themselves with that reality. Radical art today is synonymous with dark art; its primary color is black. Much contemporary art is irrelevant because it takes no note of this and childishly delights in color."²⁷ For Adorno, "The ideal of blackness with regard to content is one of the deepest impulses of abstraction" (*Aesthetic Theory*, 39) Moreover, "there is an impoverishment entailed by the idea of black," according to Adorno, to which "trifling with sound and color effects" is a mere reaction (39). It is, however, precisely through a consideration of the unstable zone between the lived experience of the black and the fact of blackness, between the color black and what it absorbs and reflects, what it takes in and pours out, that we can begin to see how it is possible to mistake impossibility or impoverishment for absence or eradication. That zone, made available to us by the broken bridge of mistranslation, is where one lives a kind of oscillation between virtual solitude and fantastic multitude (which could be said to be the very theme of Mondrian's late work that Reinhardt takes it upon

himself to negate and therefore inadvertently confirms, or of a certain lateness in Fanon's work that a certain earliness in his work seeks to negate but inadvertently confirms). This canted zone or curved span moves between a fact and an experience that, in themselves and in the commerce between them, remain inaccessible to all concepts of and desires for the racial *object* and unavailable to the protocols of dematerializing representation.

Finding things out, getting at the meaning of things, turns out to mean and to demand an investigation of instability, a courting of tumult, of riot, of derangement, of the constitutive disorder of the *polis*, its black market, border, and bottom, the field of minor internal conflict, of the minor occasion or event through which the essence of an interminable struggle takes form. It means settling down in the uninhabitable, where one is constrained to re-initialize what has been dismissed as the pathontological in the discourse of the militant onto-pathologist. It means producing mad works—prematurely, preternaturally late works—that register the thingly encounter, works that are both all black and in which black is conspicuous in its absence, between blackness and chromatic saturation.

3

In the attention he pays in his late work to mental disorder and/as anticolonial refusal, Fanon understands that such blackness as Mondrian is infused with and performs shows up in color, that it is more than merely mindless and irresponsible, as Reinhardt believed. Now the interplay between blackness, color, madness, and late work that I have been trying to consider demands a turn to this important and familiar passage from “On National Culture,” in Philcox’s translation of *The Wretched of the Earth*:

[T]he colonized intellectual frequently lapses into heated arguments and develops a psychology dominated by an exaggerated sensibility, sensitivity, and susceptibility. This movement of withdrawal, which first of all comes from a *petitio principii* in his psychological mechanism and physiognomy, above all calls to mind a muscular reflex, a muscular contraction.

The foregoing is sufficient to explain the style of the colonized intellectuals who make up their mind to assert this phase of liberating consciousness. A jagged style, full of imagery, for the image is the drawbridge that lets out the unconscious forces into the surrounding meadows.

An energetic style, alive with rhythms bursting with life. A colorful style, too, bronzed, bathed in sunlight and harsh. This style, which Westerners once found jarring, is not, as some would have it, a racial feature, but above all reflects a single-handed combat and reveals how necessary it is for the intellectual to inflict injury on himself, to actually bleed red blood and free himself from that part of his being already contaminated by the germs of decay. A swift, painful combat where inevitably the muscle had to replace the concept.

Although this approach may take him to unusual heights in the sphere of poetry, at an existential level it has often proved a dead end. (157)

Fanon's reading of the staging that launches the colonized intellectual's reflexive grasp at authenticity must itself be read in its relation to his analysis of the particular psychosomatic disorders that colonialism fosters and that resistance to colonialism demands. This is to say that the muscle's problematic replacement of the concept needs also to be understood as psychosomatic disorder. The problem of the colonized intellectual as the condition of im/possibility of emergent national culture shows up with a certain clarity in Fanon's attention to mental disorders under colonialism even when the limits of psychopathology are exposed.

The increasing occurrence of mental illness and the rampant development of specific pathological conditions are not the only legacy of the colonial war in Algeria. Apart from the pathology of torture, the pathology of the tortured and that of the perpetrator, there is a pathology of the entire atmosphere in Algeria, a condition which leads the attending physician to say when confronted with a case they cannot understand: "This will all be cleared up once the damned war is over." (216)

Whose case is it? Who's on the case? Are we to consider the pathological fantasy that "this will all be cleared up"; or the decayed orbit of diagnosis that leads from the failure to understand down to that fantasy; or must we be concerned with the one big case of an entire pathological public atmosphere. In any case, the cases with which Fanon is concerned here are instances of psychosomatic pathology, "the general body of organic disorders developed in response to a situation of conflict" (216). In a note, Fanon characterizes the tradition of Soviet psychological theorization of these

disorders as “putting the brain back in its place” as “the matrix where precisely the psyche is elaborated.” That tradition operates by way of a terminological shift from “psychosomatic” to “cortico-visual” (216n35). Such disorders are both symptom and cure insofar as they constitute an avoidance of complete breakdown by way of an incomplete outwitting, in Fanon’s terms, of the originary conflict.

Fanon continues by turning to a disorder that is seemingly unique to the Algerian atmosphere:

g. Systemic contraction, muscular stiffness

These are male patients who slowly have difficulty making certain movements such as climbing stairs, walking quickly, or running (in two cases it is very sudden). The cause of this difficulty lies in a characteristic rigidity which inevitably suggests an attack on certain areas of the brain (central gray matter). Walking becomes contracted and turns into a shuffle. Passive bending of the lower limbs is practically impossible. No relaxation can be achieved. Immediately rigid and incapable of relaxing of his own free will, the patient seems to be made in one piece. The face is set, but expresses a marked degree of bewilderment.

The patient does not seem to be able to “demobilize his nerves.” He is constantly tense, on hold, between life and death. As one of them told us: “You see, I’m as stiff as a corpse.” (218–19)

Fanon offers an anticipatory explication:

Like any war, the war in Algeria has created its contingent of cortico-visceral illnesses . . . This particular form of pathology (systemic muscular contraction) already caught our attention before the revolution began. But the doctors who described it turned it into a congenital stigma of the “native,” an original feature of his nervous system, manifest proof of a predominant extrapyramidal system in the colonized. This contraction, in fact, is quite simply a postural concurrence and evidence in the colonized’s muscles of their rigidity, their reticence and refusal in the face of the colonial authorities. (217)

Perhaps these contractions comprise a staging area for questions. What’s the relation between the body seeming to be all of one piece and the uncountable

set of minor internal conflicts that Fanon overlooks in his assertion of the absence of black interiority or black difference? Is jaggedness an effect or an expression of rigidity, reticence, or refusal? Is such gestural disorder a disruptive choreography that opens onto the meaning of things? At the same time, would it not be fair to think in terms of a gestural critique (of reason, of judgment)? Muscular contraction is not just a sign of external conflict but an expression of internal conflict as well. Perhaps such gesture, such dance, is the body's resistance to the psyche and to itself the thing's immanent transcendence, the fissured singularity of a political scene.

But is this anything other than to say that dance such as this moves in a pathological atmosphere? It is fantastic and its rigor is supposed to be that of the mortis, the socially dead, of a dead or impossible socius. The point, however, is that disorder has a set of double edges in the case (studies) of Fanon. Such disorder is, more generally, both symptom and cure—a symptom of oppression and a staging area for political criminality. And such disorder is deeply problematic if the onto-epistemological field of blackness is posited as impossible or unexplainable; if the social situation of blackness is a void, or a voided fantasy, or simply devoid of value; if resistance itself is, finally, at least in this case, a function of the displacement of personality. Fanon seeks to address this complex in the transition from his description of muscular contraction to his understanding of the relation between what has been understood to be a natural propensity to “criminal impulsiveness” and the war of national liberation. Now the relation between the colonized intellectual and his impossible authenticity is to be thought in its relation to that between “the militant” and “his people,” whom the militant believes he must drag “up from the pit and out of the cave” (219). At stake is the transition from romantic identification with the pathological to the detached concern of the psychopathologist who ventures into the dead space of the unexplainable in the interest of a general resuscitation. Fanon is interested in a kind of rehabilitation and reintegration that the militant psychopathologist is called upon to perform in the interest of procuring “substance, coherence, and homogeneity” and reversing the depersonalization of “the very structure of society” on the collective as well as individual levels (219). For Fanon, the militant cortico-visceral psychopathologist, the people have been reduced “to a collection of individuals who owe their very existence to the presence of the colonizer” (220). A set of impossible questions ought to ensue from what may well be Fanon's pathological insistence on the pathological: Can resistance come from such a location? Or perhaps more precisely and more to the point, can there be an escape from that location; can the personhood that defines that location also escape that position? What survives the kind of escape that ought never leave the survivor intact? If and when some

thing emerges from such a place, can it be anything other than pathological? But how can the struggle for liberation of the pathological be aligned with the eradication of the pathological? This set of questions will have been symptoms of the psychopathology of the psychopathologist—in them the case of the one who studies cases will have been given in its essence. It is crucial, however, that this set of questions that Fanon ought to have asked are never really posed. Instead, in his text Fanon insistently stages the encounter between anticolonial political criminality and colonially induced psychopathology. In so doing he discovers a certain nearness and a certain distance between explanation and resistance as well.

Fanon is embedded in a discourse that holds the pathological in close proximity to the criminal. At stake in this particular nearness is the relation between psychic and legal adjustment. In either case, the case *is* precisely in relation to the norm. But the case of a specifically colonial psychopathology, in its relation to the case of a specifically anticolonial criminality, has no access to the norm. Moreover, if in either case there were access to the norm, that access would be refused and such refusal would be folded into the description of criminal, pathological anticolonialism. In such cases, what would be the meaning of adjustment or “reintegration”? What does or should the liberation struggle have to do, in the broadest sense, with the “rehabilitation of man”? The flipside of this question has to do, precisely, with what might be called the liberatory value of ensemblic depersonalization. This is Fanon’s question. He achieves it, in the course of his career, by way of an actual engagement with what is dismissed in *Black Skins, White Masks* as the “minor internal conflicts” that show up only in contradistinction to authentic intraracial intersubjectivity but that is taken up, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, with all of the militant psychopathologist’s ambivalence, under the rubrics of “cortico-visceral disorder” (muscular contraction) and “criminal impulsiveness” in its irreducible relation to “national liberation.”

While Fanon would consider the zealous worker in a colonial regime a quintessentially pathological case, remember that it is in resistance to colonial oppression that the cases of psychopathology with which Fanon is concerned in *The Wretched of the Earth*—in particular, those psychosomatic or cortico-visceral disorders—emerge. What’s at stake is Fanon’s ongoing ambivalence toward the supposedly pathological. At the same time, ambivalence is itself the mark of the pathological. Watch Fanon prefiguratively describe and diagnose the pathological ambivalence that he performs:

The combat waged by a people for their liberation leads them, depending on the circumstances, either to reject or to explode the so-called truths sown in their consciousness by

the colonial regime, military occupation, and economic exploitation. And only the armed struggle can effectively exorcise these lies about man that subordinate and literally mutilate the more conscious-minded among us.

How many times in Paris or Aix, in Algiers or Basse-Terre have we seen the colonized vehemently protest the so-called indolence of the black, the Algerian, the Vietnamese? And yet in a colonial regime if a fellah were a zealous worker or a black were to refuse a break from work, they would be quite simply considered pathological cases. The colonized's indolence is a conscious way of sabotaging the colonial machine; on the biological level it is a remarkable system of self-preservation and, if nothing else, is a positive curb on the occupier's stranglehold over the entire country. (220)

Is it fair to say that one detects in this text a certain indolence sown or sewn into it? Perhaps, on the other hand, its flaws are more accurately described as pathological. To be conscious-minded is aligned with subordination, even mutilation; the self-consciousness of the colonized is figured as a kind of wound at the same time that it is also aligned with wounding, with armed struggle that is somehow predicated on that which it makes possible—namely, the explosion of so-called truths planted or woven into the consciousness of the conscious-minded ones. They are the ones who are given the task of repairing (the truth) of man; they are the ones who would heal by way of explosion, excision, or exorcism. This moment of self-conscious self-description is sewn into Fanon's text like a depth charge. However, authentic upheaval is ultimately figured not as an eruption of the unconscious in the conscious-minded but as that conscious mode of sabotage carried out every day—in and as what had been relegated, by the conscious-minded, to the status of impossible, pathological sociality—by the ones who are not, or are not yet, conscious. Healing wounds are inflicted, in other words, by the ones who are not conscious of their wounds and whose wounds are not redoubled by such consciousness. Healing wounds are inflicted appositionally, in small, quotidian refusals to act that make them subject to charges of pathological indolence. Often the conscious ones, who have taken it upon themselves to defend the colonized against such charges, levy those charges with the greatest vehemence. If Fanon fails to take great pains to chart the tortured career of rehabilitative injury, it is perhaps a conscious decision to sabotage his own text insofar as it has been sown with those so-called truths that obscure the truth of man.

This black operation that Fanon performs on his own text gives the lie to his own formulations. So when Fanon claims, “The duty of the colonized

subject, who has not yet arrived at a political consciousness or a decision to reject the oppressor, is to have the slightest effort literally dragged out of him,” the question that emerges is why one who is supposed yet to have arrived at political consciousness, one who must be dragged up out of the pit, would have such a duty (220). This, in turn, raises the more fundamental issue, embedded in this very assertion of duty, of the impossibility of such non-arrival. The failure to arrive at a political consciousness is a general pathology suffered by the ones who take their political consciousness with them on whatever fugitive, aleatory journey they are making. They will have already arrived; they will have already been there. They will have carried something with them before whatever violent manufacture, whatever constitutive shattering is supposed to have called them into being. While noncooperation is figured by Fanon as a kind of staging area for or a preliminary version of a more authentic “objectifying encounter” with colonial oppression (a kind of counter-representational response to power’s interpellative call), his own formulations regarding that response point to the requirement of a kind of thingly quickening that makes opposition possible while appositionally displacing it. Noncooperation is a duty that must be carried out by the ones who exist in the nearness and distance between political consciousness and absolute pathology. But this duty, imposed by an erstwhile subject who clearly is supposed to know, overlooks (or, perhaps more precisely, looks away from) that vast range of nonreactive disruptions of rule that are, in early and late Fanon, both indexed and disqualified. Such disruptions, often manifest as minor internal conflicts (within the closed circle, say, of Algerian criminality, in which the colonized “tend to use each other as a screen”) or muscular contractions, however much they are captured, enveloped, imitated, or traded, remain inassimilable (231). These disruptions trouble the rehabilitation of the human even as they are evidence of the capacity to enact such rehabilitation. Moreover, it is at this point, in passages that culminate with the apposition of what Fanon refers to as “the reality of the ‘towelhead’” with “the reality of the ‘nigger,’” that the fact, the case, and the lived experience of blackness—which might be understood here as the troubling of and the capacity for the rehabilitation of the human—converge as a duty to appose the oppressor, to refrain from a certain performance of the labor of the negative, to avoid his economy of objectification and standing against, to run away from the snares of recognition (220). This refusal is a black thing, is that which Fanon carries with(in) himself, and in how he carries himself, from Martinique to France to Algeria. He is an anticolonial smuggler whose wares are constituted by and as the dislocation of black social life that he carries, almost unaware. In Fanon, blackness is transversality between things, escaping (by way of) distant, spooky actions; it is translational effect and affect, transmission between cases, and could be

understood, in terms Brent Hayes Edwards establishes, as diasporic practice.²⁸ This is what he carries with him, as the imagining thing that he cannot quite imagine and cannot quite control, in his pathologizing description of it that it—that he—defies. A fugitive cant moves through Fanon, erupting out of regulatory disavowal. His claim upon this criminality was interdicted. But perhaps only the dead can strive for the quickening power that animates what has been relegated to the pathological. Perhaps the dead are alive and escaping. Perhaps ontology is best understood as the imagination of this escape as a kind of social gathering; as undercommon plainsong and dance; as the fugitive, centrifugal word; as the word's auto-interruptive, auto-illuminative shade/s. Seen in this light, black(ness) is, in the dispossessive richness of its colors, beautiful.

I must emphasize my lack of interest in some puritanically monochromatic denunciation of an irreducible humanism in Fanon. Nor is one after some simple disavowal of the law as if the criminality in question had some stake in such a reaction. Rather, what one wants to amplify is a certain Fanonian elaboration of the law of motion that Adorno will come to speak of in Fanon's wake. Fanon writes, "Here we find the old law stating that anything alive cannot afford to remain still while the nation is set in motion, while man both demands and claims his infinite humanity" (221). A few years later, in different contexts, Adorno will write: "The inner consistency through which artworks participate in truth always involves their untruth; in its most unguarded manifestations art has always revolted against this, and today this revolt has become art's own law of movement [*Bewegungsgesetz*]" (*Aesthetic Theory*, 168–69) and "Artworks' paradoxical nature, stasis, negates itself. The movement of artworks must be at a standstill and thereby become visible. Their immanent processual character—the legal process that they undertake against the merely existing world that is external to them—is objective prior to their alliance with any party" (176–77). In the border between *Black Skins, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, the body that questions is a truth that bears untruth. It is a heavy burden to be made to stand as the racial-sexual embodiment of the imagination in its lawless freedom, and the knowledge it produces exclusively, particularly when such standing is a function of having one's wings clipped by the understanding.²⁹ However the burden of such exemplarity, the burden of being the problem or the case, is disavowed at a far greater cost. So that what is important about Fanon is his own minor internal conflict, the viciously constrained movement between these burdens. On the one hand, the one who does not engage in a certain criminal disruption of colonial rule is pathological, unnatural; on the other hand, one wants to resist a certain understanding of the Algerian as "born idlers, born liars, born thieves, and born

criminals" (*Wretched/P*, 221). Insofar as Fanon seems to think that the colonized subject is born into a kind of preconscious duty to resist, that the absence of the capacity to perform or to recognize this duty is a kind of birth defect that retards the development of political consciousness, Fanon is caught between a rock and a crawl space. Against the grain of a colonial psychological discourse that essentially claims "that the North African in a certain way is deprived of a cortex" and therefore relegated to a "vegetative" and purely "instinctual" life, a life of involuntary muscular contractions, Fanon must somehow still find a way to claim, or to hold in reserve, those very contractions insofar as they are a mobilization against colonial stasis (225). Against the grain of racist notions of "the criminal impulsiveness of the North African" as "the transcription of a certain configuration of the nervous system into his pattern of behavior" or as "a neurologically comprehensible reaction, written into the nature of things, of the thing which is biologically organized," Fanon must valorize the assertion of a kind of political criminality written into the nature of things while also severely clipping the wings of an imaginative tendency to naturalize and pathologize the behavior of the colonized (228). Insofar as crime marks the Algerian condition within which "each prevents his neighbor from seeing the national enemy" and thereby arriving at a political consciousness, Fanon must move within an almost general refusal to look at the way the colonized look at themselves, a denial or pathologization or policing of the very sociality that such looking implies (231). Here Fanon seems to move within an unarticulated Kantian distinction between criminality as the teleological principle of anticolonial resistance and crime as the unbound, uncountable set of illusory facts that obscure, or defer the advent of, postcolonial reason. This distinction is an ontological distinction; it, too, raises the question concerning the irreducible trace of beings that being bears.³⁰

This is all to say that Fanon can only very briefly glance at or glance off the immense and immensely beautiful poetry of (race) war, the rich music of a certain underground social aid, a certain cheap and dangerous socialism, that comprises the viciously criminalized and richly differentiated interiority of black cooperation that will, in turn, have constituted the very ground of externally directed noncooperation. It turns out, then, that the pathological is (the) black, which has been figured both as the absence of color and as the excessively, criminally, pathologically colorful (which implies that black's relation to color is a rich, active interanimation of reflection and absorption); as the cortico-visceral muscular contraction or the simultaneously voluntary and impulsive hiccupped "jazz lament" that in spite of Fanon's formulations must be understood in relation to the acceptable jaggedness, legitimate muscularity, and husky theoretical lyricism of the bop and post-bop

interventions that are supposed to have replaced it (176). Because finally the question isn't whether or not the disorderly behavior of the anticolonialist is pathological or natural, whether or not he is born to that behavior, whether or not the performance of this or that variation on such behavior is "authentic": the question, rather, concerns what the vast range of black authenticities and black pathologies does. Or, put another way, what is the efficacy of that range of natural-born disorders that have been relegated to what is theorized as the void of blackness or black social life but that might be more properly understood as the fugitive being of "infinite humanity," or as that which Marx calls wealth?

Now, wealth is on one side a thing, realized in things, material products, which a human being confronts as subject; on the other side, as value, wealth is merely command over alien labour not with the aim of ruling, but with the aim of private consumption, etc. It appears in all forms in the shape of a thing, be it an object or be it a relation mediated through the object, which is external and accidental to the individual. Thus the old view, in which the human being appears as the aim of production, regardless of his limited national, religious, political character, seems to be very lofty when contrasted to the modern world, where production appears as the aim of mankind and wealth as the aim of production. In fact, however, when the limited bourgeois form is stripped away, what is wealth other than the universality of individual needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces, etc., created through universal exchange? The full development of human mastery over the forces of nature, those of so-called nature as well as of humanity's own nature? The absolute working-out of his creative potentialities, with no presupposition other than the previous historic development, which makes this totality of development, i.e., the development of all human powers as such the end in itself, not as measured on a *predetermined* yardstick? Where he does not reproduce himself in one specificity, but produces his totality? Strives not to remain something he has become, but is in the absolute movement of becoming?³¹

Though Fanon is justifiably wary of anything that is presented as if it were written into the nature of things and of the thing, this notion of wealth as the finite being of a kind of infinite humanity—especially when that in/finitude

is understood (improperly, against Marx's grain) as constituting a critique of any human mastery whatever—must be welcomed. Marx's invocation of the thing leads us past his own limitations such that it becomes necessary and possible to consider the thing's relation to human capacity independent of the limitations of bourgeois form.

Like the (colonial) states of emergency that are its effects, like the enclosures that are its epiphenomena, like the civil war that was black reconstruction's aftershock, like the proletariat's anticipation of abolition; it turns out that the war of "national liberation" has always been going on, anoriginally, as it were. Fanon writes of "a lot of things [that] can be committed for a few pounds of semolina," saying, "You need to use your imagination to understand these things" (231). This is to say that there is a counterpoint in Fanon, fugitive to Fanon's own self-regulative powers, that refuses his refusal to imagine those imagining things whose political commitment makes them subject to being committed, those biologically organized things who really have to use their imaginations to keep on keeping on, those things whose constant escape of their own rehabilitation as men seems to be written into their nature. In such contrapuntal fields or fugue states, one finds (it possible to extend) their stealing, their stealing away, their lives that remain, fugitively, even when the case of blackness is dismissed.

—Duke University

NOTES

At the outset of this attempt to consider blackness in its relation to fugitivity and translation, I must express my gratitude for two groundbreaking examples. See Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), and Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

1. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (1967; London: Picador, 1970), 77–78.
2. For more on translation and its relation to the concept of "anoriginal difference," see Andrew Benjamin, *Translation and the Nature of Philosophy: A New Theory of Words* (London: Routledge, 1989).
3. I am invoking, and also deviating from, Nahum Dimitri Chandler's notion of para-ontology, a term derived from his engagement with W. E. B. Du Bois's long anticipation of Fanon's concern with the deformative or transformative pressure blackness puts on philosophical concepts, categories, and methods. For more on para-ontology, see Chandler, *The Problem of Pure Being: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Discourses of the Negro* (New York: Fordham University Press, forthcoming).

4. For more on Fanon's relation to phenomenology, see David Macey, *Frantz Fanon: A Biography* (New York: Picador, 2001), 162–68.
5. Jared Sexton and Huey Copeland, "Raw Life: An Introduction," *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003): 53.
6. There is a certain American reception of Agamben that fetishizes the bareness of it all without recognizing the severity of the critique he levels at movements of power/ knowledge that would separate life from the form of life. The critical obsession with bare life, seen in its own vexed relation with the possibility of another translation that substitutes naked for bare and perhaps has some implications, is tantamount to a kind of sumptuary law. The constant repetition of bare life bears the annoying, grating tone that one imagines must have been the most prominent feature of the voice of that kid who said the emperor has no clothes. It's not that one wants to devalue in any way the efficacy of such truth telling, such revelation; on the other hand, one must always be careful that a certain being positive, if not positivism, doesn't liquidate the possibility of political fantasy in its regulation of political delusion. There's more to be said on this question of what clothes life, of how life is apparell'd (as John Donne might put it); this, it seems to me, is Agamben's question, the question of another commonness. So why is it repressed in the straight-ahead discourse of the clear-eyed? This question is ultimately parallel to that concerning why Foucault's constant and unconcealed assumptions of life's fugitivity are overlooked by that generation of American academic overseers—the non-seers who can't see, because they see so clearly—who constitute the prison guards of a certain understanding of the carceral. Judith Butler might say that they see too clearly to see what lies before them. See her analytic of the "before" in the second chapter of her *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1989). See also Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), and *Means without Ends: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
7. Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952), 88.
8. This is an image—taken from Denis Diderot's reading of Samuel Richardson—that Brooks deploys in his analysis of melodrama. See Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (1976; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 19.
9. Or it might show up as a refusal of the resonance of Fanon in Sexton and Copeland, or in Achille Mbembe and David Marriott, or in important new work by Kara Keeling and Frank Wilderson. See Keeling, "'In the Interval': Frantz Fanon and the 'Problems' of Visual Representation," *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003): 91–117 (wherein she takes up that passage in Fanon with which I began, thereby both authorizing and directing the course of my own reading; wherever I might diverge from her understanding, I do so only as a function of her thinking, in kinship and respect). See also Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); David Marriott, *On Black Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, trans. A. M. Berrett et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Frank Wilderson III, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming).
10. Michael Inwood, ed., *A Heidegger Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 214.
11. Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 174; hereafter cited in the text.

12. For more on the relation between evasive previousness and unavailable natality, consult Mackey's multivolume epic *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*, especially the first installment, *Bedouin Hornbook*, Callaloo Fiction Series, vol. 2 (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1986).
13. See Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), "Black Is a Country," in *Home: Social Essays* (New York: Morrow, 1966), 82–86, and Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).
14. See Theodor W. Adorno, "On Jazz," trans. Jaime Owen Daniel; modified by Richard Leppert, in *Essays on Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 472.
15. "Black as Symbol and Concept," in *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, ed. Barbara Rose (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 86–88.
16. "Black," *Arts/Canada* 113 (October 1967); hereafter cited in the text.
17. Yve-Alain Bois cites the following statement by Reinhardt: "I've never approved or liked anything about Marcel Duchamp. You have to choose between Duchamp and Mondrian." See Bois, "The Limit of Almost," in *Ad Reinhardt*, ed. William Rubin and Richard Koshalek (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), 13.
18. Bois wonders if the non-sentence Reinhardt pronounces on theater ("Theater, acting, 'lowest of the arts'") alludes to Fried's in/famous essay on what he took to be the degrading force of theatricality in minimalist art, "Art and Objecthood." The essay originally appeared in *Artforum* a couple of months before Reinhardt's death on August 31, 1967, a couple of weeks after his encounter with Taylor. See Bois, "Limit," 13 and 30n21. Also see Reinhardt's unpublished notes from 1966 to 1967 collected by Rose under the title "Art-as-Art," in *Art as Art*, 74, and Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (1967; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 148–72. I would like to acknowledge the influence of Paul Kottman's ideas regarding what he calls "the politics of the scene" on my attempt to think through this interplay of politics and theatricality.
19. Clement Greenberg, "The Crisis of the Easel Picture," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Arrogant Purpose, 1945–1949*, 4 vols., ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 223, quoted in Bois, "Limit," 17.
20. See, for instance, Mondrian's 1927 essay "Jazz and Neo-Plastic," in *The New Art—The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, ed. and trans. Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James (1986; New York: Da Capo, 1993), 217–22.
21. See Harry Cooper, "Mondrian, Hegel, Boogie," *October* 84 (Spring 1998): 136.
22. See/hear Cecil Taylor, *Segments II (Orchestra of Two Continents): Winged Serpent (Sliding Quadrants)* (Milan: Soul Note, 1985).
23. Yve-Alain Bois, "Piet Mondrian, *New York City*," in *Painting as Model* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 183.
24. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 227; hereafter abbreviated *Wretched/F*.
25. See W. E. B. Du Bois, "Sociology Hesitant," *boundary 2* 27, no. 3 (2000): 41.
26. Frantz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre* (1961; Paris, 1991), 273. See also *Wretched/F*, p. 227, and Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 163; hereafter abbreviated *Wretched/P*. Forgive my oscillation—undertaken

primarily due to considerations of style (which is not only eternal, as Mackey says, but fundamental)—between the poles of these translations.

27. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 39.
28. See Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).
29. This is a Kantian formulation that I have elsewhere tried to explicate by way of the work of Winfried Menninghaus. See my “Knowledge of Freedom,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 4, no. 2 (2004): 269–310. See also Menninghaus, *In Praise of Nonsense: Kant and Bluebeard*, trans. Henry Pickford (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), and Immanuel Kant, “On the combination of taste with genius in products of beautiful art,” in *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 196–97.
30. Perhaps this paradox—wherein the colonized intellectual must deconstruct and disavow what the anticolonial revolutionary has to claim, in a double operation on and from the same questioning, questionable body; wherein national consciousness and mental disorder are interinanimate—is proximate to what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak thinks under the rubric of the “‘native informant’ as a name for that mark of expulsion from the name of Man.” Perhaps Fanon’s late work operates as something on the order of a refusal of that expulsion and of that name, even in his invocation of it. See Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 6.
31. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Vintage Press, 1973), 487.