

# Thing: a fugitive in( )operation

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## Abstract

'Thing' conducts an antiracist intervention in Agamben's "inoperativity", operating contemporary Black studies into Agamben's Heideggerian absences. Opening the subject to the impotentiality of Bartleby the Scrivener's preference not to, Agamben seeks to disable the mechanisms of the world for a new politics. However, this poetics leaves the internal constitution of the subject, allowing the forces of operativity to maintain their operation as the constitutive ontology of subjectivity. Into this troubling remnant in Agamben I bring Hortense Spillers, who explores the constitution of the non- or anti-subject, constructed through the racializing operation of subjectivity that allows Agamben's subject to remain intact throughout the process of being rendered inoperative. The Black non-subject, Spillers theorizes, is not constituted by the body that Agamben's (White) subject requires; instead, she is formed of flesh, which is antecedent to subjectivity's hegemonic form. Flesh is the materiality of racialization in the operativity of world. Fred Moten's numerous works on Blackness and otherwise ontologies allow this deep aporia in Agamben's thinking to open into a radical poetics of antiracist inoperativity, disavowing its constitutive subjectivity. In this essay, I closely read Agamben and Heidegger, with the thinking of Hortense Spillers, Sianne Ngai, C. Riley Snorton, Alexander Weheliye and Fred Moten, arriving somewhere closer to the Black beyond of inoperativity's antiracist refusal.

*Keywords: Moten; Black studies; inoperativity; flesh; value form*



## Thing

FUGITIVITY IS A CONSTANT DEHISCENCE OF HISTORICAL WOUNDS; ESCAPE FROM THE POLITE  
RITUALS OF SIGNIFICATION

*The abandon? That's just an old song, a beautiful new machine, and it goes: The dancing past is Blackness, cast beneath like shaded light, like stones, while the present — the present that inhabits the same body as Europe, that is European corporeality — is the investigation of itself, the analysis of its History qua European Being and that analysis is its own creation, the creation of itself and its other. For a(n) (im)properly Motenian dance with Agamben, it would be sufficient to spend this whole essay with just the first page of Agamben's latest book, *Creation and Anarchy* (2019). There would be so much to do, and towards the*

end of that work we would say, ‘The past is indeed created now but there is something — another past, (not but nothing but) a past in which the present is bound and sedimented — that precedes (which is to say, far exceeds) the past, that comes before the moment of Europe’s making’. The essay would be so structured, such an ordered confrontation with each line of the page, working along it, down it, then eventually in a direction called, in the institution of criticism, *beyond it*. Then Moten and I would end on top of the ruins of the criticized book, and we would be Europeanly victorious. But what would I do with the new solid *polis* posited atop the ruins of the previous mayor of the city of criticism? I would just be destroyed again, another fracture in the mythic circle of violence. I do not want to implement institutional policy on the study of Moten and Agamben, on their planning in some underworld I dream of daily; I do not want to universalize my institutional critical knowledge lapped up in the debt-performance of various universities. Policy — as *apodeixis*, as proof, as a declaration to show and to speak — is to speak *for, on behalf of*, another who is silenced by policy; to speak for those who cannot speak *because I am speaking*, the retroactive assertion of impossibility within the frame of possibility posited by sovereign power that is created by this assertion. This has all been said before (Harney and Moten, 2013: 67ff). Instead I walk in, always listening to Moten, always tuned in to podcasts on the homelessness of home, on the temptations, and I try to walk through the house of Europeanness. This essay begins with time. We step into the room where Agamben’s inoperativity is being written on the walls, and there is so much it ignores; it doesn’t realize that, in the Man/animal/thing triptych of Being it posits, the thing precedes the creation of Being. The thing is anteontological and has been built upon the blinding light of European imperial reason. Then we move into space. We enter the room where Marx is hammering, and there we find the historical creation of capitalist value and the disguise it places over beings: value makes it seem like the body and the city are separate, like individuation and the polity become intertwined, but we find out that they were always the same thing anyway. Then we realize, in the room where Hortense Spillers is sweating with thought, that the thing was actually always flesh, and that flesh is the wound of European history, capitalist value and the originary moment of Being that posits the ontological triptych. Inside that wound is Blackness and that is what we were looking for the whole time. Then we move into the zone where Moten is performing, where he sings with someone who is and is not ‘you’. In there we discover the myth that has been upheld, whether they meant to or not, by Agamben, Heidegger and loads of other blokes who look the same but never presented a name card at the initiation ceremony of

modernity. And then we get to the end and, finally, in that room we are allowed to dance. There I hope to encounter a city of criticism that is its constitutive outside (Moten, 2018a: 42), that is inside its moment of making, in its own nowhere, and thus constantly aware of what preceded its own making and what cannot be produced by exposure to its own force. *THIS IS/WILL ALWAYS HAVE BEEN FRED MOTEN'S FUGITIVE DEHISCENCE IN GIORGIO AGAMBEN'S INOPERATIVE USE OF THE BODY.*

## Time

*THE THING IS ANTECEDENT TO HISTORY AND EXISTS BEFORE BEING*

In the poetics of inoperativity, the entire *logos* of *ergon* is disbanded and a modal ontology is made available. This making-available brings us to a Heideggerian clearing, an opening in the dense forest where light opens the space of possibility for beings to emerge otherwise. The epistemological process of the clearing is archaeological, following Edmund Husserl's metaphors of knowledge excavation, and Agamben is guided by the belief that 'archaeology is the sole means of access to the present' (Agamben, 2019: 1). To dig up knowledge from the darkness beneath, to bring to light. Clearing is a *lighting* process: Heidegger's term for it is "*Lichtung*": lighting. Inoperativity clears the ontological ground for the openness, the *Lichtung*, of poverty, the (im)potentiality of not-having and the necessity of the non-necessary. But what of the things brought into the clearing? Agamben distinguishes the things through a Heideggerian triptych of being: 'The stone is worldless, the animal is poor in world (*weltarm*), and human beings are world-forming' (Agamben, 2019: 33). For the human to open up the dark forest of labour and ontology to the animals 'poor in world' is insufficient for Agamben. Instead the stone is excavated. What does the stone — the thing — see when brought/bought into the shaded light of the singular ontological mode that conditioned its worldlessness? How does the stone relate to its unbeing in the world?

The stone as worldless and workless thing is, in this triad, included in the command of its exclusion; it is now participant in the making of its own worldlessness. The stone is the past in the act of archaeological excavation in which Agamben opens a clearing in order to understand the present, and the present, we should not forget, is European, even for Agamben himself.

It is in seeking to comprehend the present that human beings — at least we Europeans — find ourselves compelled to interrogate the

past. I have specified “we Europeans” because it seems to me that, supposing that the word “Europe” has a sense, it cannot, as is obvious today, be either political or religious and even less economic. Rather, it consists perhaps in this: that Europeans — unlike, for example, Asians and Americans, for whom history and the past have a completely different significance — can gain access to their own truth only by means of a confrontation with the past, only by settling accounts with their history. (Agamben, 2019: 1)

That possessive pronoun will affect the experience of the stone - who is *their* stone, *Europe's* stone, the past of a present that is not its own - and dictate already how the stone is able to end history, to be brought/bought into the *Lichtung* and cut the dialectical process that produced it as past-thing.

To look into the past in order to explain the present, for Agamben, *is* Europeanness; to be European is to see a self-enclosure in the opening, to be able to witness as if objectively, one's own entrapment within the open, which is then revealed as an also necessarily non-open: the negative is revealed as constitutive of the world (for the European who seeks the present/open through the past/non-open). ‘The openness that is in question in the world is essentially the openness to a closure, and the one who looks into the open sees only a closing up, sees only a non-seeing. For this reason — that is to say, insofar as the world has been opened only through the interruption and nullification of the relationship of the living being with its disinhibitor — being is from the very beginning traversed by the nothing, and the world is constitutively marked by negativity and disorientation’ (Agamben, 2019: 49). The nullification, though, is only a nullification of *their* history, a disorientation in relation to *their* own position within *their* own closed openness. The European, that is, sets up his own negative space within the enclosure of his own landscape. The world the animal lacks is then only a lack of the possibility of nullifying and being disoriented by the enclosure of European openness. And the worldlessness of the stone is crucially only worldless in its (im)potentiality to unsee the boundaries of the European *Lichtung*. The stone is unable to become bored — which is to be ‘absorbed’ and ‘stunned’ ‘in things’ (Agamben, 2019: 48) — in the closed-up open of Europe.

The negativity in the dialectics of the (European) human is the originary moment of creation for Heidegger, which Agamben elaborates: ‘The openness of the world begins in the human being precisely from the perception of non-openness’ (2019: 48). When inoperativity suspends the suspending-mechanism of dialectical history and its privileging of work and negativity, beings are deprived

of their coordinates of value in the *logos* of Being, but those coordinates of value produced the human and its constituent world. Seeking, then, to move out of normative ontology, into a modal ontology of destituent potential, leaves a clinging remnant of the thing that constituted the freed being: its language, its command, its origin, is the beginning of its body in relation to its world; Man and his European world are one single internality expressed as inside world and outside world. So how is the being removed from Being when they are mutually constitutive and, as we might come to understand through Moten, inseparable when felt, or heard, from outside their own way of seeing?

Agamben is not a questioner of the stone. He sits in a chair nearby but his *Lichtung* is so bright it burns the buzzing silence of the stone's worldless blues. Listen to the stone. In a momentous passage, Moten speaks the stone:

Perhaps this means that what opens the world to play, what brings the world out into the open (secret), is the question *and the questioning* of things that have been brought into the closed world of their exclusion, those who have been incorporated by way of that which has been made open to the world. Taken out of the dark, brought into light but shadowed, brought out by shadow, dark to themselves, things are brought into shade by shade throwing shade. The ones who have been brought into the world by way of that which has been made open to the world are excluded from the world, are given over to the world as poverty and dereliction. [...] They are outside of the world into which they have been thrown. [...] They unmade the world of the ones who belong there, the ones to whom they belong, the ones who brought them, threw them, bought them. [...] But the ones they threw into the world, so that the world they withheld from them might be made, unmake the world. Perhaps the world the slaveholders made is the text of impossible origins. The Bible and the Greeks are the world the slaveholders made. [...] The Bible and the Greeks. These texts are Europe. Europe is man. (Moten, 2018a: 31)

The 'world-forming' of the human, in its impotential inoperativity, is always premised on clearing a space for becoming, which in Agambenian inoperativity is becoming-other, becoming, against dialectical history, a suggestion of another possibility. But what was excavated to produce the world that was formed by (European) Man remains and is not carried over to the coming politics of destituent potential. Destituent potential, indeed, eradicates and makes

impossible, as Agamben writes in *The Use of Bodies*, the ‘unceasing, unwinnable, desolate dialectic between constituent power and constituted power’ (2016: 266), finding a form of social creation outside the violent logic of a constituent power that brings into being, and maintains its violent continuation in, a constituted power. But the rejection of the logic of constituent power means that the coming politics cannot be created entirely anew because it is already formed from what was excavated, and that act of excavation is constituent power; it is its moment of originary sovereignty. That moment of originary sovereignty creates the world that is European Man, who is also formed of his constitutive outside. The binary of life is posited in this movement, and that binary is race: when Being redefines all that is not inside it, all that upholds it from outside, as Black. For Agamben, the coming politics is a freeing of the beings who already exist within the enclosure of Being. However, since Being is produced by the exclusionary assimilation of the stone, by the stone’s constitution of the *Lichtung* as its necessary outside, the stone must also be brought into the utopia of the coming politics, otherwise the beings taken into utopia would no longer exist. What to do with the stone?

To bring Moten in to this cul-de-sac in Agamben’s thinking, the thing reveals ‘the fatal relation between world forming and judgment’ (Moten, 2018a: 34); it reveals that the logic of destituent potential resides in an archaeological mining for resources labelled by the light of the clearing, where stands Man and his tools, and that destituent potential attempts to speak for (so, *write policy for*) the stone in order to take the impotentiality of beings out of Being and into the coming politics, which would not work without the stone because the beings inside it would remain constituted by constituent power. The stone is the only one of the three listed beings (stone/animal/world-forming Man) who is not spoken for already in the *ergon* — the proper task — of Being. Here, in the clearing, the human realizes his entrapment and his need for the stone, for the unspeakable/speechless thing.

In *The Open*, Agamben writes, ‘[t]he jewel set at the centre of the human world and its *Lichtung* is nothing but animal captivation; the wonder “that beings are” is nothing but the grasping of the “essential disruption” that occurs in the living being from its being exposed in a nonrevelation’. This means, he goes on, ‘*Dasein* is simply an animal that has learned to become bored; it has awakened from its own captivation to its own captivation. This awakening of the living being to its own being-captivated, this anxious and resolute opening to a non-open, is the human’ (Agamben, 2004: 65). The non-open is a boundary within the (im)potentiality of the human’s workless duty, already stationed at the moment of his waking within his act of opening: Man *opens*, and the impotential of the non-

open is contained within that act. Moten, however, insists on the thing's 'insistent previousness evading each and every natal occasion' (2003). 'Agamben recalibrates [the Heideggerian] interplay between animality and humanity that accompanies the essential disruption that renders man creaturely - being exposed in a nonrevelation, being delivered over to something that refuses itself' (Moten, 2018a: 40). Slipping out of that deliverance, inoperatively, into a modal ontology that reconfigures the subject is, for Moten, insufficient because the outside of this logic is constituted also in the same moment; the outside is internal to the inside, constituted with(in) its subjectivity and its (White) subjects. Beneath and before that outside is Blackness. 'The key point here is that what initiates everything, for Schmitt and Agamben [...] is the originary power of the sovereign. But how do we analyze the originary power of a figure that depends on the originary violation of the normativity that guarantees its power?' (Moten, 2018a: 40–41) The beyond-outside (or what we might discover as the *beneath*) is suspended in order for sovereign power to posit the law as constituting all that is its outside, revealing the immanent internality of the outside. 'This immanent outside is always understood as an internality that has been rendered ecstatic insofar as it must break the law that it safeguards in order to make the law safe' (Moten, 2018a: 41). The human is folded into animal-being, into the closed open, but the human understands that it is a landscape of possibility. The thing, however, is suspended in the underground, and is not involved in that originary moment; it is not participant in the mutual presuppositions of the inside and outside of sovereign power. To properly access a discourse of the outside, it must be heard beneath the sight/site of Being's *Lichtung*. It must be conceived that the (Black) thing is called a (Black) thing only in relation to this inside/outside originary sovereignty that precedes and stands before it. 'Blackness is present at its own making — it is the autopoiesis of imagined, imagining things' (Moten, 2018a: 43).

For Moten, this boredom at the instantiation of the *Lichtung* is impossible because it does not explain the beyond-outside, the beneath; it totally disallows any study of the out from outside. The very positing by Aristotle in the beginning of (European Man's) philosophy of an *ergon* proper to Man is a rebuttal of the possibility of the human's absorption and stunnedness (as Agamben defines 'boredom') in the face of the (non-)open: to be bored at the moment of perceiving the non-openness would be to initiate world by its inoperative refusal. The impossibility of this boredom reveals the falsity of the originary moment. For the thing to be extracted and to cause Man to perceive the non-openness of the *Lichtung*, the thing must precede the creation of Being, or the originary moment of sovereignty. The definition of the thing is exclusion from sovereign subjectivity.

Its externality to the *Lichtung* affirms its temporal antecedence to it. Man is made in the spatiotemporal moment of the origin. The thing is outside, or beneath, that command.

Blackness is unmappable in the cartographic logic of the enclosure (Moten, 2018a: 207), and this is the crucial aporetic absence that Agamben does not account for when seeking the inoperativity of the slave. The slave is not the absence of value; the slave is socialized value that cannot be recognized in the exchange-value machine of modernity, but is necessary to its continuation. The slave is anteontological resistance to positionality, so her removal into a new modal ontology of inoperativity will not work: she cannot be grasped like a subject, like an upstanding individual. She is the ocean: the fugitive, undercommon phonography of the sea.

What is so terrifying, so profoundly disturbing, about the slave to the master is that the slave is constituted by something else, by the murky ground of excavation where European archaeologists go in search of their own self-constituted/constituent present. The fugitivity of the slave is the terror of the master. The proper human is repressed by the limits of his own enclosure, in which he has excavated a form of sociality of which he cannot control the ontological foundation and by which he must himself be constituted, and that sociality is what Emmanuel Levinas calls the pre-seriousness of primitive dancing civilizations; it is what Hannah Arendt calls the no-language and non-existent subject of Africa; and what Agamben calls nothing because he never talks about it (Levinas in Moten, 2018a: 1; Arendt, 1970: 95-96). It is called Blackness.

Before finally abandoning this dry spell in the European *Lichtung* where my feet are beginning to itch, I would like to correct Agamben's Heideggerian diagnosis of Being as boredom. What is at play in this moment is rather corporealization, the coming-into-Being of the body that determines the figure of corporeity, and thus capitalist modernity. The moment of awakening into *Dasein* is the construction of the body and the human's awareness of this limitation. This moment also brings the stone into Being as the temporal limit of Man's corporeality: the stone, the thing, that 'insistent previousness evading each and every natal occasion' (Moten, 2003), is made into a (non-)body at the moment of its exposure to the sight/site of the human body. It is individuated, turned into a body, but a body that is the impossibility (i.e. the Blackness) of the properly human (i.e. White) body. This individuating moment is the moment of race, when race becomes the defining limit of the body and the body is revealed as a racializing machine of violent separation according to the ideology of proper property, of serious self-possession. What remains in the insistent previousness of the racialized



thing is Blackness. What Agamben, after Heidegger, describes as boredom is the becoming-White of European Man, the beginning of his (self-)definition as a referent of inherent ontological right to possession of self and other. *BLACKNESS PRECEDES CONSTITUENT/CONSTITUTED POWER AND EXISTS BEFORE THE MOMENT OF ORIGINARY SOVEREIGNTY.*

## Space

*THE THING IS NOT PRODUCED IN THE MOMENT OF ORIGINARY SOVEREIGNTY AND IS NOT CONSTITUTED BY THE MUTUAL FORCES OF INDIVIDUATION AND THE POLITY*

In the *Grundrisse*, Karl Marx sees history as a process of individuation, but individuation necessarily among social relations (1973: 18). From the eighteenth century on, from the creation of something that fancies calling itself “civil society” (which Marx also puts in scare quotes), the individual is the prime interface of society; social connections are no longer the producer of the individual, rather the individual is a user of social connections for personal means. The individual, who is inherently productive for Marx, arises from community. Moreover, what is produced is always property, and it is a tautology to say that property is necessary for production. ‘All production is appropriation of nature on the part of an individual within and through a specific form of society. [...] [T]hat there can be no production and hence no society where some form of property does not exist is a tautology. An appropriation that does not make something into property is a [contradiction] (Marx, 1973: 21).

The production of (European) society *as* property is the production machine, a machine that produces individuals. The value of this production occurs through abstract labour, the complexity of which has been explained by Sianne Ngai: ‘Abstract labor contains a fundamental tension: it is the form that *social* labor assumes in a society based on the *private* organization of production and circulation. [...] It is crucial to emphasize that abstract labor is not an abstraction by thought, but [is] rather achieved by the collective practice of actors who do not know they are achieving it’ (Ngai, 2015: 37). The production of exchange value, as commodities or as individuals, occurs after the moment of the products’ exchange. ‘Abstract labor — the only labour that for Marx specifically constitutes value, as opposed to material wealth — is not labor physically expended by workers in real time in heterogeneous and uncoordinated acts of production, as Michael Heinrich emphasizes. It is rather a “relation of social validation” posited retroactively in exchange, which fulfills the actual function of

relating independently performed labors to the total labor of society' (Ngai, 2015: 38, citing Heinrich, 2012: 50). Blind individual concrete labour produces the abstraction that is the polity. So, while (European) history is a process of individuation (becoming an individual body: corporealization), as Marx begins the *Grundrisse* by stating, the individual is presupposed already in the proposition of the polity, since it is the individual's labour — unknowingly, but necessarily — that retroactively produces the possibility of a polity, an abstract connection of property relations bound in modernity by the universal referent that is the market. Abstract, socially necessary labour is the simplest of all abstractions, which in Marxian terms means that it has the greatest possibility of universalization. It can be socialized, turned into the necessary condition of society, its labour and its production.

In this sociohistorical chiasmus — in which the individual and society, individuation and production, endlessly suggest and become each other — the potentiality to be human is premised on valuable labour. Humanity in modernity is retroactively affirmed by the exchange value of the product of human labour. Inherent and necessary in potentiality, as Agamben learns from Aristotle, is impotentiality: the possibility not to be. Humanity can only be human by containing within itself the possibility of refusing labour, of refusing to be an individual. The individual is premised on a debt to the concrete particularity of the abstraction of the polity — indebted to its own creation. The individual is created by, creates, and is always indebted to, the polity. The individual's impotentiality to be, however, locks the polity also in a mutually constituent relation with the individual. There are public and private debts intersecting at this juncture, this locus of the logic of capitalism's self-preservation. Society and the individual create each other in the act of modernity's capitalist individuation.

Marx's "civil society" creates 'the various forms of social connectedness [that] confront the individual as a mere means towards his private purposes, as external necessity' (Marx, 1973: 18). The creation of the individual is the creation of the individual as an appropriator of public property, turning it into private property. The public, though, does not precede the individual's appropriation of it. In modernity, the external world is only a possibility of appropriation into the machine that turns everything into private property. The human, created by this production process of individuation, is the mechanism making this transaction possible, and making what is exchangeable possible. The moment is the mutual constitution of world and the user of world. What this means is that the production and the circulation of the valuable individual — the *sine qua non* of capitalist modernity — are inseparable, and inseparable from the world created

in the process. This is the new ontological category of capitalism's (anti)socialization, its extraction of the antecedent being of beings; their abstraction as and through its value form. As Ngai emphasizes, though, this abstraction is very real, a '*substance* in the process of plasticizing' (2015: 52, emphasis original). The human — by which is meant, European Man — is the mechanism abstracting these homogenized spheres (production and circulation), homogenized uniquely in capitalism, consuming the posited value production of the future and thereby creating its debt to the capitalist polity. As Agamben writes, '[c]apitalism productive of goods is fictitiously feeding on its own future. The capitalist religion, consistent with Benjamin's thesis, lives in a continual indebtedness, which neither can nor should be paid off' (Agamben, 2019: 71). Man is made by and makes his indebtedness to the polity, by which the polity is also made. That is: Man *belongs* to the polity, to the public space of the city, but the polity can only exist *as* Man and *in* his European capitalist ontology. This is the paradox of modernity, and I think this takes us beyond Agamben's insistence that the modern framework of labour does not apply to ancient life, since the Greeks 'were ignorant of the concept of labour' (2019: 19). The paradox of the polity and the individual's reflection in each other constructs the ontology of modernity and conditions the light that is shone on any archaeologically excavated artefact, so that it is always seen through the paradoxical vision of Man's singular society.

Discovering philosophy as resolute resistance to seeing the thing as thing, as antecedent to and impossible in modernity, allows us to add a post-Marxian racial verse to the repetitive chorus of European thinking.

What is excavated can never be understood as a thing in its thingliness, because at the moment of excavation it is appropriated; its sight of the outside from the outside is annihilated and the only understanding it will provide is further property. The only way to refuse this way of seeing and clear that historically conditioned light of scientific seeing, to displace the individuation of European Man and the society premised by and upon him, is for the artefact to look at itself, to experience itself against, in contradistinction to, outside and without the *nomos* of world. To present what is called its thingliness to the insistent previousness of its nothingness: that is the antiracist philosophical project. Racism is precisely the 'aggressive and expansive drive to comprehend the other and thereby to reduce the other to what Levinas [and Heidegger, and Agamben] would call a thing', so anti-racist resistance 'must both disavow a certain temptation to comprehend [...] and reduce the racist's or philosophy-as-racism's field precisely by engaging what remains truly thingly' (Moten, 2018a: 10).

The subject and its ethical dimension, in Agamben's reading of Foucault, do 'not have an autonomous substance'; rather, they have 'no other place and no other consistency than the relation of use between the human being and the world' (Agamben, 2016: 33). That relation of use 'constitutes precisely the primary dimension in which subjectivity is constituted' (Agamben, 2016: 33–34). For Agamben, and, it might be fair to say, for European critical theory generally, subjectivity as relation is the (im)potentiality of the teleological dialectic, the possibility of cutting it, ending history. However, for people in the thingifying light of scientific excavation that turns beings fungible and wounds other histories by exclusionary assimilation, history already ended long ago; it was cut resolutely in the Middle Passage. Instrumentality cannot simply be inverted and its negativity embraced. Instrumentality must be understood, rather, as Moten understands it, as never a feature of the slave anyway. Instrumentality was always stuck in the magnifying glass of the scientist so that anything examined would always seem to be marked by it. Humanity sees the relation of instrumentality because it is humanity's constitutive internality. Individuation and the polity are mutually constitutive, so a poetics of inoperativity can only be thought beyond their relations, in the space-outside-space of Blackness, linked by brutality to Black life. *MODERN MAN AND HIS CITY ARE BUILT TOGETHER, BUT IN THE ANTEONTOLOGICAL ABYSS, THERE'S A NOTHING CALLED BLACKNESS, AND IT MAKES MODERN BLACK LIFE LIKE IT MADE THE ANCIENT SLAVE.*

## Flesh

*THE THING IS FLESH, A WOUND THAT CHARACTERISES THE WHOLE OF HISTORY AND YET STANDS  
OUTSIDE OF IT*

Moten notes that the "black body" is a misnomer that misconceives the history of Blackness (Moten, 2018a: 90), regarding its construction within the prescribed boundaries of self-labelled serious European philosophy and its property-possessive logics, rather than as an insistent previousness of flesh antecedent to the body, beginning as an object of European Being in the Middle Passage but preceding it. What we have been referring to as "thing" comes out in this moment as flesh.

Flesh, as C. Riley Snorton knows, is not some innocent form of life antecedent to modernity. Here we speak, in our own riff on Moten and Marx and Agamben, of the insistent previousness of flesh in order to work fugitive loopholes into destituent power and find a/nother/Blacker way out, but flesh is, as Hortense

Spillers (1987) affirms, fundamentally a racializing and a (de)gendering possibility, marked by fungibility, by a loose interchangeability outside the prescribed logic of semantics. Snorton seeks a way out of modernity's racializing force by spatializing the fungibility of the (Black) non-body's insistent previousness, pursuing 'flesh as a capacitating structure for alternative modes of being by tracing the various ways black figures made use of fungibility for fugitive movement, such that flesh became their instrument to engender interstitial spaces of reprieve' (Snorton, 2017: 53). Snorton seeks to bring the flesh *back out* of its entanglement with race, since, as Spillers notes, the 'severe disjunctures' of the 'hieroglyphs of the flesh' come 'to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin colour' (Spillers, 1987: 67). What is marked in the non-body of Black being is the linguistic difference that codes 'that zero degree of social conceptualization' (Spillers, 1987: 67) as forever disjunctive. Here is the inheritance of the whip, passing down through structured signifiers of the slave-driver's lash.

The problem set up here is that for Agamben the being is spoken into Being *as a body*. Agamben takes this, again, from Heidegger. The command to exist — the originary command that calls beings into Being — is premised on the emergence of a body, of the being-as-body. For Heidegger, the person is necessarily *not* a Thing and is constituted by the performance of intentional acts; it is his unity of body, soul and spirit as 'phenomenal domains' that allows Being to belong to the person who performs the task of intentional acts (Heidegger, 2001: 48–49). The slave enters into this as resistance to use, as 'not the being-at-work (*energeia*) of the soul according to the *logos* but something for which Aristotle can find no other determination that "the use of the body"' (Agamben, 2016: 5). Through this disruption of duty, Aristotle and Agamben recognize a non-productive form of being that puts the slave into a relation with herself, into a modal ontology based on a relation with herself, but what this overlooks is the non-corporeality of the slave. In the act of enslavement, the body is stolen. Enslavement is another name for the whiplash scar of stealing bodies. The Atlantic and the disruptive fungibility of its ontology is the name of that act in modernity, but for Aristotle the definition still stood; for Aristotle the slave still existed as the stolenness of that body that cannot be a Thing because it bears the mode of Being that is intentionality. Now, that 'diasporic plight marked a *theft of the body* — a willful and violent [...] severing of the captive body from its motive will' (Spillers, 1987: 67). The intentionality of the stolen body is that which is pocketed by the possessor, and in that movement the corporeality of the body is deprived of Being: the slave of Spillers, the stolen life of Moten, dodges the understanding (the *grasp*) of Agamben, Aristotle and Heidegger.

Here arises the ‘central [distinction] between captive and liberated subject-positions.’ That is, body and flesh: ‘before the “body” there is “flesh”, that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse’ (Spillers, 1987: 67). This is flesh that is crucially designated as coming *before* the act of stealing, as a divergent ontological mode seemingly imposed *on* the body as an after-effect of theft, but which rather reveals the existent viscosity in the code now borne by the captive-being released from Being: Blackness. The captive subject-position is constructed as the impossibility of proper gender performance. ‘Under these conditions ... the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political manoeuvre, not at all gender-related, gender-specific [...]: at the same time — in stunning contradiction — the captive body reduces to a thing, becoming *being for* the captor (Spillers, 1987: 67). Heidegger’s elision of the possibility of m/Man-as-Thing is correct, of course. Proper Man as full subject of modernity, bearing that liberated subject-position, could never be a Thing. A Thing is what life becomes once it is stolen; a Thing is life post-stolenness, in the celebration of a homelessness that is always giving away home. The slave’s non-productivity is employed by Agamben in the poetics of inoperativity as if the slave were a non-productive body. Agamben will reach for the slave to emancipate her, but his hands will grip nothing. The absence of value will slip from his anarchic fingers and their beautiful pursuit. The slave is not a body, necessarily.

Adding a brilliant new turn to this discussion in his 2014 book *Habeas Viscus*, Alexander Weheliye accesses the complex history of flesh and its future anterior being in the routine brutality of the world of Man:

If the body represents legal personhood qua self-possession, then the flesh designates those dimensions of human life cleaved by the working together of depravation and deprivation. In order for this cruel ruse to succeed, however, subjects must be transformed into flesh before being granted the illusion of possessing a body. What Spillers refers to as the “hieroglyphics of the flesh” created by these instruments is transmitted to the succeeding generations of black subjects who have been “liberated” and granted body in the aftermath of de jure enslavement. The hieroglyphics of the flesh do not vanish once affixed to proper personhood (the body); rather they endure as a pesky potential vital to the manoeuverings of “cultural seeing by skin color” [...]. Racializing assemblages translate the lacerations left on the captive body by apparatuses of political

violence to a domain rooted in the visual truth-value accorded to quasi-biological distinctions between different human groupings. Thus, rather than entering a clearing zone of indistinction, we are thrown into the vortex of hierarchical indicators: racializing assemblages. (Weheliye, 2014: 39–40, citing Spillers, 1987)

The racializing assemblages place beings in three categories, and they are: human, not-quite-human, and nonhuman. These categories are not palimpsests of the Heideggerian triptych of categories used by Agamben; they access something more obscure, something darker, Blacker, and render irrelevant the thing/animal/human triptych of being, or at least reveal their position as entirely limited to world. What the categories of Weheliye/Spillers develop beyond Agamben/Heidegger is the condition placed upon beings at the moment of individuation. For Heidegger, the ‘clearing zone’ allows for ‘indistinction’ because of that inherent performative agency we found above, but Weheliye shows us that this is only a ‘vortex of hierarchical indicators’: beings are prepared for individuation by the ontological referent that is race. The otherwise being is prepared categorically — as Moten says it best — for ‘admission to the zone of abstract equivalent citizenship and subjectivity, whose instantiations so far have been nothing but a set of pseudoindividuated aftereffects of conquest and conquest denial, a power trip to some fucked-up place in the burnt-out sun’ (Moten, 2018a: 136). The mutual constitution of the polity and the individual also necessitates the denial of their mutual constitution. *Move on, nothing to see here*, the police for protecting individuals say.

Revealed in this theorization of the flesh by Weheliye and Spillers, which takes us beyond our previous understanding of Blackness as a “thing” or “stone”, is its resistance to ‘the legal idiom of personhood as property’ (Weheliye, 2014: 44). The flesh is the appropriable substance in the individuating relation of production, the waste that clogs the machine, that is made but is not made into property and is therefore nothing, and always becoming-nothing. For Agamben, world ‘is the inoperativity of the animal environment’ (Agamben, 2019: 49); world is created for and by the human by recognizing his inherent non-openness, to which the animal is blind (2019: 48). The landscape, however, is the ‘ulterior stage’, the deactivation of the world and its perception ‘as a whole in a new dimension’: ‘No longer animal or human, the one who contemplates the landscape is only landscape’ (2019: 49).

In the production machine of world that produces property, the contemplation of the landscape is then the subject’s conversion into property

itself. The ontological totality of landscape that undoes the particular production mechanisms of world and conceives them anew as a singular otherness is the extension of property to everything, including its own perception and perceiver; the subsumption of subject and/as property, to put it Motenly. The flesh that resists property is at this moment, or in the moment of this realization, distinguished from the stone and seen in spatial relation to it. World is constructed out of the separation of animal and Man, as Agamben says. The negativity of the animal environment contains a(n) (im)potentiality created by exclusion in the moment of (world) creation. The constitution of the seeing subject — the subject/property who sees world as itself and defines the negative in relation to its own positive becoming as the abstract equivalent — is premised on denial; such is its constitutively internal repression, its manifestation as capital. The animal world is all the same; a different name conditioned by the same law. Before that — in front of it and antecedent to it — is the marking of the thing in world as flesh.

For Agamben and Heidegger, then, the being cannot be a thing or an object because the being bears a body, the being is born(e) into a body by the ontological command that is Being, and through that command Being belongs to the individual body. For Snorton, after Spillers, though, and for Moten too, the peculiar condition of Black sociality is to be precisely unbodied, to exist in the precorporeal *community* of Blackness; to be, that is, a being that is conceived (of) as intra-racially homogeneous, the same as all Blacks, as non-existent as all slaves, as objectish as any old thing. ‘There’s no such thing’, as Stefano Harney says, with Moten beside him, ‘as a “white community” [...] Whiteness is the destruction of community’ (Moten and Harney, 2020a: 31–34’) because Whiteness has that agential language of the command that speaks beings into Being. For the being who is not a being insofar as it cannot speak itself into Being because the command functions as an exclusionary force demarcating the boundaries of emergence in the clearing, in full ontic capacity, there is only the possibility of being missed out of the process of corporealization — left in the communal form of being, retroactively defined in the bourgeois individual subjectivity of modernity as primitive, as a primordial relic antecedent and anathema to contemporaneity; instead existing as degendered thing, simultaneously excessive and reductive, too colourful and colourless, ‘the manifestation of absence turned to the excessive’ (Moten, 2008b: 191): that is, as flesh. FLESH IS NOT A BEING, AS SUCH. IT IS LIFE BARRED FROM BEING. AND THAT IS WHY THE FLESH, OR THE STONE AS IT IS APPEARS, AS IT EMERGES HERE AND THERE, IS SO PERSISTENTLY ANTECEDENT.



## Performance

### LOVE (OF) THING / THING OPTIMISM

There's a song Fred Moten loves, and it begins:

I've been so many places in my life and time  
I've sung a lot of songs, yeah, and I've made some bad rhymes  
I've acted out my life on stages, with ten thousand people watching me  
But we are alone, and I'm singing this song for you.  
(Temptations, 1975; Moten, 2018c)

Moten is talking about the song with contemporary artist Sondra Perry. They have been discussing the complexity of Perry's work and its relation to misrecognition, the pop song's love lyrics endlessly reworking the 'I thought I saw you today' paradigm, the 'I saw someone who looked just like you' and whether this is directed at *you* or at precisely the everything that is necessarily not you, in a world where everything is *you* in *your* absence *except you*, because what defines you (and my pop song love for you) is that you are not here. The conversation then moves into Moten's fury at the institution, Frieze's capacity to consume 'like medicine' the criticism of itself and the awful paradox of serving an institution ('the university as glorified real estate company' [2018c: 20–22"]) that posits itself as the space of opening while violently closing every possibility of thought. Then back to another song. Moten is in love with the song, with its idea, and he keeps calling its singer 'Dennis Franklin' although his name is Dennis Edwards (who had an intense love affair with Aretha Franklin, whom Moten only calls 'Aretha'), adding another accidental layer to the bizarre slippage of recognition, the opening of the possibility of a radical doubt in the object-recognizing capacity of the speaker. Perry and Moten are *alone* on stage, watched by all these people expecting to plug into the speakers like work stations, to offload all their shit; ten thousand people 'all up in our fucking faces' (Moten, 2018c: 36–37"), leading Moten to the question, 'What are we doing here?' (2018c: 20–21") But first, in the song, perfectly titled 'A Song for You', there is the duality of the public and the private, the aloneness after the performance; 'and so of course any time you do a live performance of the song, that produces that irony' (2018c: 38–40").

There is a pause in Moten's moment of release, his performance of privacy in front of the crowd. 'That thing of ... Uh ... See ... Black sociality is not a private thing ... It obliterates privacy. It cannot tolerate privacy or privatization.

*It must be shared.* It doesn't belong to anybody. It doesn't even belong to us. ... But by the same token it can't be public either ... It can't exist within that sort of brutal public-private partnership that everything seems to be bound up with now' (2018c: 39–42"). Sitting in front of this crowd, two friends in their private conversation, the arranged publicity of Perry's art and the advertisement for Moten's books at the beginning of their talk, and their frustration at being watched, at being plugged into, it arrives finally at a position that nestles into the liminal aspatiality of being 'alone' and 'singing this song for you'.

The subject of the song — and we could use its singer, Dennis Edwards, as that subject — is emerging into an active absence of singularity. Edwards has been everywhere, displaced globally as an abstract spectacle to be watched, to be set into performance. He is, like any artist, as Moten says, plugged into like a work station, a machine onto which people offload all their tumult, their unbearable excess. And Black people are also 'ubiquitous as work stations, for other people to work out their shit' (2018c: 18–19"). Edwards has toured the world, accumulating these performative transferences of visibility. The eyes of crowds, of tens of thousands, elicit his performance for the depletion of their own temporal accumulation. Time has built up in them, the cruel labour of years, and watching Edwards and his beautiful voice is a chance to charge the void, to plug in to the pump and drain some of that miserable excess. Edwards takes it all on. He recognizes, brilliantly, that it's not necessarily the perfection of his performance that allows this, since he sings some 'bad rhymes'. It's something else, something far deeper than that. Edwards's is — and it's clear now, at this point in the essay, what I am proposing for this singing subject — an ontological condition. He was born to be a travelling performance, to exist as a work station that is never allowed to stop moving and plug in. Edwards is always, forever unbearably operative, and that operativity is a condition of his ontological status as non-body. Aristotle asks himself if the worker is born before his labour, and the answer is yes. The being is inherently inoperative. Edwards must, then, not be a being. Edwards, instead, is Black. His precorporealized position is also his position as an emblem of an antemodern community. He represents — and exists only as the representative of — a mythical community that signifies pure togetherness which is at once fetishizable as beautiful, as the hard-working, chain-ganging, plantation-song-singing slave, and anathema to the individual bourgeois subjectivity of modernity.

Agamben is of course looking to go back, somehow, to this inoperative state. But Edwards here reveals the reality of that state. The reality is that it is built on the premise of something having been thrown under the landscape where the polity and the subject constitute each other. The reality is that a modal

ontology assumes an already-completed constitution of the subject who can now endlessly reconstitute herself as a form-of-life that *does not* assume a free subject who exists *a priori*. The potentiality that grants the sovereignty that inoperativity shifts out of is a world-constituting European potentiality that has already constituted the world of European ontology's emergence, leaving its racializing residue wherever that subject moves, even if into a modal ontology that pulls down the grotesque statue of subjectivity; and that world is based on something that looks like 'you' but is not 'you'; something that defines the possibility of 'you' being recognized; a dark thing in the machine, stolen life, back as black and blur, in the whatever universal machine. Agamben is under world, reformulating, but Dennis Edwards, disguised fugitively by Moten as Dennis Franklin, merging into Aretha and her own fugitive sociality, is the name of 'under' and the thing that 'under' refers to in the deictic world of European subjectivity.

The first two lines of the song rhyme, although the imperfect rhyme is acknowledged in the sentiment itself, while the second couplet is posited on a different form of coherence. It is a semantic rhyme. 'Me' and 'you'. They sound nothing alike, but precisely the theorization achieved in these lines, in this song, is that what 'you' are is anything but 'you.' 'You are everything except you' (2018c: 18–19"). What 'you' most rhymes with is, for the fleshy subject who is shared in the antecedent form of Black sociality, possibly 'me', or 'we' or 'us.' *We* are alone. We are pushed out of the landscape of bourgeois subjectivity and the Whiteness of modernity's ontological singularity, but that is where the performance of this gestural escape from individuality is enacted, where the work of Black sociality is found, unexcavated, and listened to. This, the impossible outside in the aloneness of a genuine 'we', is where the self is shared. This is where sharing is the real act of the being.

Sharing is a concept that Moten and Harney have been working on recently. It is not mentioned once in *The Undercommons* and is not part of Moten's 2017–18 trilogy, *consent not to be a single being*, so it is difficult to attain any steady practice of study with it yet. The concept emerges in an interview with Moten and Harney on 4th July, 2020. Moten's signal is bad, and it is hard to hear him ('And I've made some bad rhymes,' Dennis Edwards might say if The Temptations were stuck in a pandemic in New York with no signal). Responding to a question about patriarchy and its force in the performance of recent Black Lives Matter protests, Moten focuses on the 'extraction of sharing'. 'Even in zones that are preserved for the protection and cultivation of normative white interests, the simple capacity for people to maintain anything like a liveable individual life [...] has been the function of the chorus and forced enactment and practice of

sharing of women, which is to say: the *extraction of sharing*, and that's crucial. Literally, the *taking of sharing*. That's how Donald Trump himself made it to his third birthday' (2020a: 36–41”).

Moten goes on to describe this more specifically as ‘the extraction of what has often been conceived of as women’s work, or the labour of reproduction’. Sharing is a duty of the being in whom the task of maintaining the sociality of individuals is placed. The given ontology of capital extracts sharing from the labouring subject, the subject who is unpaid because she is a bearer of the duty of sharing. This is, for Agamben, the ancient slave, but for Moten this is the position of that being whose being is withdrawn in the act of her condemnation to a state of producing sharing to be extracted by and for capital. ‘It’s black women who have to do this sharing. And you can’t separate the sharing from the extraction. What [Saidiya Hartman] does [...] is to figure out a way to not retrieve sharing from extraction, but to imagine and let us get some sense of these practices of sharing’. Sharing is a practice that exists within the logic of capital, of those juridical spaces of the concentration camp, and it is not the task of Black study to withdraw it. This is a fundamental difference in the respective ways in which a poetics of inoperativity can be thought by Agamben and by Moten. For Agamben, the practice of inoperativity is taken from within and moved; it is replaced, reformed. For Moten (and Harney), the practice of initiating the constitutive sociality of the body’s use happens *within* the space of the camp. It is not a beyond, an outside, an otherwise. It is, to limit it somewhat to a spatial coding, *under*. And that is to say, *before*. It is practised *before* the extractive power of modernity both in its temporal and spatial meanings: antecedent to, and in the face of.

For Moten, it is an ethical imperative to constantly recognize and actively think this mutual death in the life of the extraction of sharing. ‘We do so’, he says, ‘in the interests of the revival and the renewal of our habits of sharing, which are our habits of assembly, and in the recognition of the necessity to socialize outside of any bullshit notion of gender opposition and any restrictive notion of sexual difference, to socialize the practice of sharing, which [...] [Harney and I] always want to acknowledge as a fundamentally maternal operation. But the socialization of that maternal operation is not a retrenchment of sexual difference and gender difference along traditional lines, but an obliteration of that shit’ (2020a: 40–41”).

The maternity of this operation is an interesting addition. Against the patriarchal practice of extraction that imposes the injunction of constant labour for the maintenance of the regime, the maternal operation of sharing brings people into assembly *before* and *during* the extraction of their sharing practice. The

sharing is happening — emanating from the maternal embrace that gathers in a caring gesture, in the outreach of the politics of care — while the extraction of that sharing continues. Feminized reproductive labour, that is to say, is simultaneously producing the polity and the individual. The maternal labour of social reproduction is the creation of the social mode that is extracted for the bourgeois, liberal individual as the single full subject of modernity. Blackness is the sociality that precedes that dual production, and that exists out from its outside, that moves always in the underneath. Before the radical modality of Agamben, there is a sociality, a commonality, that had to be pounded in to the ground for this world to emerge; and then it had to be excavated, archeologically dug and re-dug-up for the constant performance of Man's self-discovery, his imposition of thingliness onto the stone and the assertion of his own self-recognition as 'you', his subjectivity binaries. Before that, Edwards/Franklin was alone with Aretha, in front of ten thousand people all excavating themselves in the work station of ontology's pre-ontological racialization. Somehow, somewhere, 'Blackness, which is to say black social life, is an undiscovered country' (Moten, 2008b: 202). Black sociality is on the map but unmappable. It is alive but unusable in a modal ontology because it's always already shared; it has always been extracted, always shared, and that is how it gains its aloneness in full view of the crowd who self-constitute through this performance.

What we arrive at here is a mad and beautiful scene in which Hortense Spillers emerges out of Moten in order to topple Heidegger from the landscape of Agamben, which gives Agamben fully to Moten, at which point Moten shares his own pseudo-Agambenified sociality with Spillers and we have a fugitive poetics of sharing in the warm nest beneath inoperativity.

Harney brings Spillers into the discussion as soon as Moten stops talking. 'Sharing is not an interpersonal relationship [...] One doesn't share. One is shared. Now, the great moment, as Fred says, [of] feeling the combination of horror and possibility in this is in Hortense Spillers's work. [What she is] emphasizing for us is this utter access, an access so deep that it undoes gender, that it undoes patriarchy [...] Somehow that access has to stay open for that type of sharing to take place' (2020a: 41–45"). Now the nest opens up. This is what we want, what I've been looking for throughout these words, in the months of sweating above them, pointing out the figures who look nothing like me, then shouting 'Hey, you!' as they dodge, again, fugitively away, into a sociality that precedes, exceeds and pleases me. 'The kind of sharing we're talking about is about being accessed, and it is such because we're already shared'".

That kind of sharing is the anti-statist anti-univers(al)ity; the local act of love; it is Edwards singing to Franklin, saying ‘Ooh!’ when he’s too old to sing, and then becoming, posthumously, Franklin in Moten’s study; it is the shocking beauty that Agamben never speaks about; it is the threat to thinking that Arendt denounced Black studies for (1970); it is, as Moten and Harney say in their latest collaborative essay, the ‘anti- and ante-natal undercommonality’ (2020b: 3) that is Blackness. That Blackness, that act of sharing, the constant ethical imperative that is the thing I’ll never know called Black sociality, is the obliteration of the divide between public and private. And what that obliteration does, once we get this far into it, is suspend the activity of archaeology. Agamben, you can stop digging now. The job has been cancelled and they have closed the institution, or at least from this point in the burnt-out corpse of the (European Being’s) landscape, we cannot see the policies they stamp into our skin; we cannot hear the duplicity of the institution’s happy consumption of its internal criticism. Archaeology is over, above. What we were digging up is the reason for our digging. But, really, it is sharing, and it is already shared.

For Agamben, sharing is a public act (2016: Prologue). It is the public counterpart to the almost shameful ‘clandestinity of private life’ (2016: xvii). To share, as he elaborates in his short essay ‘The Friend,’ is ‘purely existential, a con-division that [...] lacks an object’ (Agamben, 2009: 36); friends ‘do not share *something* (birth, law, place, taste): they are shared by the experience of friendship’ (2009: 36). It is *sharing* that is the lived experience of friends. Sharing as a spatial practice, as an ethical imperative conducting certain beings into a life that is non-being, however, is for Agamben, after Aristotle, the practice of the animal. ‘In this sense, we say that humans live together, unlike cattle who share the pasture together’ (Aristotle in Agamben, 2009: 36). The animal beneath is unseen in the public act of sharing; there is an already stolen — but fugitively capacious and beautiful — sharing going on that is neither private nor public, that is under the landscape of Man and his endless emergence. ‘To bring to light’, Agamben neatly states, ‘the intimate interweaving of being and living: this is today certainly the task of thought (and of politics)’ (2016: xix), but in the sharing of the pasture, in the ethical imperative of sharing before and inside any ontology, there is something that is too dark to bring to light, and against whose darkness the lightness knows its light. For Moten and Harney, in opposition to Agamben, sharing is inherently internal; it is the constitutive poetics of sociality that constitutes the being. And exactly its purpose is to share the pasture; to enact an inherent resistance to property within the property of Man’s light. Brought to the

light already, sharing is the ethics of darkness in the pasture before Man, in the flesh.

For Agamben, the correct path away from modernity's brutal juridical space of inter(n)ment is the use of one's own body, in the sense of *sōmatos chrēsthai*, of experiencing one's potential without making it actual, of living in and by and for the community. This is the radical magic of *The Use of Bodies*, its care of inoperative internalization, of seeing oneself as oneself within oneself in order to create the non-teleological, non-productive potentiality of others as constituent and constituted (which in this moment of performative *chrēsthai* become difficult to distinguish) sociality. It renders Denise Ferreira da Silva's 'affectability' (da Silva, 2007: xv) optimistic, in the weirdest Motenian way; it turns the affective capacity and wound of being created by nature into the inoperative potentiality of the coming politics. The problem, however, that I keep tripping up on every time I jump with joy at the sound of this beautiful inoperativity, is that Dennis Edwards (as plural; as *we* that rhymes with *me* that rhymes with *you*, badly; as Black sociality) is alone, having been watched by tens of thousands, and it is only in the act of his disappearance from the sociality that constitutes him that he can produce the thing that summarily sings his own constitution in/as a poetics of inoperativity. Edwards was made by the crowd. He was made by The Temptations. But in the moment of being able to be alone and to sing, for you, for his love, to constitute and be mutually constituted by his potentiality as song, he disappears. The disappearance is surely the result of inoperativity's divergent spatiality; it attempts to make and place bodies elsewhere, in Aristotle's inoperative landscape or Heidegger's constituting *Lichtung*.

What comes out of this immobile tide washing into the shoals of Edwards and Agamben is Moten on the radio saying, 'You are everything except you'. While the juridical regime extracts sharing from the shared beings in the given ontology of modernity, Agamben's inoperativity removes the beings into a deconcentrated, decamped space of *sōmatos chrēsthai* and non-teleological use beyond the activation of potentiality. However, in the fugitive undercommons of Black sociality, something else is happening, and, beyond what I've already said above, I don't know what that something is.

## Love / Home

### PERFORMANCE (OF) THING / BLACK ABANDON(ING)

The point is, maybe, if there's a point, that the condition of Black sociality is permanent operativity in the service of White inoperativity in the institution of criticism. All Whites are not allowed to employ the service of this displacement of operativity, as the misleading example of Dennis Edwards might have suggested (since it is not a necessarily privileged position to have access to Edwards's song; it's available on YouTube). Other genocidal strikes constitute the atomic tunnels of the driver's lash: gender, class, sexuality, ability. Instead, what I mean to say is that access to the emancipatory poetics of inoperativity is premised on an employment of Black sociality as permanent reduction to the performative excess of operativity, and that is a significant limitation in Agamben's project when listened to from the record player of Black study. I am not suggesting that thinking *against* Agamben is the response to this limitation; I'd go for a pint with Giorgio any day. But the concept of sharing, the careful emancipatory poetics of Moten and Harney, can enhance a reworking of the secret Whiteness worn in the muffled policies of inoperativity that still designate certain Heideggerian zones of Being as the spaces of ontic initiation, which I cannot see a place for in any fugitive project.

The (*whatever*) point is that the possibility of an inoperative politics is put into performative play by a dance with Blackness and its insistent previousness, the fungible excess of its constitutive flesh, and the abandon(ing) of the European tradition of critical theory and thinking that without fail posits the Bible and the Greeks as the entirety of serious history. The point is a refusal and celebration of the possibilities in criticism; a movement inside them and against them and out from their outside. This is Blackness's always fugitive position in the institution of thought. 'White supremacist intellectual culture in America is committed to the regulation of disorder, the capture of the fugitive. Its methodological character is the ongoing and aggressive deployment of an instrumentalist disposition (i.e., a tendency to reduce everything to the status of mere instrument while failing adequately, ruthlessly, critically to consider the very idea of the mere instrument and, thereafter, to think [the thinking] instrument)' (Moten, 2018b: 109–10). This is not to say that inoperativity must begin with ignorance of European thinking, but rather that a continuation of the European tradition will always reach the same ignorant conclusions. It will ignore, as Agamben does, the Blackness of the Greek slave (regardless of any epidermalized illusion of pre-racial ontologies — Moten, 2018a: 98). It will be unaware of the constitution of the thing outside the



originary moment of sovereignty that constituted the animal and the human *qua* animal and human. It will not know the thing's production of flesh once excavated, extracted into the enclosing clearing of the European world. It will always try to map the thing, failing to notice that the thing is really nothing, a nothingness recognizable and loveable precisely by its unmappability, its total juxtapositionality but fugitive internality to the cartographic logic of modernity (cf. Moten, 2018a: 194ff). It will always be limited to representation, no matter how much it rebuts representation and critically deconstructs its power, because world itself is only a self-enclosing representation of its own dialectical history when seen from inside Europe and European history/theory. To access a poetics of inoperativity, end history and instigate the *argos* of people is pointless if it is only done from the vantage point of the human.

if you ain't gon' get down then what you come here for?

what they bring your ass up in here for if you ain't gon'  
tear shit up? if you wasn't just as happy to be here as you was

to come then what you gon' do, simple motherfucker? the salve trade  
(Moten, 2008a.)

“Why the sudden abandon?” Because that's what you do with Agamben, when everything but you is what you are. Still. Already shared, resistant to sharing, attempting to imagine a poetics of sharing, in love and hate with sharing and its constant disappearance, here I abandon, Agambenly, all these dances and go home to the place where home is always given away.



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