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Radical Black Drama-as-Theory: The Black Feminist Dramatic on the Protracted Event-Horizon

Jaye Austin Williams

Abstract In this essay, I elaborate my present project, grounded in what I call *drama theory*, the critical theoretical dimensions of dramatic writing, and address the deeply troubling intramural tensions across Black Studies, between those who read blackness, and black cultural production, through largely futurist, celebratory lenses; and those who apply a structural analysis to blackness as the site against, upon, and through which the world coheres its soci(et)al apparatuses and machinations. I situate myself within the latter constellation, and sample here two plays by Suzan-Lori Parks to demonstrate how I translate the analyses of antiblack violence by black feminist dramatists.

[T]eaching or writing one's response to specific works of literature have ... become subordinated to one primary thrust ... a theory [that fixes] a constellation of ideas ... [that] will be replaced in another month or so by somebody else's competing theory as the race [for theory] accelerates.

Barbara Christian¹

Blackness is constantly being performed on and off stage. Masks are being put on and taken off. And the danger exists that as we move against race ... we may delude ourselves into believing that race no longer matters.

Nadine George-Graves²

[Narrating] counter-histories of slavery has always been inseparable from writing a history of present, by which I mean *the incomplete project of freedom*, and the precarious life of the ex-slave, a condition defined by the vulnerability to premature death and to gratuitous acts of violence.

Saidiya Hartman³

Event vs. Event-Horizon

In thinking “theory” and “event” together, I am prompted to address what I perceive as two deeply troublesome discursive tensions in the present moment: (1) between black feminism and Afro-pessimism; and (2) between black performance theory and Afro-pessimist theory. As a black feminist who frames her work through the deployment of Afro-pessimist theory, and who deploys the disciplinary realm of theatre and drama as her lens, my labor is to analyze perform(ed)/(ative) iterations of black dramatic literature in ways that join rather than divide these robust frameworks. In so doing, I ground my work in what I call *drama theory*, the critical theoretical dimensions of dramatic writing and its applications to both the reading and the theatrical performance of that writing. In part, this formulation insinuates the question: How can such theoretical ground be broken by one whose will to be/act/create/articulate/theorize is rendered incoherent at best, and/or absented at worst; while the fruits of that action/creation/articulation/theorization are perpetually accumulated and subsumed into and by, among other things, the lives and fantasies of non-blackness? Piqued by this question, I “read” plays theoretically—inspired by my scholarly engagement with and creative contributions to the contemporary field of black feminist playwriting in the United States, and increasingly, globally. This mode of reading bridges *and* splits the difference between theater/performance studies and critical black studies, treating the dramatic writing of black feminist playwrights—and, by extension, of other black playwrights—as a creative *and* a critical discourse. In this, I am instructed by renowned literary critic Barbara Christian’s now classic 1987 essay, “The Race for Theory,” in which she states that black women, among those most marginalized among the marginalized, “have always theorized...though more in the form of the *hieroglyph*, a written figure that is both sensual and abstract, both beautiful and communicative.”⁴ It is this mode of writing that she observes to be, in turn, over-written by and through an anxiety-driven race toward some notion of standing in the intellectual realm, rather than writing our very lives—as the high stakes of Black artistic and intellectual production would seem to suggest we must. My task, keeping these high stakes in mind as I work in this rich intellectual and artistic tradition, is to illuminate and explain these hieroglyphs as I, too, continue to create them along the way.

I forge this work cognizant of and distressed by the long-standing and emergent ideological rifts between those who read blackness—and certainly, black cultural production—through largely positivist, futurist, celebratory lenses; and those who apply a structural and political analysis to blackness as the site against, upon, and through which the world derives its bearing and coheres its soci(et)al apparatuses, plea-

tures, and relations. I regard myself as adhering to the latter theoretical posture, as an unflinching black radical feminist who reads closely and critically in order to report on how black dramatists, in particular, illuminate this violent predicament. While I personally yearn for healing and coherence with(in) the world for my people, and am exceedingly proud of their incalculable achievements, I also work against my formulations fulfilling either recuperative or prescriptive demands. I do this because black people keep *being* murdered by police; keep *being* criminalized and incarcerated longer and at exponentially higher rates than all others; keep *being* erased by gentrification; keep *being* hated for their very presence.⁵ It is this *erasure of being* that prompts my recognition of the historical caesura that has *never* been sutured, between the violent roundup of Africans, starting as early as the 7th century, A.D., and the transmogrification upon their unloading throughout the Americas, that severed them from their ontology, into the continuum of these onslaughts and erasures that inflect the present moment.⁶

I also recognize, and am deeply and directly impacted by the fact, that this is the nexus at which the rife, intramural debates between black scholars occurs—around the notion of blackness across the African Diaspora as a locus of infinite potentiality, rich cultural heritage and vast intellectual capability; versus the assertion that blackness constitutes a locus of violent accumulation (of wealth for all but slaves) and fungibility (the reduction and interchangeability of humans into objects, commodities, currency for an array of uses), such that it is more useful to read the Middle Passage rhetorically and symbolically: as a point of severance from the locus identified above, rather than as a chartable historical event that can be recuperated and overcome by collective fortitude. It is precisely the fact and high stakes of this terrible schism that prompts my black feminist incision into *structural, antiblack violence as the center of gravity that keeps the world on its axis* in the wake of both, and that has driven such a terrifying wedge between the black intellectual “community”.⁷ It is the gravitational pull of this particular gap/black hole that forges my unwavering commitment to the ways in which these rhetorical, philosophical and theoretical tensions are distractions from the fact that although its performances may vary affectively, this violence impacts blacks, as Selamawit Terrefe suggests, “of all presumed genders” and sexual persuasions equally.⁸ Put another way, the plight and predicament of blacks *in the wake* of slavery points to a plight and predicament that is, as Frank B. Wilderson, III asserts, “vertically integrated” and “without analog, no matter the breadth of one’s achievements.”⁹ It is this daring to excavate—to read, deeply and unflinchingly into—the crimson core of this ontological break, that comprises the mode of radical analysis to which I adhere, as it troubles the various anxiety-driven narratives that redact and/or

elide altogether the particularity that defines how the black suffers *at every level of abstraction*.

And so, I am compelled to stand and work amidst these intramural tensions, and unflinchingly persist in training my critical lens on that which refuses and nullifies the vastness of black achievement and capability, and that, in spite of these, relegates so many blacks to captive and otherwise alienated existences, or annihilates them altogether. Moreover, that blacks' cultural contributions and African roots are vast and rich is my *given*; so my work is not a departure from the celebration of these contributions and roots. Rather, in reading black feminist plays radically, and often starkly, I labor toward a crucial *augmentation* of the discourse(s) around blackness and the massive forces that continue to pitch it into violent relief, such that the repeated "evidence" of this violence, however astonishingly, persists in being nullified as such. Somewhere in this willful strangeness lurks that which positions black suffering as paradoxical event. Paradoxical because an event, in the strictest sense, can be defined by its offset from other events – i.e., it can be temporally located, having a beginning and end. But how might we begin to think of an event the beginning of which is traceable, but which has, at best, a speculative and debatable "end" – the *longue durée* of slavery and its afterlife, for example? It is the drama of and within this debate by which I am compelled.

In an effort to bring together a *concert* of these, as yet, dissonant perspectives (namely, black optimism, Afro-positivism, Afro-futurism and Afro-pessimism), I aim to clarify, ever so briefly here, how my Afro-pessimist analyses, in effect, "mine the unconscious" of the playwrights whose works I examine; *not* for the purpose of psychologizing them or their characters/figures – for they are not the targets of the critique – but, rather, to level a critique against the forces that position and structurally impact them. As such, my intent is to reveal the ways in which even the most celebratory discourses meditate, *even if unconsciously*, on the particularity and irreconcilability of the black predicament. In other words, this project does not aim to expose the psychological underpinnings of the writers and their characters toward some cathartic end – the Aristotelian process from which the present, traditional mode of drama is derived. Rather, it labors to expose the vast dimensions at and through which the world metabolizes the black into an object vulnerable to an overdetermined violent affect against which that being's own affects (acts, gestures, and will/intent) are powerless.¹⁰ This is because, although that violence might express itself symptomatically – through psychological and other means – it is a totalizing violence that is deeply structured, and which performs through and across a multitude of economies.¹¹ This necessitates the multifarious disciplinary interventions deployed by the scholars and

dramatists with whom I engage in this essay and beyond. I aim, therefore, to incise, by way of an analysis of these dramatists' own theorizing, the *protracted event* of black enslavement, in order to reveal—to join the chorale of revelations around—the devastating paradox that the project of black captivity is: namely, an event of genocidal proportion, one that exceeds scales of achievement, and certainly, of time and singularity.

A Chorale of Minds and Voices

The three playwrights on whom I have focused most prominently in my larger theoretical project are Suzan-Lori Parks, Lynn Nottage, and Kia Corthron, three black feminist dramatists whose works I observe to be exemplars of rigorous historical, political and philosophical dexterity. In the course of this essay, and in recognition of its spatial constraints, I will include a sampling of my analysis of two of Parks' thematically conjoined plays: *The America Play*, and *Topdog/Underdog*, in order to demonstrate how I “riff” within what I call the “Black Feminist Dramatic,” a site at which the stakes are terribly high, and the “metered” acuity and incisiveness of its analytics, honed to thunderous effect.¹²

I engage an array of black scholars and scholar-artists in my project and continue thinking through how they are in concert, and why and in what ways they differ. Some of these thinkers refer to themselves as Afro-pessimists, while others, at least in part, adhere to the theoretical posture but do not necessarily invoke or identify with the term itself.¹³ Still others regard themselves as Afro-positivists/futurists, writing their way through and toward other modes of being and/or being human as means of signifying resistance to the force and will of subjection.¹⁴ But all of them share blackness, and a sound cognizance that those who are black continue to face exponential violence at the macro and micro longitudes of existence.

The title of Paula Giddings' 1984 book, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* calls our attention to the deep and vexing tension (between the will to enter and all that would foreclose it) that animates my own performances as a Black, lesbian feminist artist and intellectual—but five of the masks (identities) I perform. There was a time I would have described Giddings' work as “groundbreaking” without giving deep thought to what that really means. But now I pause to ponder the assignation of such an adjective, not to undermine the breadth and vision of Giddings' accomplishment. Quite the contrary: her work stands as rigorous evidence of the incalculable contributions of Black women, not least, her own, to the American socio-political, economic, and cultural arenas. But, as she also observes in her Preface to the 2001 edition of the book, “a new

cycle has replaced the old" such that [Black women's] gains are now obscured "in the context of the social movement optimism of the last three decades."¹⁵

The obscuring that Giddings isolates is deeply embedded and systemically perpetuated. This suggests a will to obliterate not only the forward motion (progress) of a designated locus of persons and all of the evidence that such viable creative and intellectual labor can and does, in fact, originate from, with, or for them; but also the will to isolate and obliterate that locus. Giddings' revised insight is extremely important. It prompts us to more keenly read not only the symptoms of subjection in modernity—such as poverty, absence of and/or poor education, unemployment, and incarceration—more keenly, but also the outcries against them. In other words, she prompts us to recognize these ills and many of *the moves toward their alleviation*, as symptoms of an extremely complex process; a perpetration to which *even allies working toward justice for all* are not immune: namely, to obscure, to render perpetually captive; and ultimately, to obliterate the body and presence of blackness, from the macrocosmic down to the microcosmic, quotidian performance(s) to which Nadine George-Graves alludes above. Put yet another way, Giddings cautions us that these gestures—these scenes of obliteration are enacted from the most acute to the most quotidian, "allied" demand: e.g., a white acting teacher grabbing hold of a black student, dragging her out into a very public place and demanding that the utterly terrified student "Sing out! Sing out! Show everyone that you have a voice!"¹⁶

This essay, along with the larger project of which it is a part, aims to formulate a context within which to pitch theoretical dramatic analysis in dynamic concert with other theoretical frameworks as means of placing in relief the particular complications that continue to arise for blacks who, regardless of gender and/or class exist at the behest of a formidably structured, annihilative project, the present instantiation of which is what an increasing number of analysts refer to as "neo-slavery" and/or "the new slave estate."¹⁷ It does not, therefore, purport to celebrate the "in spite of"/"anyway" condition of black survival and achievement.¹⁸ Quite the contrary: it is a radical lament on the empirically supportable fact that when blacks survive at all, they must do so with a resolve to resist and protest; and that their "poetry is not [and can never be] a luxury," as black lesbian feminist, Audre Lorde reminds us.¹⁹ Moreover, the fruits of those creative and intellectual labors are either deemed "radical," in and by the main, and therefore, dangerous to the codes of "civility"; or are accumulated, absorbed into and claimed by the economies of the reigning paradigm that western "civilization" has wrought and with which, by extension, the "investments and privations" of greater regions of the world continue to align.²⁰

The Non-Event

What if “life” and “being” – beyond the biological and postmodernist definitions (and the attendant disagreements around what constitutes them) – were examined along an entirely different longitude? What if the performative register, at which the perception of linear causality predominates, were to be read such that impactful gestures – constitutional, legal, psychic, corporeal and otherwise – could be read *diagnostically*; i.e., as symptomatic of decay far beneath the surface upon which performances are enacted and history is either amassed “merely” narratively, or altered/elided altogether – far beyond the point at which (biological) flesh decays and psychic soundness warps irretrievably? Such an approach would enable us to read the profundity of Christian’s, George-Graves’s, and Hartman’s analyses as the “deep-tissue” diagnostics that they are, rather than miring them in the delimiting discourses of prescriptive outcome, identity politics, or the discursive Olympiad commonly rehearsed as “overcoming adversity”.

James Baldwin, who, while Suzan-Lori Parks’ creative writing teacher, suggested she pursue playwriting, also renders precisely such a diagnostic in identifying the United States as a locus of pernicious non-self-recognition, in the face of which he must bear – in addition to all the rest – the hunger for a liberation that he contends is impossible without whiteness cognizing itself as enslaver. He observes:

One of the things that most afflicts [the United States] is that white people don’t know who they are or where they come from. That’s why you think I’m a problem. I am not the problem; your history is. And as long as you pretend you don’t know your history, you’re going to be the prisoner of it. And there’s no question of you liberating me if you can’t liberate yourselves. We’re in this together.²¹

There is deep irony in Baldwin’s admonishment of white America’s willful amnesia about its own history. And I believe he knows, one year before his death, while delivering this observation as part of his keynote speech at the Associated Press’s annual luncheon in 1986, that such cognition is highly unlikely. Moreover, the worst of such absence of cognition and its blunt enactments has been and continues to be imbibed by non-black Peoples of Color.²²

Such rage-induced grief and defeat lurked behind the eyes of the woman who adopted and raised me. My mother was a divorced, black woman whose intellectual capability was, by all accounts, “off the charts”. A trained and licensed nurse, she later worked as a civil servant; a medical secretary for the New York City Dept. of Health. She opted for the civil service path because a high school diploma and supplemental secretarial training were the maximum requirements for the

job she held from the 1950s until her death in 1968. This brings to bear a crucial dichotomy: that my mother's intellectual capability was out of sync with her structural capacity. In other words, she survived, but was capable of far greater than the world provided her the capacity to do. When she died, and her youngest sister took me in, I discovered that they shared those values; values that encompassed not only the notion that "justice" and "human rights" were worth fighting for, but also that they were universally attainable. Black people seemed to share a deep wish to attain this justice, the rights inherent within it, and to be regarded as free and equal within all the world's theatres. Yet black people seemed to have to fight for theirs, *in perpetuity*—and not only in courts of law, but also in their daily lives, and in the streets. Some of the questions, during this protracted gesture toward a better future, for which I had not yet formulated language, were: Why should one have to fight for something that was constitutionally ordained? Why were the black folks at the storefront church I attended in childhood—with the specter of blond-haired, blue-eyed Jesus looming over the pulpit—always praying, singing and getting slapped by the spirit so hard, only to land right back in the same, poor storefront church with the curled linoleum edges and delicious comfort food that awaited us in the church basement after ever Sunday service? What had the big, long drive we took to Washington, DC when Dr. King put out the call been about, really? The answer loomed in the rising unrest between those who remained loyal to the importance of fighting for freedom and equality, and those whose moment was just on the event horizon, who questioned why they should have to fight and fight and fight and fight ...for a freedom they felt was (still!) owed them. I was in no way yet cognitively prepared to synthesize this impending intramural, philosophical schism; and, in truth, on many days I still feel incapable of and enervated by it. This was to become the deeply troubled intramural discourse in which I, along with a constellation of black scholars, am now engaged: what are we fighting so hard for? And even more urgently, why are we fighting *each other* so hard? Surely, Hortense Spillers' call for "an intramural protocol of reading" is not summoning intramural hostility and the crowding out of the perspectives that differ from one's own. I believe she is summoning something else—a black feminist embrace of the array of perspectives and reflections of blackness, in full recognition of our need to compare notes, from the sundry corners of struggle and suffering that have enslaved, imprisoned, and colonized us.²³

Enter Suzan-Lori Parks, whose plays intervene, with lightning-rod effect, in the ruses of "progress" and "post-racialism," with a troubling repetition—an echoing back and forth across the stopgap of an abstracted history which generations of allegorical black brothers and gravediggers—the figures in two of her plays—cannot seem to find. As

James Snead observes, “[w]hen we encounter repetition in cultural forms, we indeed are not viewing ‘the same thing,’ but its transformation, not just a formal ploy, but often the willed grafting onto culture of an essentially philosophical insight about the shape of time and history.”²⁴ Parks accomplishes this—within the imaginary realm—by factoring the continually accruing currency of the Abraham Lincoln/John Wilkes Booth dynamic, through her construction of two dramatic frameworks within which to excavate what she calls “the great hole in history”. Through these constructs, she poses a baldly dramatic, diachronic, dialogic reckoning with that hole—what Hartman apprehends as the “lost archive”.²⁵

The first is *The America Play*, which is constructed in two acts. Parks titles the first act “Lincoln Act,” and sets the scene as: “A great hole. In the Middle of Nowhere. The Hole is an exact replica of the Great Hole in History.”²⁶ She then introduces us to a Black gravedigger, to whom she refers alternately as “The Foundling Father,” and “The Lesser Known”. He is a figure who has left his family behind in search of a better life upon which to stake their claim. In the process, he tells us he has found new work:

The Lesser Known[s] act would now consist of a single chair, a rocker, in a dark box. The public was invited to pay a penny, choose from the selection of provided pistols, enter the darkened box and “Shoot Mr. Lincoln.” The Lesser Known became famous overnight.”²⁷

In the course of the play, we are able to glean that this figure performs as, but is *not* Lincoln. He is a Foundling, which connotes having been orphaned, i.e., separated from one’s origins as well as from the ability to found. The second act of the play is titled, “The Hall of Wonders,” in which we meet the Foundling Father’s wife, Lucy, and son, Brazil. They have not seen the Foundling Father since his departure, and have now set out in search of him, summoning Orlando Patterson’s formulation of slavery’s three constituent elements, one of which is natal alienation.²⁸ The pinnacle of congruity for this father, mother and son—a ruse, for they are a unit that is never able to congeal—lies in the quest, the digging, from their respective ends in search of a coherence they will never find. It is an open-ended search that is never gratified. Rather, in the Hall of Wonders, one can hear echoes of the “muted cries, screams and moans in the infinite abyss of the non-subject” to which Cornel West alludes when he laments [this nation’s] unrelenting assault on black humanity [and its concomitant] invisibility and namelessness.”²⁹ Correspondingly, Brazil recalls, “On what [the father] claimed was the 101st anniversary [of the nation’s founding] the Father showed the Son “the wee,” “the sob” and “the moan”.”³⁰ Of his mother, Lucy, Brazil recollects:

As a child it was her luck tuh be in thuh same room with her Uncle when he died. Her family wanted to know what he had said. What his last words had been. Theyre hadnt been any. Only screaming. Or, you know, breath. Didn't have uh shape to it.³¹

Breath not having a shape; death as constant companion, and in the silent ethers which surround them, "only screaming," are constituent to how Hartman is intervening in slavery's "archive."³² Brazil's recollection, then, is one of memory that is bone-deep, transmissible by way of the only legacy available to him: suffering beget of violence. Parks signifies dramatically the ontological disenfranchisement of and gratuitous violence against Blacks which West signifies theoretically. One striking example is an echoing gunshot-as-motif:

[Stage direction:] A gunshot echoes. Loudly. And echoes. The Foundling Father "slumps in his chair".³³

As the stage direction indicates, it is not Abraham Lincoln we see shot and killed. Rather, we hear the echo-as-historical reminder, but see a black man as both the assassinated *and* as occupying an imaginary space "as-Lincoln". This is to say, he does not enjoy the status of "true" occupier of either stately or human position that Lincoln did/does.³⁴ With this gesture, Parks also visually and dramatically theorizes that interstitial space of non-belonging/incorporation—the space for which there are no words—by deploying what she calls "pauses, spells and beats" exchanged between mother and son as they, in the wake of the echoing gunshot, search for their now absent husband/father who has set out ahead of them in search of a claim in which they have no stake; their un-findable place in American history:

THE FOUNDLING FATHER LUCY
 BRAZIL LUCY
 THE FOUNDLING FATHER
 BRAZIL: Izzy dead? LUCY: Mmlistenin. BRAZIL: Anything?
 LUCY: Nothin.³⁵

Such is Parks' now nearly quarter-century-old incision, to which "post-racial" time has finally caught up. I suggest it is time to take a pause, a spell, a beat to ponder how this rumination upon (so-called) emancipation's "seismic" non/impact upon black "freedom," has landed in the present moment.

Saidiya Hartman's opening epigraph calls our attention to the continuum that constitutes "slave time" in her disturbance of the notion that freedom has been achieved for what she terms the "ex-slave". She is rhetorically savvy to at once suggest the historical event is past

“ex-slave”) and that its condition(s) continue to haunt the present (“vulnerability to premature death and gratuitous acts of violence”).³⁶ Moreover, and as I have alluded earlier, inasmuch as Michel Foucault locates the genesis of the “new penal system [within and between] the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” in his analysis of captive/carceral punishment, I assert the patent-holder of its design, in its seismic, global and timeless effect upon blacks, to be Plato.³⁷

In short, the violent demise of temporality for one being constitutes being for another (paradoxical inference intended).³⁸ What’s more, once the carceral state could be localized to the black body, when the Egyptians began to enslave sub-Saharan Africans, if not earlier) — which is to say, once the historic practice of slavery was “blackened” — and that body attenuated to a condition that Spillers describes as gaping, “atomized” flesh,³⁹ the world could freely attain to the dynamic human interplay between the will toward *dasein* (Heidegger’s formulation on “being-here”), and the tension it reluctantly engages with temporality (i.e., time’s presence as reminder of being’s demise — a facet of what is more colloquially termed “existential angst”).⁴⁰ Frantz Fanon observes that, “[e]very human problem cries out to be considered on the basis of time, the ideal being that the present always serves to build the future.”⁴¹ The implicit anxiety to which he speaks here — namely, faith in a future as means of staving off death — is what animated the “Englighten[ed]” push toward futurity as a conceptual (epistemological) drive in 19th century Europe, and which continues to animate the world’s technological remaking and consumption of itself in the present, ever-escalating moment. The violence of this remaking is staggering enough. But the, at once conspicuous and, imperceptible refusal of the slave’s antagonistic predicament in relation to the world’s making and remaking (e.g., the theatre(s) of war as both a generative and destructive enterprise) — and most especially in interventions using “violence” as a justifiable rubric — is remarkable. An example of this is Marco Abel’s omission of the trans-Atlantic slave trade from his introductory litany exemplifying colossal violence across world history:

The violence that is part of the routine practices of U.S. airport security personnel getting too close for *my personal comfort* at least partially derives from the fact that I simply have no way to prevent this violation of personal space from happening: *if I objected in any way, I would instantaneously undergo an incorporeal transformation, from private citizen of another country to suspect, and consequently would be violated even more.* This violence is not of the same kind as the violence of the bombs in *Madrid, London, Egypt, or Iraq*, though this does not make it any less real or significant. Nor is the violence of 9/11 of the same kind as *the violence perpetrated against the millions who died in German concentration camps, Soviet gulags, or civil wars* that have been and still are fought *all over the world* [.]⁴²

Abel's elision of sub-Saharan Africa and the Americas from the set that includes Madrid, London, Egypt, Iraq, Germany, and the (former) Soviet Union, rhetorically disavows the way in which the contract into which Egypt, Europe, and the Americas entered that "instantaneously ... transform[ed]" sub-Saharan, and later, West Africans into "incorporeal" objects; from "private citizens of various countries" into the "suspects" and "convicted felons" that predominate the prison industrial complex today, is also remarkable. However, underscoring this omission of transatlantic slavery as a term within Abel's expression is not to indict him as lone perpetrator of such predisposition. To the contrary, his otherwise persuasive incision into violence's mediation of societal interplay is ardent in its aim to create a theatre within which violence's animus might be more impartially critiqued. Rather, I am suggesting that transatlantic slavery is often not catalogued in the index of violations against humanity that establishes the parameters of Abel's (and others') discussion because, in the deep tissue of paradigmatic machination—foundational to which is rhetorical discourse—violence against the black is neither avowed as *constitutive* to the lexicon of world menacing, nor to that of world making. As such, that which animates the *pas de deux* between (human) being and (what one might, in this age of technology, regard as its avatar) capital proliferation, is troubled, to say the least, by the inevitability of this doom.⁴³ Is it any wonder, then, that the neo-/ex- slave is so violently overdetermined?⁴⁴ Or, that the black must gesture so fervently toward origin, cultural pride and racial/ethnic heritage?

Frank B. Wilderson, III suggests that this violent elision is constituted by the necessity for a genocidal violence that constructs the transatlantic slave as an utterly controlled, "accumulated and fungible" flesh-object "ripped apart literally and imaginatively, [thus] destroy[ing] the possibility of ontology [because this necessity, this ripping] positions the Black in an infinite and indeterminately horrifying and open vulnerability, an object made available (which is to say fungible) for any subject."⁴⁵ In concert with this analysis, and a growing number of others that dare, as it does, to mediate on the deeply political implications of not merely black experience, but of black *being*, I am compelled toward dramatists' analyses precisely because they work on an imaginary plane that trains both our gaze and our senses to demand more of our historical reading about transatlantic slavery than merely the *moral* rift between north and south that has been so oft romanticized; and instead, to perceive the *ethical* implications attendant to this terrible predicament.⁴⁶ In this way, we might apprehend how the slave-as-property (matter) animated the "conflict," thereby—and this is key—giving meaning to those on *both* sides of the moral line. Cognizance of the slave's suffering was neither req-

uisite nor constitutive to this meaning; only the fact of “its” animating flesh. Rhetorically speaking then, the slave’s status as non- (human) being — i.e., as the *matter* that enables the location of meaning and the structuring of feeling for the human engaged in the moral struggle — is the only, and crucial, requisite to such construction.⁴⁷

The disarticulation (at best) and erasure (at worst) of the black being’s integrity at every tier of human interplay — corporeal, psychic, and civil/social — constitutes the imperceptible scandal (what Parks terms “imperceptible mutabilities”) that assaults the black attempting to navigate the affective register (i.e., performance of/ within daily life, at the longitude of “identity”).⁴⁸ Rather — paradoxically — the black is perceived and treated as a scandal to civil/social life at every level; which is to say, the only frequency at which this scandal is perceptible/legible is that at which the slave/carceral being and the black shadows (episteme and theory at their zeniths) engage.⁴⁹ It is here, at this “subterranean” — or, supernumerary — longitude of “living,” that the pith of black intramural theoretical debate takes place. It is a painful debate, and one that reveals much about the schism between the desire to live and belong, and the willingness to challenge “belonging” through questioning the ethical foundation upon which the project within which one desires to live, stands. Moreover, one cannot escape examining the degree to which that desire prompts an anxious misrecognition of Afro-pessimism’s critique. It is *not* a critique of black achievement, striving and/or identity; rather, it is an indictment of all that circumscribes, elides or obliterates them, and of those who enact these antagonisms.⁵⁰ This intellectual engagement is, in part, the thriving discourse that exceeds both civil society’s radar and interest; that embodies and apprehends the joy and suffering that animate the economies that Spillers terms “the national treasury of rhetorical wealth” that both (over-) determines and positions the black within her “confounded identities”.⁵¹

Enter, Parks’ second framing of the Lincoln/Booth relation, this time transliterated into two disaffected black brothers residing in a dingy studio apartment. In order to fully apprehend how their predicament exceeds any possible bearing their respective or collective wills can have upon altering its outcome, we must first make a rhetorical distinction, as I have earlier, in the reference to my mother’s predicament, between the terms *capability* and *capacity*. Parks’ *Topdog/Underdog* factors an incisive algorithm through which to read the Lincoln/Booth relation afresh, such that this distinction becomes ineluctably clear. This is to say, that the brilliant repartee between two brothers named Lincoln and Booth (their father’s “idea of a joke”) reveals that a performative elixir of intelligence, savvy, intuition and compliance does not stave off the maelstrom of repetition and reversion within which the

American nation and the slave-descended are immutably enmeshed.⁵² Within that maelstrom, Parks situates the futility of the black's striving to "go legit" as means of entering the civil/social order. In so doing, she lingers, unflinchingly, within what I frame as a kind of mathematical expression:

Slave time (real time), where slave time = x , and the value of x is unquantifiable yet necessary in precisely the way Spillers cognizes her confoundedness as necessary to her country.⁵³

In the simplest terms, these brothers are both highly capable, and express their capabilities in distinctly different ways. Their incapacitation, however, is identical. Their responses to it are also distinct: the elder's (Lincoln) gesture toward legitimacy collapses under the weight of enervation and impossibility; while the younger's (Booth) explodes under the press of accrued resentment, paranoia, and the acute disappointment in the revelation that his investment in the notion that there was ever anything to inherit has always already been bankrupt. Lincoln, by contrast, is indeed a master at the game, insofar as he knows (as his epigraph above illustrates) that "there aint no winning."⁵⁴ This is to say that he knows his adeptness (capability) does not = winning (capacity). I have not, therefore, written the expression as: "slave time *vs.* real time," because although the slave animates and validates — again, *exponentially* — the life that all others experience *within the context* of (real time), they exist outside the protective auspices that parentheticals represent.

Parks' insight here is meteoric. First, she has written, in effect, the inverse — the "negative imprint", if you will — of Plato's Socratic dialogue. Here, Lincoln "leads" Booth, as Socrates might lead Glaucon, to the realization that they do not need to be a team for Booth to assume Lincoln's position as "master-hustler":

LINCOLN
You can hustle 3-card monte without me you know.

BOOTH
Im planning to.

LINCOLN
I could contact my old crew. You could work with them. Lonny aint around no more but theres the rest of them. Theyre good.

BOOTH
I can get my own crew. I don't need yr crew. Buncha has-beens. I can get my own crew.

LINCOLN

My crews experienced. We usedta pull down a thousand a day. Thats 7 G a week. That was years ago. They probably do twice, 3 times that now.

BOOTH

I got my own connections, thank you.

LINCOLN

Theyd take you on in a heartbeat. With my say. My say still counts with them. They know you from before, when you tried to hang with us but—wernt ready yet. [He elaborates what his argument would be.] Meanwhile youd be working out yr shit right here, right in this room, getting good and getting better every day so when I did do the reintroductions youd have some marketable skills. Youd be passable.

BOOTH

I'd be more than passable, I'd be the be all end all.⁵⁵

Their perspectives are a distance apart in the beginning. However, Lincoln poses an argument that inflates Booth, winning him over in the imagining of what could be. Further, Parks understands her audience (i.e., the reader and/or the gazer) to be not only a microcosmic representation of the world, but in a kind of contract; a collective, unconscious agreement in imagining a world that is inured to presupposing (anticipating) and projecting a narrative about two brothers who are delightful and compelling *precisely because their witty repartee appears to transcend their abject circumstances*. This fixation on transcendence as a mode of human self-redemption girds that contract, which stipulates that the brothers' joint implosion is a direct (causal) result of their "disadvantage" —and by this, I mean to suggest a codicil to this notion, wherein "disadvantage" does *not* presume a condition that overwhelms and subsumes them and is, thus, insurmountable. To the contrary, this cherished buzz word that animated the social science treatises of the 1960s and 1970s, operates as a boomerang for the black, in that it presumes, in effect, that a set of circumstances are *of the brothers' own making*, such that disadvantage = not taking full advantage (not capitalizing upon) the bountiful resources deserved by *all*. Parks understands this, deeply, and in dramatically situating these doomed brothers as she does, within an impossible impasse, Booth's resentment of Lincoln's unmooring — from either the assimilationist (honest worker) or dissenting (hustler) narratives, coupled with his determination that Lincoln not syphon his share of their (so-called) inheritance (a knotted handkerchief purportedly containing \$500) — "explodes" in his hand (he shoots Lincoln), effectively annihilating them both. In

other words, Parks enables us to see that the proverbial trigger has been pulled on them both long before their sentient bodies are dead, literally and figuratively, and once the curtain goes down, Booth will either go to prison, shoot himself upon realizing he cannot reconcile what has transpired, or be shot by the police.

Lest we presume this violence plays out only on black male bodies, we must remember that this violent ratio, between the black and the world, suggests that the gender binary is an insufficient yardstick with which to measure the breadth of the black's disaffection — what Achille Mbembe terms “the terror and the symbolic sealing off of the slave” regardless of their gender.⁵⁶ Put another way, gender is not constitutive to the analytics that determine the degree to which the black's “presence” scandalizes civil life.⁵⁷ There is no recuperating of the black from being so scandalized in the inverse. As Angela Y. Davis observes, “[T]he rape of the black woman [i]ndirectly ... target[s] the slave community as a whole [and constitutes] a blow against the black man [whose] instinct to protect [is, in this context] stripped of its male supremacist implications[.]”⁵⁸ Correspondingly, playwright, director and performer Robbie McCauley's 1989 experimental performance piece entitled *Sally's Rape* situates the character of Robbie, as a descendant of a slave named Sally, in dialogue with that of Jeannie, a white woman. The discursive tension between the two figures emerges because Robbie moves to claim the story of her grandmother, Sally, as her own. Jeannie acknowledges that she is in Robbie's story. Sally is an emblem of those slave “women” whose bodies are violated without recourse — which is to say, their womanhood has been obliterated such that no legible violation can be claimed, which Hartman's analysis of the inapplicability of the accusation of rape for the slave places into relief.⁵⁹ All of this suggests that the slave is deracinated and un-gendered, such that entitlement to the rights and privileges that protect anyone who is part of a societal construct, and certainly anyone who is gendered — most particularly, the (white) female body — as sacrosanct — does not apply. For me, the radical black scholars who deploy Afro-pessimist theory as a framework are confronting the troublesome disjuncture between narratives asserting that blacks now perform amply and successfully within civil society, and those borne out by numerous other projects — from W.E.B. DuBois' exhaustive labor chronicling the incalculable efforts of blacks to enter the American civil project and being nonetheless blamed for the so-called “failure” of Reconstruction in the nineteenth century, to Donald Bogle's equally exhaustive work archiving blacks' navigation of twentieth century cinema — that expose the repeated and determined efforts by blacks to construct a place of being; to be as elements within a set that is, in turn, positioned within an expression (in this case, the “expression” of America).⁶⁰ The annihilative scandal, then, is itself a paradoxical fold, insofar as civility's scandalizing of the

black remains elided from many of the most prominent critiques of violence.

The Black Feminist Dramatic in Concert

As I have suggested early on in this essay, I call the realm within which I pursue my analyses, engaging these and other modes of reading the world's antiblack violence the "black feminist dramatic" because it epitomizes the very analytical breadth that Plato anticipates as devoid of vision and epistemological value. I read the interstices wherein the richness of black life collides with the bloody chaffing of social death that is foisted onto it, and the transmutation of that rich complexity becomes garbled into the treacherous performances of the overdetermined life of the black navigating the world. This is to say, I embrace and am informed by the myriad gestures and articulations of blackness. I do not refuse *any* of them, but rather, see the ways in which they are all expressing, resisting and/or surviving the precariousness into which the world has pitched them. Emergent analyses—from black trans perspectives and those that trouble the thresholds between the (incorporated) human and other forms of existence; between black queerness at the longitude of identity and black hetero-conforming identity; and ultimately, between the black, regardless of these identities, and regimes of exponential force—are enormously important to the evolution of the troubling chasms that currently exist across the fields and areas that examine the Black Diaspora. And I observe the Black Feminist Dramatic to be making crucial incisions into this turbulence.

Dramatists Lynn Nottage, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Kia Corthron, among so many others, excavate evidence of the imperceptible, timeless tether that collapses "event" into "event horizon". These projects—the French monarchy and the flesh trading that hemorrhages forth from Africa by way of Europe's incursion (Nottage's *Las Meninas*), and on into the Americas (Parks' *The America Play*, Corthron's *Breath, Boom*)—continue to signify dramatically on the black being's attempts to enter the "incomplete project of freedom" to which Hartman refers.⁶¹ As Wilderson calls for "a new language of abstraction to explain this horror [because t]he explanatory power of Humanist discourse is bankrupt in the face of the Black[,]"⁶² so do I call for a new reading of Black dramaturgy that is always already in the "cave" of imperceptibility to the world (the "noncommunicability in the presence of all other positions" that Wilderson identifies,) and that I posit, in my larger project, has been cast by Plato.⁶³

These dramatists, in concert with the growing constellation of black scholars—feminist, queer and beyond—who, together, and through and amidst our theoretical schisms, can, nonetheless, insinu-

ate an evidentiary field upon which to chart the coordinates pinpointing the force and magnitude with which “civility” forecloses Parks’, Nottage’s, and Corthron’s dramatic figures and the blackness they (re) present.⁶⁴

Conclusion - The Haunting of Culture

I am forever attempting to confront my “schismatic” present; which is to say, the present moment of a “life” rooted in the dis-integration of my “remembrance of things past” (to ironically invoke Marcel Proust). The sobering process of re-remembering, in which the unspoken, unconscious demands of the structures that both determine and overdetermine the performances of dramatists and their Black characters has been difficult, lonely and at moments frightening. These re-memories haunt the “past-presents” within which I and the playwrights and scholars I engage must confront the daunting task of reconstituting ourselves in some semblance of “story”, whether it be theoretical, historical or narrative. Proust has merely to compose, to imagine. He need not juggle the perpetually paradoxical balls that are willfully knocked out of aerodynamic play by the omniscient will to power – by which I do not mean anyone’s god; I mean, the structured regimes of state, institutional, libidinal and, as Sharon P. Holland reminds, even individual power.⁶⁵

It is no longer merely the enactments of Jim Crow and anonymous Ku Klux Klansmen wearing pillowcase masks and brandishing torches that should concern us. Rather, it is Holland’s concerns – the concerns of this entire chorale of voices – that must summon our vigilance. We must anticipate that which has been what Alice Walker calls “our familiar”⁶⁶ – a constant drive by the collective unconscious to stultify black inhabitation of *human* being. It is within the black feminist dramatic, and in concert with the ever-expanding constellation of Black scholars and scholar-artists, that my waking hours are spent analyzing and meditating upon, not the hope or promise of some event-horizon, but upon the black dramas within which we might imagine the undoing of what the prospect of that event has already unmade.

Portions of this essay first appeared in *Solving for 'x': The Allegorhythms of Black Feminist Playwriting* (ProQuest, UMI Dissertations Publishing, 2013) by [née] Joyce Ann [Now: Jaye Austin] Williams.

Notes

1. Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory" in *Cultural Critique* Number 6 (University of Minnesota Press, Spring 1987) 52.
2. Nadine George-Graves, "Basic Black" in *Theatre Journal* Volume 57, Number 4 (The Johns Hopkins University Press, December 2005) 610–612.
3. Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" in *Small Axe*, Volume 26 (June, 2008) 4, my emphasis. (This essay also appears in *On Marronage: Ethical Confrontations with Antiracism*, P. Khalil Saucier and Tryon P. Woods, Eds., Africa World Press, 2015).
4. Christian, "The Race for Theory" 52.
5. I invoke here the *sous rature* (under erasure) so oft deployed by Jacques Derrida, the Algerian-born French philosopher who, in so signifying — albeit insufficiently — underscores existential and ontological erasures. (See, in particular, *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri Spivak trans., [The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997].) I point out the insufficiency of this mode of signification because so many preeminent European philosophers (among them, Martin Heidegger) were grappling with how to express the myriad urgent anxieties and conditions of, for and about the human's *being*; yet, in their contemplations, did not consider one for whom being human had been pitched outside the parentheticals that cohere the collective understanding of what constitutes human being (in the non-biological sense). Also see n.10, below. In addition, and crucial to this discourse is Jared Sexton's "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism" in *InTensions*, Number 5 (Fall/Winter 2011) 5, in which he asks, "[W]hat is the nature of a human being whose human being . . . raises the question of being human at all...[?]."
6. Selamawit Terrefe alludes to the Sub-Saharan/ Arab slave trade in her essay, "Speaking the Hieroglyph," in *Theory & Event*, Vol 21, Number 1, 2018, and more thoroughly elaborates its psychoanalytic contours in her forthcoming monograph, *Impossible Blackness: Violence and the Psychic Life of Slavery*.
7. See Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press 2016) for an exquisitely drawn and generous examination of these very tensions in modernity and the necessary work that must be done to exist amidst Slavery's terrible residue. Also, I would be remiss not to note the constellation of twentieth century postmodernists, a number of whom I find extremely useful in their cognition of the power and impact of structural violence — e.g., Jacques Derrida's incision into the violence of language; Michel Foucault's analyses of epistemological and carceral violence; and the productive tensions piqued by Heidegger's challenging of the primacy of intellectualism in determining the qualitative contours of Being. Respectively, see, again, Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, 1972; 2010), and *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, 1995), and Heidegger's *Being and Time* (State University of New York Press, 1953; 2010).
8. Selamawit Terrefe, "Phantasmagoria; or, The World is a Haunted Plantation" in *The Feminist Wire*, October 10, 2012, available at <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2012/10/phantasmagoria/> [n.d.]

9. Frank B. Wilderson, III, "The Prison Slave as Hegemony's (Silent) Scandal" in *Social Justice* Volume 30, Number 2 (92), "War, Dissent, and Justice: A Dialogue" (2003) 18–27.
10. See Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, Richard Philcox trans. (New York: Grove Press, 1952, 2008) 95, in which he asserts the black as being "overdetermined from without," such that the question of whether an unencumbered "black psyche" can exist at all looms large.
11. This is why the notion of reforming police behavior in response to the repeated murders of unarmed black men is an insufficient strategy. The police officers' actions are symptomatic of a deeply imbricated, systematized reflex by an entire regime of power that does not perceive the black as a human participant within the parenthetical of civility. That negative perception has, in turn, conditioned its paramilitary arms to respond through exponentially violent means to, what Frantz Fanon isolates as, a "black imago". See, also, Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, (Charles Lam Markmann, Transl.) 151, in which Fanon discusses the "Negro [as] phobogenic object".
12. I use "metered" here *not* to suggest structural constraint; but rather, paradoxically, to insinuate "poetry" at its deftest—signifying on the ancient Greek term for dramatist/tragedian ("poet")—such that it pushes the conceit (structured/crafted verse) even farther; the way a jazz musician plays a classical motif "to the letter," then steals away with it, into the stratospheric dimensions of improvisation, and then "returns" to the phrase/motif just as deftly. The listener senses the ground has moved, but is not quite sure how. I believe this to be the realm of "fugitivity" that Fred Moten elaborates in his book, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minnesota University Press, 2003), a virtuoso performative analysis of blackness *qua* improvisation. Also note, I place "returns" in quotes, prompted by Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes of Belonging* (Random House, Vintage Canada Edition, 2001), which suggests the cognitive schema of transatlantic slavery's Middle Passage to be one from which there is *no* return; there is but a map leading *to* the door—the threshold—but that trajectory is irreversible. See also, Saidiya Hartman's memoir, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), which echoes this. I posit Parks, Nottage and Corthron as articulators of this strange threshold, at and around which blackness so improvises.
13. Jared Sexton's explication of the term, in "Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word" in *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* Number 29 (2016), available at <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue29/sexton.html> [n.d.], is an immensely important contribution to this discourse.
14. Sylvia Wynter's exploration in this realm is expansive and deeply useful to me. See, for example, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument" in *CR: The New Centennial Review* Volume 3, Number 3 (2003) 257–337.
15. Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex*, (New York: Perennial, 2001; William Morrow, 1984) 6.

16. This was a scene of subjection I witnessed in the corridor of an institution where I once taught. I surmise that teacher has no cognizance, to this day, of the violence with which her progressive "benevolence" was fraught, and how it terrorized that student, and me, for whose benefit the teacher staged the scene.
17. The Prison Abolition movement, with the activism of Michelle Alexander, Ruth Gilmore and Angela Y. Davis, among others, has gained considerable visibility of late, through projects such as Alexander's book *The New Jim Crow*, and the film *13th*, in its move to dismantle the prison industrial complex. An attendant question—I am guided here by Audre Lorde's cautionary *Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House: Comments At "the Personal And The Political" Panel: (second Sex Conference, October 29, 1979)*—becomes, would such dismantling undo the project of antiblackness, or simply displace the carceral gesture into other loci, in tandem with the perpetual, acute violence(s) that continue(s) to play out on the streets of this country between the police state and always already vulnerable blacks? Also see Patrice Douglass' "Black Feminist Theory for the Dead and Dying," *Theory and Event* 21, Number 1 (Jan 2018); and again, Sharpe's *In the Wake*.
18. See my elaboration of this idea in the transcript of my 2015 speech for Black Commencement at the University of California, Irvine entitled "Black Achievement in the Face of Diversity" in *Out of Nowhere: Black Meditations at the Cutting Edge*, September 5, 2015, available at <https://outofnowhereblog.wordpress.com/2015/09/05/black-achievement-in-the-face-of-diversity/> [n.d.].
19. Audre Lorde, "Poetry is Not a Luxury" in *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press Feminist Series, 1984) 36.
20. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Baby: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics*, Vol. 17, No. 2, Culture and Counteremory: The "American" Connection (Summer, 1987) 65.
21. James Baldwin, "The View from Here," National Press Club Speech, 1986.
22. See Lewis Gordon's elaboration of this and other manifestations of antiblackness in *Bad Faith and Antiracism* (Amherst: Humanity Books, 1999). His insights edify the limits of black/white binaric thinking, toward a cognizance of the black's predicament in relation to the world, not just to white people.
23. Hortense Spillers, "Black, White, and in Color, or Learning How to Paint: Toward an Intramural Protocol of Reading" in *Black, White and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003) 277-300.
24. James Snead, "On Repetition in Black Culture" in *Black American Literature Forum* Volume 15, Number 4, "Black Textual Strategies, Volume 1: Theory" (Winter, 1981) 146.
25. See Saidiya Hartman's, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*, Oxford University Press, 1997; and *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.

26. Suzan-Lori Parks, *The America Play and Other Works* (TCG Publications, 1994) 158.
27. *Ibid.* 164.
28. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Harvard University Press, 1982).
29. Cornel West, "Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization" in *The Future of the Race*, H.L. Gates Jr. and Cornel West eds. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Incorporated, 1996) 80–81.
30. Parks, *The America Play* 182.
31. *Ibid.* 198.
32. Hartman also pursues this meditation in "Venus in Two Acts" 1.
33. Parks, *The America Play* 198.
34. I am mindful of Richard Dyer's book, *White*, Routledge, 1997, in which he describes the "invisibility of whiteness as ... of a piece with its ubiquity", 10.
35. Parks, *The America Play* 198.
36. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" 1.
37. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 22. Also see Plato, *The Republic* in *The Portable Plato*, Scott Buchanan ed. (New York: Viking Press, 1977) for an accessible version of the entire work; and, see *Solving for 'x': The Allegorhythms of Black Feminist Playwriting* (ProQuest, UMI Dissertations Publishing, 2013) by [née] Joyce Ann [Now: Jaye Austin] Williams, which examines, in particular, Book VII, the "Cave Allegory," as precursor to paradigmatic, epistemological annihilation of blackness.
38. I am alluding to the human being, and to the slave *née* being that, as Hortense Spillers reminds, is a "being for the captor" in her landmark essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" in *Black, White and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003) 206. Additionally, Sexton's framing of "slave time" as "the slow time of captivity, the dilated time of the event horizon, the eternal time of the unconscious, the temporality of atomization" is stunning to ponder in terms of the violence of (rhetorical) elision.
39. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" 208.
40. I am referring once again to Martin Heidegger's meditation on "being and time". See also, S.E. Anderson, *The Black Holocaust for Beginners* (For Beginners, 2007), in which he introduces the slave trade that presages Transatlantic slavery; namely, the Arab Slave Trade. See again, Notes 5 and 7.
41. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* xvi.
42. Marco Abel, *Violent Affect: Literature, Cinema and Critique after Representation* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007) 2, my emphasis.
43. I'm referring here to the collective un- and pre-conscious machinations that rouse the frenzied, Darwinian jockeying for (impossible) surety of one's survival.

44. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* 95.
45. Frank Wilderson, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2010, 38.
46. See, again, the collection, *On Marronage*, as an example of assemblages of works that forge discourses around the ethical questions piqued by the particular animus of antiblack racism.
47. It is no accident that the range of synonyms for “matter” spans from “material”; “stuff”; “stock” and “staple”, to “trouble”, “problem”, “difficulty”, “worry” and “complication”. The first four nouns constitute the inanimate objects that facilitate human utility; the latter five nouns constitute the anxiety that arises – to borrow and paraphrase an expression from the craft of acting – “when objects betray”. It is this notion of “betrayal” that subtends my meditation here, especially as it is overdetermined onto the slave-object and, in modernity, onto the unarmed black; the black female in virtually any space; the gender queer black who performs an alternative, and thereby threatening, non-conformist “identity”.
48. I allude here to her play *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*, which was first produced in New York, at BACA Downtown (a space curated by The Brooklyn Arts Council Association) in the late 1980s.
49. See Jared Sexton’s “Ante-Anti-Blackness: Afterthoughts” in *Lateral* Volume 1 (Spring 2012), in which he defines “blackness [as] theory itself, [and] anti-blackness [as] the resistance to theory.” He goes on to say, “[b]lack life is not lived in the world that the world lives in, but it is lived underground, in outer space.” It is here, at this place of “living,” that the pith of (black) intramural theoretical debate takes place.
50. Again, Sexton’s “Afro-pessimism” (see n. 8) is immensely helpful.
51. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” 203.
52. Suzan-Lori Parks, *Topdog/Underdog* (New York: Theatre Communication Group, 1999; 2001) 22.
53. Note that I have refrained from placing a parenthetical around “slave time,” as means of signifying the absence of (protective) insularity for the slave-descended. Also, see Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” 203.
54. Parks, *Topdog/Underdog* 106.
55. *Ibid.* 44–45.
56. Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” Libby Meintjes, trans., in *Public Culture* Volume 15, Number 1 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) 11–40.
57. Here, I have placed “presence” in quotations rather than *sous l’erasure* (under erasure) as means of acknowledging the affective “presence” of blacks that performs “as if” in relation to other beings in civil society. This is to address the misapprehension that haunts the intramural discourse between some black scholars, who presuppose the assertion of such performance as not having transcended social death (the condition by which the black is engulfed and isolated) as *inherent* to the black being, rather than as *symptomatic* of the overdetermination of forces onto the black that annihilates their being.

58. Angela Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves" in *The Massachusetts Review, Woman: An Issue* Volume 13, Number 1/2 (Winter-Spring, 1972) 97.
59. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
60. See W.E.B. DuBois' *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860–1880* (New York: Charles Scribner's & Sons, 1999); and Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 2007).
61. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" 4.
62. Wilderson, *Red, White and Black* 55.
63. See again, Williams, *Solving for 'x'*; specifically, Chapter One: "A Dramaturgy of the Cave: Excavating Plato's Carceral Continuum," 33–67.
64. I parenthesize the "re" of "represent" so as to posit that, production histories and publications notwithstanding, these dramatic works have heretofore neither been presented nor theorized with this conceptual framing; and to suggest that the "re-" presentation that theatre in general is presumed to enact, pertains to that which occurs in the communicable, which is to say, experiential, register. By contrast, the perceptibility/communicability of these dramatic works when they are staged – and the *condition* of suffering of their black figures and the players who perform them – exists outside the experiential register, requiring the "protocol of reading" (to summon Spillers) I am forging through them.
65. Sharon Patricia Holland, "The Last Word on Racism: New Directions for a Critical Race Theory" in *South Atlantic Quarterly* Volume 104, Number 3 (Duke University Press, Summer 2005) 403–423.
66. Alice Walker, *The Temple of My Familiar* (Harcourt, 1989).