

Jared Sexton
**All Black
Everything**

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You could build a world out of need or you
could hold
everything black and see.
– Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American
Lyric*

I will take as axiomatic the following premise, expressed in the editorial to the current issue: “It is evident that #BlackLivesMatter and the organizations that coalesce the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) represent the most important and promising developments in the theory and practice of abolition.” Important and promising to this conjuncture, to be sure, as the *eupraxia* of black millennials refashions the linkage between the singular claim for freedom – the slave’s cause – and the whole range of leftist efforts for dignity, justice, and equality.¹ But this is also true within a larger, structural view, since the *longue durée* of black strivings in this twilight civilization, which continually give rise to the collective aspirations of black activists in any given moment, encompass and inflect the whole range of leftist efforts – from the reformist to the revolutionary – on a global scale. To my mind, abolition, as it has been unevenly developed within the internationalist black radical tradition over several centuries now, “is the interminable radicalization of every radical movement,” most especially its own.² It is that which radicalizes all others because it radicalizes itself as its most essential activity. The slave’s cause is the cause of another world in and on the ruins of this one, in the end of its ends.

The discourse of black lives distinguishes mattering and movement from any reductive concepts of legal right or standing, even if it remains entangled with and against the violent dynamics of lawmaking and law enforcement. One crucial aspect of the abolitionist imagination highlighted by this discourse on that score involves resistance to the aestheticization of politics and advocacy of a renewed politicization of aesthetics, including myriad representations of blackness in art, entertainment, and news media. If, as the editors suggest, the mass media “has hostilely presented M4BL in general and BLM in particular in ways that simplify its ideas, downplay its organizational capacity, shade over its intersectional potency, and demonize the young Black bodies whose availability to unaccountable state violence is the oldest and most consistent American reality since the European invasion,” that simplification, shading, and demonization has been contested by the independent generation of a vast digital image archive, a prolific online social-media commentary, and a rich analog protest culture involving political signage, graffiti, fashion, and

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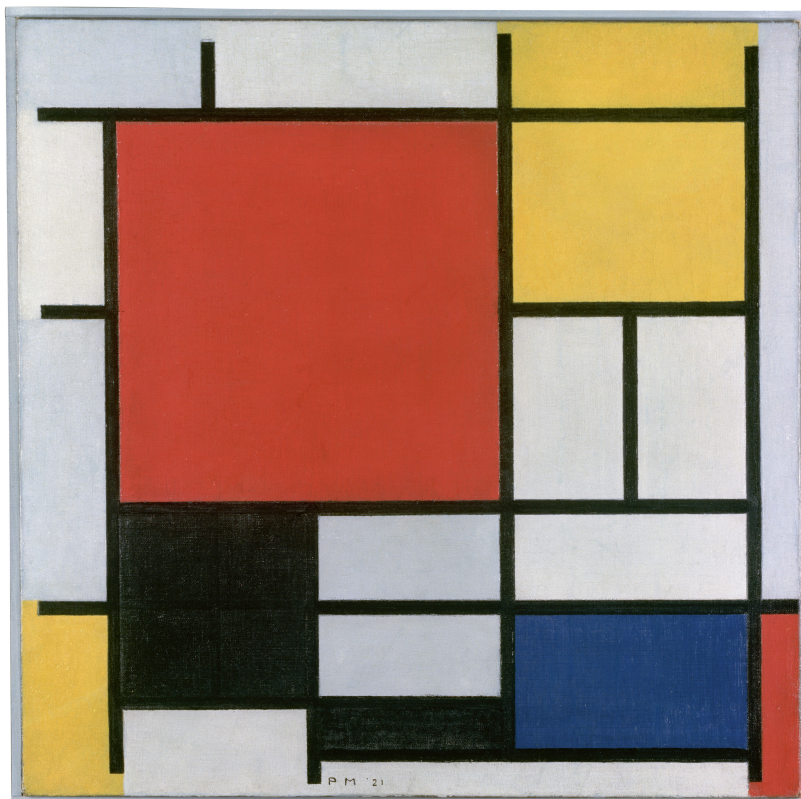
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Photo documentation of the lecture "What is Contemporary? Black Lives Matter: Patrisse Cullors and Tanya Lucia Bernard in Conversation" with artists Patrisse Cullors and Tanya Lucia Bernard (2016). Photo: Casey Winkleman. Courtesy of The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.



Ad Reinhardt poses in front of one of his paintings, date unknown.



Piet Mondrian, *Composition in Red, Yellow, Blue, and Black*, 1921. Oil on canvas
Photo:Wikimedia Commons

dance, among other things. All of which is, of course, shaped by the diverse theoretical formulations drawn from and contributed to the interdisciplinary field of black studies, most notably regarding currents of black feminist and queer theory; all of which is, of course, shaped by the diverse philosophies, practical wisdom, and good sense characteristic of black thought in the most general sense.

Black art and black artists have been critical to this development from the beginning. It is not insignificant that one of the founders of BLM, Patrisse Cullors, is a practicing artist, and that BLM has an Art + Culture director, Tanya Lucia Bernard.³ The art world has, as a result, witnessed a fairly steady stream of initiatives in recent years related to the movement for black lives, exploring its many dimensions and situating it within the broadest historical, geopolitical, and even spatiotemporal contexts. We can note events spanning, for instance, from Erin Christovale and Amir George's Black Radical Imagination film and video series at REDCAT in Los Angeles, to Simone Leigh's Black Women Artists for Black Lives Matter (BWA for BLM) launch at the New Museum in New York.⁴ But the present engagement is not only of urgent topical interest. It also revisits deeply entrenched questions about aesthetics and art history, the asymmetrical ways and means of artistic production, the contradictory role of financial backers and institutional brokers, the political economy of the culture industry, and the perennially troubled ethical vocation of the artist. These questions condense with great force at the point where blackness, blacks, and the color black come into focus, whether black people are agent, object, or audience of the work. It is hoped that the comments below might facilitate a thought and practice of art and activism, their mutual organization or disorganization, as they traffic between the material and symbolic terms of blackness whose spacetime presents itself in paradoxical display.

Tom Vanderbilt, a design, science, and technology writer, suggests in his essay "Darkness Visible" for *Cabinet* magazine: "There is perhaps no color freighted with as much meaning as black; what makes this significant, as art students will remember, is that black is not a color at all, merely the absence of wavelengths of visible light. To truly see black would require the loss of any visible light, meaning in fact that all would be black."⁵ Black, notes Vanderbilt, is not a color at all by some accounts. But what a curious way to refer to the color freighted with the greatest meaning. As if the meaning becomes so excessive or extreme that the color, as such, disappears into itself, or into everything else that is not itself. In fact,

Vanderbilt glosses several discrepant understandings of black. On the one hand, we find descriptions of black as a force of incorporation, swallowing up all light and color, all meaning and desire and fantasy, even all existence, so much so that "our lives consist of those things that we draw away from the black." In this sense, black is best seen not at all, as noncolor and as nonseeing, the failure or impossibility or limit of seeing. Like an astrophysical singularity, we agree to the undeniable importance of the effects of black without being so sure as to the nature of its existence. On the other hand, we have meditations, running from the ancient period to the present, about black as the color of sight itself, as what sight cannot see about its own seeing. "To truly see black would require the loss of any visible light, meaning in fact that *all would be black*." One sees black and black alone, or one sees everything else *without* it, we might even say *against* it. To see black at all is to see all black everything.⁶

Black, then, begins and ends as a paradox or a problem of definition; it may even be the paradox or problem of definition *itself*, which is to say the paradox or problem of beginning and ending, being and nothingness. We might try to approach black by way of its relation to other colors, by way of a kind of originary difference, such that black, the presence of noncolor, is black only *in relation to* white, the color of absence. Or, given that black entails the self-cancelling presence of all color and colors combined, we might learn something about its qualities when compared to other colors comprised of mixture as such, colors like brown or gray, for instance. Novelist Paul La Farge writes the following in his own contribution to the *Cabinet* issue on the color black:

We "see" in total darkness because *sight itself has a color*, Aristotle suggests, and that color is black: the feedback hum that lets us know the machine is still on. The contemporary philosopher Giorgio Agamben, following Aristotle, remarks that the fact that we see darkness means that our eyes have not only the potential to see, but also the potential *not* to see. (If we had only the potential to see, we would never have the experience of not-seeing.) This twofold potential, to do and not to do, is not only a feature of our sight, Agamben argues; it is the essence of our humanity: "The greatness – and also the abyss – of human potentiality is that it is first of all potential not to act, *potential for darkness*." Because we are capable of inaction, we know that we have the ability to act, and

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also the choice of whether to act or not.
*Black, the color of not seeing, not doing, is
in that sense the color of freedom.*⁷

La Farge loses track of the distinction between freedom and a negative condition of possibility and then reduces the former to the latter. Even so, we can hold onto the fundamental association he draws between black, or blackness, and freedom.

Since at least the time of Malevich's *Black Square* (1915), white artists have, for this very reason, been drawn to working with black, and none more so than the mid-century abstract expressionists. But few, it appears, have affirmed all they have found in its precincts. Poet and theorist Fred Moten is interested in this thwarted interest, especially as it is found in the example of Ad Reinhardt, one of the towering figures of the movement and the moment of abstract expressionism. In "The Case of Blackness," Moten pursues an extended criticism of Reinhardt's attempts to contain, to quarantine, blackness and blacks from the color black in order to pursue his creative practice as formal purification: "art-as-art."⁸ Reinhardt is not indifferent to the world and his is not conservatism in either the social or the political sense. Quite the contrary, he is at war with the conventions of the art world and its stifling historical inertia and he is, at the time, a critic of the imperialism of US foreign policy in Southeast Asia and its domestic policy of Jim Crow legal segregation. His problem lies elsewhere, in an inability to see how his desire for mobilizing the critical force of abstraction – what he calls "concept" – need not sacrifice what he saw as the distracting messiness of lived experience – what he calls "symbol."

On this score, Moten thinks backward through Reinhardt en route to another, earlier white abstract artist, Piet Mondrian, whose quest for the universal by way of form and color passed through and, unlike Reinhardt, carried along the world from which it was drawn. Artist Michael Sciam writes at great length about *Victory Boogie Woogie* (1944) and its predecessor piece, *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1943), in his own book on the Dutch painter, touching on some of the most compelling aspects of the work:

While the space [of *Victory Boogie Woogie*] is nevertheless very dynamic (not least because of the lozenge format), its dynamism is the result of a virtually unlimited number of planes interacting with one another. While the finite dimension of the planes appears to predominate now, their enormous number and variety tend to evoke an infinite space.

The infinite space of the lines is now expressed through the finite space of the planes. Everything varies in this painting, as it does in *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, but we no longer see any process leading to a unitary synthesis. It is multiplicity that predominates here. *Victory Boogie Woogie* appears to present an endless sequence of possible syntheses of yellow, red, and blue manifested in constantly varying forms. In actual fact, this is precisely what *Broadway Boogie Woogie* tells us: unitary synthesis opens up again to multiplicity. We encounter a great many instances of partial unity (including white) in *Victory Boogie Woogie*, but not one that holds for the composition as a whole. All the planes are in a state of reciprocal motion. They are all relative and there is not one that establishes itself as a synthesis of all the others.⁹

What Sciam describes as the painting's construction of "infinite space" and "an endless sequence of possible syntheses" is, ultimately, about its ability to evoke a sense that "unitary synthesis opens up again to multiplicity." That is the key. For Moten, too, unitary synthesis opens up again to multiplicity, but not just any synthesis can accomplish such an opening. It is blackness that enjoys a certain pride of place in that respect, as the *singular unitary synthesis of all colors*, the monochrome that is actually the combination of the whole range of monochromes: "the related nonexcluded, nonexclusive understanding of mixture, of color, as constitutive of blackness and of blackness or black as a constitutive social, political, and aesthetic power."¹⁰ Mixture as power: but how? Black is what you get when all the primary colors are present equally in the mix. It is what you get when there is equality among colors. In other words, "the endless sequence of possible syntheses of yellow, red, and blue manifested in constantly varying forms" are, in a way, the infinite shades of blackness that Moten has in mind when he claims that Mondrian's "great, final picture, *Victory Boogie Woogie*, is all black, is all of what had been absorbed in black, is the explication of a dissonant, chromatic saturation, the inhabitation of a break or border, the disruption embedded in the grid's boundaries."¹¹

In the wake of Moten's analysis, we are struck anew by Reinhardt's statement at the 1967 *artscanada* teleconference, the so-called "black conversation," between Toronto and New York to address the color black in light of the emergent protocols and priorities of the Black Power and Black Arts movements. Joining him at this gathering of artists were Aldo Tambellini,

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An installation view Quentin Morris's *Untitled Show* at Blum & Poe, New York (2016). Photo: Christian Defonte

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Rashid Johnson, *Cosmic Slop "Bitter"*, 2015. Black soap, wax. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Martin Parsekian

Michael Snow, Cecil Taylor, Arnold Rockman, Stu Broomer, and Harvey Cowan. Reinhardt's statement, published later as "Black as Symbol and Concept," opens like this:

I started with black as a symbol, black as color, and the connotations of black in our culture where our whole system is imposed on us in terms of darkness, lightness, blackness, whiteness. Goodness and badness are associated with black. As an artist and painter, I would eliminate the symbolic pretty much, for black is interesting not as a color, but as a noncolor and the absence of color.¹²

Reinhardt would liberate black from its connotation, which is to say from its color, whereas Taylor, Reinhardt's counterpart and critical interlocutor, "speaks not only out of but also of the lived experience of the black," in other words, the enriching and enabling experience of the symbolic dimension of black.¹³

When we read about black art by black artists, they seem always to refer, however indirectly, to black lives (and deaths), and to living (and dying), in relation to their black art. So, even if they pivot away from figuration and toward greater abstraction, black life (and death) and lives (and deaths) still enter the frame and the conversation. This is perhaps why, as Moten notes, "Taylor interrupts himself and the conversation he joins" at this historic event "by raising the question of black dignity in a discourse on black art. He moves differently to Reinhardt, whose opening of the discussion is followed and carried forth in a kind of uninterrupted seriality by other participants in the conversation ... before Taylor leaps, or breaks, in."¹⁴ Black artists making black art move differently with and through the color black. At the outset of "The Case of Blackness," Moten declaims: "The cultural and political discourse on black pathology has been so pervasive that it could be said to constitute the background against which all representations of blacks, blackness, or (the color) black take place."¹⁵ It is, in part, this discourse of pathology that prompts Reinhardt to displace and diminish the symbolic in the name of art-as-art. A work of art, for him, to say nothing of an artist, cannot be black in the symbolic sense and attain its true nature. Reinhardt believes this and he doesn't believe this; he is of two minds, let's say, a white mind and a black mind. "Reinhardt reads blackness at sight," Moten observes, "as held merely within the play of absence and presence. He is blind to the articulated combination of absence and presence in black that is in his face, as his work, his own production."¹⁶ In order to recover the

negativeness of black, Reinhardt attempts to shuck its negativity.¹⁷ He is trapped in his own ostensibly nonsymbolic conception of concept and symbol, unable to see or to acknowledge the mixture, the "articulated combination," of absence and presence, concept and symbol, of color and noncolor in blackness and black.

It is precisely this willingness to work with, through, and against such negativity that has propelled the career of someone like Quentin Morris, a Philadelphia-based black artist who abandoned the figurative work he was trained to create as a scholarship student at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. In 1963, at the height of the US Civil Rights movement, Morris decided to begin working on "monochromatic painting ... exclusively using black in a myriad of tonalities and textures to present black's intrinsically enigmatic beauty and infinite depth." Morris was, of course, relating in some way to the charged political atmosphere that year surrounding the pivotal March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, an event witnessed firsthand by fellow artists like Norman Lewis, Romare Bearden, and Ad Reinhardt himself. For Morris, it has been vital to undermine "the whole idea that black is supposed to be something macabre, negative, dirty, filthy," and to challenge the "racial stereotypes in there as well, and the whole thing about it being funereal." His black monochromes would thus serve "to refute all negative cultural mythologies about the color, and ultimately to create work that innately expresses the all-encompassing spirituality of life."¹⁸

Alex Baker, director of the Fleishman/Ollman Gallery in Philadelphia, describes Morris's use of black as an "oblique reflection on racism ... subtly critiquing the dominant white culture's history of racism." And yet this engagement with the symbolic dimension of black does not in any respect distract from or diminish his exploration and experimentation with its formal qualities, its conceptual aspect. As Heidi Becker, co-owner of Larry Becker Contemporary Art, remarked: Morris's work is "immersive. The artist and viewer become consumed by it ... There are no perceptual tricks or [high-tech] performances ... Quentin uses black to distill everything to its essence."¹⁹ Put slightly differently, the symbol, when addressed with care, is a conduit rather than an obstacle to the concept; the concrete, in its infinite depth, leads us toward rather than away from the universal and its infinite breadth. This is why Morris can eventually see no difference between his figurative and monochrome works. The border between the two, so central to the debate exercising the minds of the American Abstract Artists, had dissolved in

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articulated combination. Black, to repeat, is the singular unitary synthesis of all colors, the monochrome that is actually the articulated combination of the whole range of monochromes; a multichromatic monochrome; it is the color that is also all color and colors, including itself; it is, to use a mathematical phrasing, *the universal set*, the set of all sets, the logical paradox discovered by Bertrand Russell at the turn of the twentieth century: Russell's paradox, black's paradox. Black is inclusive of all color and colors without failing to be itself. It is inclusive insofar as it is itself. Black lacks for nothing.

Do we not see a similar technique at work in this younger generation of black artists working in and with black and blackness? One might think in this vein of Chicago-based artist Rashid Johnson's 2015 piece *Cosmic Slop "Bitter"*. The work is, according to the Guggenheim Museum, "created from a concoction of wax mixed with a black West African soap that is often used for the treatment of sensitive skin. Inscribed with the artist's dense mark-making, this work merges the modernist tradition of the black monochrome with the cultural resonances of its unconventional materials." These "cultural resonances" not only situate the artist within a

transnational and diasporic community of African descent, but also, by raising the problem of sensitive black skin, within a history of the body in which such skin has been rendered sensitive – to physical irritants, to physical assault, to denigration, and to celebration as well. This is, after all, *black soap*, not white, soothing and cleansing dark skin with darkness. The mark-making indicates the traditional customs of decorative scarification in the region, in which practitioners "place superficial incisions on their skin, using stones, glass or knives, amounting to permanent body decoration that communicates a myriad of cultural expressions."²⁰ As well, we cannot help but recall the disfiguring scars of the slaver's whip and chain in the historic instance, and the systemic sexual violation it implies. The latter point is underscored by the title, borrowed from the hit 1973 song of the same name by Parliament Funkadelic. "Cosmic Slop" is a lament and a tribute to a poor black woman, and mother of five, coerced into sex work by the combined effects of race, class, and gender domination. The soap may soothe and cleanse, but its taste, like the slop it washes away, is bitter. And all of this conveyed through the formal manipulation of tone and texture in the abstraction of black



Kimberly M. Becoat, *Absence of Subjection*, 2013. Rice paper, stones, mesh, acrylic and twine on paper. Courtesy of the artist.

monochrome.

Finally, consider Kimberly Becoat's 2013 *Absence of Subjection*, "a work that addresses remnants of past travels by Black Americans – either on their escapes to freedom or in their migrations from south to north, or in their displacement at present." In the artist's view, this work "serves as an homage to their souls." Created using a Sumi ink wash and black acrylic on treated rice paper, *Absence of Subjection* draws from a centuries-old East Asian painting style whose goal "is not simply to reproduce the appearance of the subject, but to capture its spirit" as well. The use of this style alludes to a much larger temporal frame than the several centuries of African American history, relativizing and destabilizing the seeming permanence of slavery, segregation, policing, and mass imprisonment. It also marshals what is historically an elite form to honor the lives and deaths of the most common and lowly. The mesh wire, twine, sand, and stone that lend density, structure, and granularity to the folds of delicate paper – like the sturdy bones hidden beneath vulnerable skin or the thick curly hair growing from its scalp – also cite the history and present of confinement behind iron or steel bars and the lethal ropes used to bind hands or feet and strangle or break necks. Travel is, then, a deliberately imprecise term here; it frustrates the idea of volition or will; it renders problematic notions like origin and destination; it suggests movements both passive (like displacements or abductions) and active (like escapes or migrations). Which is also to say it refers to the struggle of actual living, the striving of a people, of *the* people.²¹

The stunning ambiguity, and perhaps irony, of "absence" designated in the title relates to both the absences produced by subjection – the devastation and destruction of these epoch-making "high crimes against the flesh"²² – and the (real or imagined) absence of subjection itself, what is present before, after, beneath, and in excess of that subjection along the way. We are brought into being – as potentiality – by the same processes by which we are subordinated by power.²³ In other words, we are or could be or become *blacks* if only we could affirm "our fundamental dependency on a [color] we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency"²⁴; if we could love black, if we could dwell in blackness, the space of refusal and imagination. Blackening the world thus might begin by reframing the issues of greatest ethical concern with respect to those most blackened by their effects; it begins in curiosity about these effects. To think the terms of political analysis and mobilization, to say nothing of aesthetic practice and judgment,

through a black or blackened lens is to think from the point of constitutive exclusion from those very terms, which is to say freedom from those very terms insofar as that exclusion is affirmed.²⁵ Black is generous and generative, inclusive and encompassing. Black is color, noncolor, and all colors. All colors are initially, eventually black, but they cannot give or give back unless and until they see themselves and others as such. Black is and is not (only) itself. To see or not to see is the question of blackness itself: "You could build a world out of need or you could hold / everything black and see."

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Portions of this essay were first delivered as a lecture to Professor Randy Cutler's Chroma seminar at the Emily Carr University of Art + Design in 2016. My thanks to EJ for inspiration, direction, and collaboration in the ongoing project; to Professor Cutler for the generous invitation and hospitality; and to the many students and faculty in attendance for very engaging, critical feedback. Any limitations or errors are, of course, my own.

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1

For an introduction to the political orientation of the Movement for Black Lives, see “A Vision for Black Lives: Policy Demands for Black Power, Freedom and Justice” (2016) <https://policy.m4bl.org/>. For a critical analysis of #BlackLivesMatter, see Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016). For an account of abolitionism’s historical role as source of inspiration and instruction for progressive and radical movements more generally, see Manisha Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

2

See Jared Sexton, “The Vel of Slavery: Tracking the Figure of the Unsovereign,” *Critical Sociology*, vol. 42, no. 4–5 (2016): 583–597, 593. I argue there that abolition is not only the historical movement to end the racial domination of chattel slavery and its varied permutations. It is also, by definition and of necessity, a movement to abolish the coloniality of power in the fullest sense, driven by a radical will that is antiracist, feminist, queer, and socialist at least. It is the movement that encompasses – in the dual sense of causing and including – the whole range of left movements in their most radical form and function. It is, or could become, the true movement of movements.

3

Cullors and Bernard were in public conversation on related topics at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles last summer. See Jessica Roy, “MOCA’s Black Lives Matter Event Turns Into Community Forum,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 8, 2016 <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-black-lives-matter-moca-grief-20160707-snap-story.html>. A podcast of the event is available online <http://www.moca.org/program/what-is-contemporary-black-lives-matter-patrisse-cullors-and-tanya-lucia-bernard-in-conversation>.

4

For an overview of events, see “How Are Artists Supporting Black Lives Matter?” *The Chart*, vol. 1, no. 8 (2016) <http://thechart.me/black-lives-matter-reading-list/>.

5

Tom Vanderbilt, “Darkness Visible,” *Cabinet* 12 (2003) <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/12/vanderbilt.php>.

6

There is a conversation to be had between what I am trying to formulate (with the help of many others thinking in the wake of afro-pessimism), François Laruelle’s thoughts on “the black

universe” (as an aspect of his larger non-philosophy), and the critical interpretations of his interlocutors. Andrew Culp recently attempted such a theoretical encounter but, unfortunately, the engagement with afro-pessimism in particular and black studies more generally is so glib and impatient that the statement fails to be anything except a rather presumptuous and, I have to say, obscurely motivated chastisement. And the treatments of Laruelle and company, though more affirmative, are no more precise. Basic exposition and some sense of rationale, prior to any attempted analysis, let alone critique, would go a long way toward promoting genuine intellectual engagement. As such, it does little to advance any of the projects evoked. Culp, in a sense, repeats Ad Reinhardt’s error (discussed below) in reverse: instead of imposing the false dichotomy of concept/symbol, he assumes it can be bypassed in advance. See Andrew Culp, “Afro-Pessimism as Aesthetic Blackness? Putting the Pessimism in Afro-Pessimism,” *NON*, January 8 (2016) <http://non.copypriot.com/afro-pessimism-as-aesthetic-blackness-putting-the-pessimism-in-afro-pessimism/>; Eugene Thacker et al., *Dark Nights of the Universe* (Miami: (NAME) Publications, 2013).

7

Paul La Farge, “Colors / Black,” *Cabinet* 36 (2009–10) <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/36/lafarge.php>.

8

Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” *Criticism*, vol. 50, no. 2 (2008): 177–218. Reinhardt’s “art-as-art” is not to be confused with the Romantic notion of “art for art’s sake” (e.g., Théophile Gautier’s *l’art pour l’art*). The former is an aesthetic strategy for isolating elements of appearance, the latter an aesthetic philosophy for isolating art from an acknowledged political function. See, respectively, Barbara Rose, *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) and Elizabeth Prettejohn, *Art for Art’s Sake: Aestheticism in Victorian Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). For more on Reinhardt, see Michael Corris, *Ad Reinhardt* (New York: Reaktion Books, 2008).

9

Michael Sciam, *Piet Mondrian: An Explanation of the Work*, trans. unknown (Bormio: Associazione nuova culturale, 2006), 137. Also available online →. For more, see *Inside Out Victory Boogie Woogie: A Material History of Mondrian’s Masterpiece*, eds. Maarten Van Bommel, Hans Janssen and Ron Spronk (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

10
Moten, "The Case of Blackness," 193.

11
Ibid., 189.

12
Rose, *Art as Art*, 86.

13
Moten, "The Case of Blackness," 192. Taylor, of course, is no folk artist and he is no stranger to abstraction. He is a paragon of abstraction, in fact, a pioneer of the free jazz movement, and for this reason maybe the most central source of guidance for Moten, who considers Taylor to be a uniquely brilliant artist and theorist as well as a representative of the unparalleled power of the black musical tradition more broadly. Taylor's 1966 magnum opus, *Unit Structures*, is something like a musical Mondrian or vice versa. For more on Taylor's life and work, see Howard Mandel, *Miles, Ornette, Cecil: Jazz Beyond Jazz* (New York: Routledge, 2008) and A. B. Spellman, *Four Jazz Lives* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004) as well as Moten's own engagement in his *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), especially Chapter 1.

14
Moten, "The Case of Blackness," 191.

15
Ibid., 177.

16
Ibid., 190.

17
"For Reinhardt, the multiplicity of symbolic meanings that have been attached to the color black – sinfulness, evil, femininity, maternity, formlessness, and the 'yearning for whiteness in the West that counters and accompanies these meanings' – are and must be detachable from the absence (of difference) that defines and is internal to the color black. This detachment is in the interest of 'the negativeness of black', which interests Reinhardt" (Ibid., 191).

18
Stan Mir, "And Then There Is Using Whatever Happens: Quentin Morris' 'Untitled'," *Hyperallergic*, May 21, 2016 <http://hyperallergic.com/300498/and-then-there-is-using-whatever-happens-quentin-morris-untitled/>. Morris's statements here may seem to accord with Reinhardt, insofar as both profess a desire to engage the color black against or apart from its "negative cultural mythologies," but it would be a mistake to conflate their respective approaches. Reinhardt takes the contest over black's symbolic dimension, offering either affirmation or refutation of its negative cultural

mythologies, to be a barrier to the expression of its conceptual power. So, while Reinhardt does not seek to redeem black with the production of positive images, say, he neutralizes his work as a symbolic intervention per se. And, of course, there is no way to remain neutral on a moving train, as the people's historian Howard Zinn often reminded us. Morris, however, frames what Moten calls "the cultural and political discourse of black pathology" as a structuring antagonism, one that can be challenged and re-signified, perhaps, but not resolved, much less eschewed or evaded. Moreover, that critical engagement with the antagonism of anti-blackness is, for Morris, the very means by which the conceptual power of black is activated, the untranscendable horizon of its creative power. Consider that, despite and across the myriad transformations in contemporary art, Morris has continued to work in black monochrome for well over fifty years!

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A. M. Weaver, "Artist Quentin Morris Explores the Color Black," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 19, 2016 http://www.philly.com/philly/entertainment/arts/20160519_Artist_Quentin_Morris_explores_the_color_black.html.

20
Katherine Brooks, "This Is The Last Generation of Scarification in Africa," *Huffington Post*, September 23, 2014 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/23/scarification_n_5850882.html.

21
Becoat's body of work to date seems as much an adventure in form, color, and texture as an extended meditation on what it means to inhabit conditions of unrelenting racial domination, in its gendered and sexual dimensions. See, for instance, her entire "urban hottentot series" as well as her pieces on racial residential segregation (*blink* – 'gentrification', *blink* – *gentrification* #2) and scientific exploitation (*soon henrietta come hela*, *blackness all inside*) <http://kimberlybecoat.squarospace.com/>.

22
Hortense Spillers, *Black, White and In Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 206. Space does not allow for an elaboration of the several concepts converging in this oft-cited phrase. This includes Spillers' recourse to the notion of "high crimes" – a political charge brought peculiarly against government officials or others in positions of great authority for dereliction of duty and, in the US context, leading to impeachment – and Spillers' enigmatic notion of "the flesh," particularly as it is distinguished

from the body as a figure of corporeal integrity and finitude. Much has been debated of late regarding the flesh/body distinction and the exchanges have often generated more heat than light. But aside from the evident theological reference and resonance involved in any conception of flesh (e.g., the flesh viz. the spirit and the word), we would need to think as well on this count about Spillers' re-articulation of certain arguments from de Certeau, who Spillers cites directly on various occasions, and from Merleau-Ponty, whose "indirect ontology" provides, I think, a background interlocution with Spillers' most famous interventions. See Michel de Certeau, "Tools for Body-Writing," *Intervention* 21/22 (1988): 7-11 and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968). The flesh, for de Certeau, is a sort of carnal raw material that is inscribed or textualized into legible embodiment by the range of economic, legal, political, social practices. The practices that produce legible embodiment can also, by that same token, render the body as illegible and formless, i.e., as flesh. The flesh, for Merleau-Ponty, is neither a pre-cultural state of nature nor a degraded (natural) status to which the (cultural) body could be reduced (though he had much to say about the latter potential), but rather a term for something like the fundamental ontological connection of all that exists (and not only all life) across the divisions of nature/culture, self/other, mind/body and so on. High crimes against the flesh perpetrated by the regime of racial slavery might, then, be read in at least two ways: 1) as a crime committed against nobody and thus no legible subject of law and/or 2) as a crime committed against that undivided primordial being which is neither (yet or still) subject nor (yet or still) object. Depending on the inflection, then, differentiation or undifferentiation is the problem. And, moreover, the high crimes allegation would seem rather fitting here because enslavement in this sense represents not simply a violent transgression against another, however severe and permanent, but also a fundamental political irresponsibility toward fleshly embodiment and/or an absolute ethical disregard for the flesh of the world. I note, in this vein, the recurrent use of the term "lifeworld" in Spillers' writing (from Husserl to Habermas and beyond), suggesting a broader and more sustained critical engagement with the phenomenological tradition on her part that has yet to be addressed fully in the secondary literature. One has only to recall this note from Merleau-Ponty to suspect the richness of the exploration: "Do a psychoanalysis of Nature: it is the flesh, the mother" (267).

How might that psychoanalysis unfold once it is admitted that these most basic terms – nature, flesh, mother – are the very ways and means for the production of racial difference, and hence freedom and captivity, as such? I hope to take up this and related questions elsewhere.

23
See, for instance, Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997). Saidiya Hartman's contemporaneous *Scenes of Subjection: Slavery, Terror and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) elaborates on points found in Butler but also, due to her stronger psychoanalytic inflections and closer attention to conditions of political economic and socio-legal extremity, diverges in her further complication of notions of agency, resistance, and transformation.

24
Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 2.

25
This piece was written before I had the opportunity to read Zakiyah Jackson's recent article "Losing Manhood," *qui parle*, vol. 25, no. 1–2 (2016): 95–136. I take to heart her central point that blackness is not simply excluded from the principle terms of modern human being from the dominant vantage, but rather forcibly included as the permanently degraded form of human animality, i.e., a racist (de)humanization. And so suggesting that exclusion might be a negative condition of possibility for freedom is, bearing this in mind, no mean feat and so may need to be rethought altogether. I hope to take up some of the illuminating arguments and provocative questions posed there in future work.