

David Marriott

On Decadence: *Bling Bling*

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e-flux journal #79 — february 2017 David Marriott
On Decadence: *Bling Bling*

1. Decadence

Let us imagine that “black lives matter” is a scandalous, even decadent claim, characterized, as the definition has it, by excess or luxury. One cannot understand this decadence outside of a certain moral politico-philosophical economy. If the virtues of restraint, industriousness, thriftiness have tended to be characterized as white, blackness is often construed as a *desiring* in whose meaning excess, or luxury, signifies a sociocultural impoverishment that is morally bankrupt. This trope takes on the amplitude of an all-encompassing theme in the discourse of anti-blackness in the West. It compels a view of blackness that, in relation to sovereign life, reveals an experience of excess enjoyed beyond consummation and one that is socially irresponsible. So what of this extravagant expenditure itself? If claiming “black lives matter” is to risk a certain exorbitance, this is not because there is any certainty about the meaning of black life, but because asserting that black life matters foregrounds those attributes by which blackness is assumed to have a value in culture. Black is a being that is somehow both useless and endlessly driven by consummation: *bling bling*.

This “decadence” rests on a twofold movement: unless blackness is put to work as the figure of endless, unproductive labor, its “natural” course will assert itself as an exaggeratedly inflated figure of inflation; or, rather, the way that blackness puffs itself up when possessed of capital is actually a sign of decadent inutility, as in the case of an excess noteworthy for its unproductive labor: *bling bling*. Since whiteness is therefore *the* privileged figure of productive capital, it represents, paradoxically, not only the limit that separates production from conspicuous consumption but also what separates racial wealth from racial poverty.

In this essay my aim is to explore how this racially derived notion of decadence always already relies on a perverse association of blackness with excess, upon which is founded an entire analysis of culture. For *bling bling* not only transcends class as well as gender; it makes it impossible to distinguish blackness from a racist economy of jouissance that, potentially, can invade and submerge every subject, person, or thing. Accordingly, if blackness denotes a profligacy that exceeds the moral economy of the subject, this is because it broaches the limits of being in general.

We could say that black life is the very experience of a life whose bling involves the exhaustion and degeneration of life itself, and one that necessarily involves a gradual separation of blackness and being. And this is

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A silver solid cast of wearable vampire fangs presented as advertised and sold at customgoldgrillz.com.

why black life paradoxically coincides with a decadence that can only enrich itself as absolute privation, and an enjoyment that can only enslave itself as a discredited imposture of working capital.

The coincidence of decadence and blackness remains unthought in black political philosophy, which continues to offer us an image of *bling bling* as that without use, or as that which uses up utility nihilistically, unnaturally. The moral traditionalism of this reading, however, opens to a reading of decadence that is itself decadent, or that at least produces a hyperbolic reading that overflows its own limits.

This failure to recognize our inherited understanding of black being as decadent being – or decadent nonbeing – makes establishing the sovereignty of black life difficult. This decadence summons, as a dialectical counterpart, a desire for discipline and subjection. Here, “black lives matter” meets the discourse of an anti-black presumption. Blackness, understood as decadence, must be restricted and resisted, made to respect force, for without opposition it will open civil life to the chaos of a demotic thematization whose consumption promises only pathological enjoyment. *Bling bling* is why black life matters to those who crave its substantive subordination. It is because blackness expresses the sign or movement of a slavish enjoyment that it is assumed to be naturally enslaving. Blackness is no longer a life or world, but an affliction. Blackness invades, submerges, ending not in existence in the traditional sense, but as something socially dead, like a zombie, driven only to multiply itself, whose sheer multiplicity reveals a decadent impropriety, one that frightens the white petty-bourgeois mind. Blackness is remiss because it manifests a being whose indebtedness has no remission. Four motifs support this configuration: pleasure, profligacy, waste, and excess.

2. The Bucket (or the Worth of Black Life)

“What’s the difference between a nigger and a bucket of shit? The bucket.”

I came across this graffiti in the toilet of my school when I was a young lad. My first thought was about the bucket: it marks a difference that is not really a difference between two things that are judged to be the same, but for the “joke” to work the bucket also has to first signify their separation. The joke depends on the presupposition that there is already a resemblance between blackness and shit: the bucket reinforces the resemblance precisely through its separation. My second thought was to ask, why this desire for resemblance? What is at stake in this filthy projection? Why do whites

seem driven to process, or recategorize, blackness as a fecal-object, to sequester it or evacuate it as essentially wasteful? Is blackness horrid because it is *itself* a filthy form, or more horrid because of its filthy resemblance to wastefulness?

Since what is at work in this idea, its orthodoxy and politics, is the doctrine that blackness is polluting because it represents something excrescent, it is no surprise that “segregation” has always played a significant role in anti-black discourse. It’s a discourse that can only see blackness as a monstrous, polluting object. Blackness persists as the always already retrievable (bucketed) figure of human being emptied of its humanness: and this evacuation is itself the separation of human being from a black phenomenal matter that is shitty and abject. It is clear that such associations derive from a politics of disgust that views blackness as a shameful, dirty incongruity irreconcilable with the categories of moral and social hygiene. How “smelly” is blackness as metaphor? How “clean” is race as a concept? And does the very ability to ask that question manifest an irreconcilable imbalance between the categories of race and pollution? As racially abject, the resemblance of blackness to human being is a resemblance that anti-blackness has to dispose of: it has to be evacuated. Yet the desire to turn black resemblance into shit appears to be constitutive of whiteness. To ask about the ontological status of blackness is to risk letting whiteness escape up its own official voiding. The evacuation of blackness – as content and form – certainly does not depend on whether blacks can ever avoid this avoidance. And this perhaps also means that the notion of a voided yet permanently felt excrescence needs a metaphoric bucket to relieve it of its own basely material rhetoric. We can and should note that anti-blackness is a discourse of assholes; the question is, should the matter of black life always act as its permanent laxative?

Now, some thirty years later, this toilet incident reminds me of another allegorical bucket. In his famous “Atlanta Exposition Address” (1895), Booker T. Washington tells the following story:

A ship lost at sea for many days suddenly sighted a friendly vessel. From the mast of the unfortunate vessel was seen the signal: “Water, water, we die of thirst.” The answer from the friendly vessel at once came back, “Cast down your bucket where you are ...” The captain of the distressed vessel, at last heeding the injunction, cast down his bucket and it came up full of fresh, sparkling water from the mouth of the

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Amazon River. To those of my race who depend on bettering their condition in a foreign land ... I would say cast down your bucket where you are[;] cast it down in making friends in every manly way of the people of all races by whom we are surrounded.¹

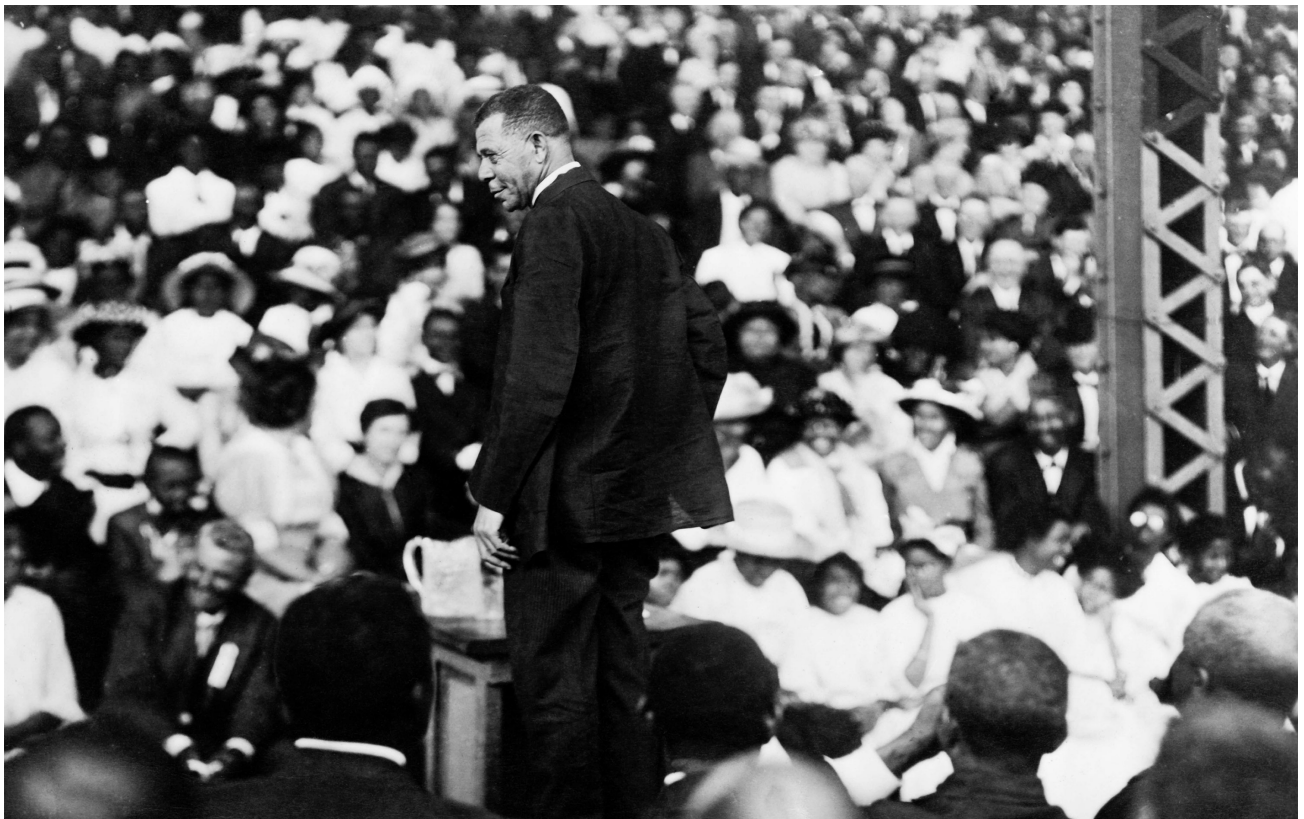
This passage echoes, in its own rhetoric, what it means to be cast down (benighted) and, conversely, what it means to be brought up (from slavery); it is a passage where literal and figurative meanings are cast down, repeatedly, only to be raised up as allegorical signs of raced enlightenment. In this justly infamous speech advocating social segregation and economic integration in the US – “In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress” – the figure of *segregation* is, once again, employed in the defense of hierarchy (113). And, as with the bathroom graffiti, a bucket functions as the metaphor of a separation that implicitly relies on a resemblance between the obscenity of an unwanted intimacy and its racial transgression. As signs of an expenditure that is potentially ruinous, intimacy and transgression cannot be

absolutely separated. The tides of racism that flowed through the South after emancipation were, among other things, both transgressive (“lawless”) and an obscene example of racial “animosities and suspicions” (114).

All this derives from the literal casting down of a bucket: the lowering of the bucket into water that miraculously reveals itself as race capital is itself a transformation of metaphor into allegory. When capital triumphs, Washington avers, blackness ceases to be bereft. The stereotype of black abjection is preserved as the history that must be cancelled out even as it is raised up by the manufacture of a mutually enriching ideal of productive self-creation. Never mind the question of *how* the boat came to be lost, the question of *how* blackness was rendered abject; the fact is that it *is* lost. Washington continues:

Cast it down in agriculture, mechanics, in commerce, in domestic service, and in the professions. And in this connection it is well to bear in mind that whatever other sins the South may be called to bear, when it comes to business, pure and simple, it is in the South that the Negro is given a man’s chance in the commercial world, and in nothing is this Exposition more eloquent

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Booker T. Washington speaks to a crowd, 1902.

than in emphasizing this chance. Our greatest danger is that in the great leap from slavery to freedom we may overlook the fact that the masses of us are to live by the productions of our hands, and fail to keep in mind that we shall prosper in proportion as we learn to dignify and glorify common labour and put brains and skill into the common occupations of life; shall prosper in proportion as we learn to draw the line between the superficial and the substantial, the ornamental gewgaws of life and the useful. No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem. It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top. Nor should we permit our grievances to overshadow our opportunities. (112)

When Washington describes capitalism as a “man’s chance” (as the fashioner of symbolic value), it is because the standard of what a black *man* should be is held up as one who is docile, submissive, “devotional,” and self-sacrificing (112). Similarly, this deployment of a manly “mammy” figure as the most perfect worker transposes the threat of the black man taking his *chance* in the nation’s most intimate spaces into an ideal of fidelity in which docility and productivity go hand in hand. And yet the exercising of that chance cannot be entirely separated from the fears of licentiousness and envy that also dominated America’s race story post-emancipation. Washington, paradoxically enough, must thus usurp this *bling bling* by casting up the ideal of race segregation in which blacks are “patient, faithful, law-abiding, and unresentful” subjects (113). For a man who extolled the virtues of thrift and social hygiene there is thus a rhetorical luxuriousness here that is far from abject. How the abject puts to “work” its own abjection seems to appear here as an evacuation that is itself figuratively productive. Indeed, how else do we read this extravagant allegorical irony that extols thrift by furnishing proof of its sumptuous (yet burdensome) returns, or that turns “animosities and suspicions” into figurative profit by ending with the “absolute” claim that whites too must learn nothing less than the “willing obedience” of feminized blackness (114)?

Here, in Washington’s figurative bucket, no recasting of race is conceivable without repression, and no repression (thus no mutual wealth) is conceivable without refashioning the referential meaning of race as *bling bling*. And the horror and anxiety over nigga desire cannot be allayed without reproducing the rhetorical flourishes that make the nigger no longer docile

or definable as such. In the law of capital (and this is valid for all races; it is the law of race), this means that nigger inutility cannot be fashioned into profit unless one suspends the logic of domination of one race over another, including, of course, the economic suspicion of blackness as nonutilitarian value. The black worker, in which this ultimate justification of racial capitalism resides, never accumulates in order to spend, but only ever works in order to sacrifice himself to labor. Consequently, he designates a being who is always spent and appropriated. The abusive appropriation of blackness must end for the recasting of its labor to become meaningful as capital. When Washington says that this is the manly way of being useful, he implies that this is just what racial citizenship is. In this difficult marriage between manliness and capital, the bucket acts *like* (and this word marks an analogy or resemblance which is neither sovereign nor natural) a racial compromise (read here from the point of view of an equivalence between white and black men). Race is *like* capital once the former is isolated from the performative or cognitive rhetoric of *unreproductive* (nigga) labor. Instead, race must be determined on the basis of its fungibility, that is to say, its figural or allegorical productivity (as nigger). (“Nigga” is always thereby cast as the inconsequential affect of “nigger” being, a distinction that will occupy the final part of this essay.) Here the attempt to capitalize blackness by turning it into rhetorical profit relies on flattery to appease white despotism, but Washington’s stern moralism is itself bound to a certain extravagance. It seems to me that in this logic of mutual need and benefit, which here takes on the figure of a compact, the metonymic movement of *casting* could equally mean that the language of race will be abolished by capital, without forgetting that capital itself requires voluntary servitude by *all* classes to “the mandates of [race] law” (114). According to this second reading, the casting (shaping, fashioning) by white and black men of the (racial-wealth) bucket is enabling because each has robbed the other of plenty and left both impoverished and impotent. If blackness is to become publicly productive, it only becomes so where the two activities of casting overlap, in that a utilitarian devotion to profit is mutually binding, and “the opportunity to earn a dollar ... is worth infinitely more than the opportunity to spend a dollar” (114).

From this perspective, earning is a veritable production: no longer of learning French or going to the opera (two parallel examples of black – but not white – frivolity), but literally turning blackness into *work*: the (consumed) ever excreted product of a chain of desires which

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An artist's rendition of what the new twenty-dollar bill might look like.

reserves for the black the abject *pleasure* of an endlessly consumable product that, in one and the same impulse, consumes itself in order to better be consumed by the orifices of whiteness.

This is the representation that, for me, is part of the profound and constant conviction that it will never be possible to liberate blackness from decadence, for decadence is, simultaneously, its authority and its fate. Or perhaps, even more consequentially: the persistence of this representation means that decadence can't stop haunting the *theory* of blackness, which is, perhaps, what is most decadently fervent and insistent about it.

3. Corpus Zero Sum

What that theory still needs to address is how blackness becomes the primary referent of a pleasure that enslaves itself, or that consumes itself as enslaved. In this connection, I would like to turn to a renowned essay by Hortense Spillers in which the reproduction of gender under racial slavery is discussed in terms of grammar, sovereignty, and naming.

In "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987), Spillers reminds us that slavery doesn't only take violent and murderous forms, but also has more symbolic manifestations, such as the more or less general reduction of black being to a corpus defined as *flesh as value*. She denounces the corporeal-carceral violence by which this corpus is produced and clarifies the cultural and linguistic fact by which this corpus is made to express its excruciating resemblance to a commodity. She sets out the ways in which the captive body is made zero sum through its real and figurative *renaming as flesh*, a notion that derives from the slave's ontological insecurity as subject, an insecurity – and denudation – which beats up against it on all sides in the hold of its making. The captive body bears the wound of this insecurity; it becomes branded as the locus of an insecure-interval removed from any history or symbolic value. This insecurity conjoins two meanings that are decisive: blackness approaches the world, or comes into the world, as a void that is constituted out of an *entirely new semiotics of privation*; on the other hand, the part played by black cultural disinheritance continues to have a profound impact on black life and history. It is, lastly, to restore the figure of the slave to history – beyond the *grammar* of race, with its coded reference to "externally imposed meanings and uses" – that Spillers sets out to revise slavery's grammar which, as gender, has no "symbolic integrity."²

The socio-political order of the New World
... with its human sequence written in

blood, represents for its African and indigenous peoples a scene of actual mutilation, dismemberment, and exile. First of all, their New-World, diasporic plight marked a theft of the body – a willful and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire. Under these conditions, we lose at least gender difference in the outcome, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific. But this body, at least from the point of view of the captive community, focuses a private and particular space, at which point of convergence biological, sexual, social, cultural, linguistic, ritualistic, and psychological fortunes join. This profound intimacy of interlocking detail is disrupted, however, by externally imposed meanings and uses: 1) the captive body becomes the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality; 2) at the same time – in stunning contradiction – the captive body reduces to a thing, becoming being for the captor; 3) in this absence from a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of "otherness"; 4) as a category of "otherness," the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general "powerlessness," resonating through various centers of human and social meaning. (67)

So nothing lies outside this more general state of powerlessness, not even language, which, as Spillers shows, reproduces the terms of racial ownership by which slave offspring are "possessed" and fathered "without whatever benefit of patrimony" (74). In this way, by means of the loss of the patronymic, Spillers shows how the confusion of tongues becomes a figure for the confusion of inheritance in the Middle Passage: the literal suspension of the grammar of kinship has been succeeded by the issuance of owned-created property; and this was both the achievement of slavery and its failing; in short, it gave birth to a subject that can only perpetuate, in consequence, *the decadent excess of social death as its own most extravagant expenditure*.

Spillers shows the importance of the invasion-elision of black kinship ties; using the term "ungendering," she focuses on how fathering-reproduction relies on a production that is also an evacuation or emptying-out of

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Iceberg Slim languidly poses for the camera.

kinship. The slave child is exposed through its servitude to an elision that delivers it over to insecure kinless being. There are exclusively historical and social reasons for this transformation, which emerged alongside the modern capital-plantation system, but what I want to stress here is the affect of the slave's *obedience to its own extravagant elision*, which *demand*s that it reproduce itself as a being that has no symbolic immanence as a modern subject.

And it was because the condition of the black slave was that of a zero sum that s/he could be so decadently stripped of human being and turned into a commodity. And in this way it is as the excess of a generalized impropriety that white plantation culture managed to line up sexual interest with its idea of virtue, the idea of a forced and forcefully used-up subject with that of *partus sequitur ventrem* – literally “that which is brought forth follows the womb.” The whole idea of an extravagant, socially dead subject issues from this condition of the slave, whose systematic effacement as a zero sum is the route to its wealthy reconversion – all this is described effectively by Spillers as a “perversion of judicial power,” but there is no outside of this perversity by which black property becomes identified with a pleasure that enslaves itself and is, therefore, socially dead (78).

Here again, Spillers can only see the sexual intimacy between masters and slaves as an example of “unrelieved crisis” in “the customary lexis of sexuality” (76). But such intimacy cannot be said to be perverse by virtue of humanism, since sexuality here isn't so much outside the customary laws or lexis of human recognition as it is the extravagant enjoyment of its destruction – the first act of which is to proscribe pleasure as a paradoxically useful, profitable remnant. Let us say that this is an enjoyment that always signifies destruction as a “property *plus*,” in which coitus is an excretory reabsorption (65). I am deliberately choosing an oxymoron to speak of the unity here between ejaculation and enjoyment-domination. This locution permits us to glimpse how the raping and torture of slaves is always a pleasurable enrichment in which the right to power is bound up with the operation of violence and rule. That pleasure is moreover an operation that makes the slave, shorn of all sentiment and symbolic value, enslaved by its own passionate attachments to reproduce life as social death. At the same time, this presumed desire for enslavement contains another consequence: For if mastery is always presumed to be sovereign in its rapacious domination, doesn't the master too end up submitting his desire to property law? Is not this extravagant enrichment through sex already slavish in having

its issue made into flesh, in losing its ancestral name to flesh, in reproducing a profit that borrows from social death a lien of social virtue as symbolic extravagance? That is why, even with the death of the slave, the endless expenditure of mastery remains the negative truth of a supernumerary economy, rather than the sign of a lasting sovereign power. This would also mean that all racial mastery is necessarily servile. But this conclusion is immediately impaired by another: such social death meets its necessary limit in a kind of decadence that cannot finally be captured by the moral legacy of humanism, and whose pleasure cannot be said to be located either exclusively in language (whether of nouns or names) or in a sovereignty that is slavishly perverse.

4. The Spending of Thrifts

The languages of extravagance and excess by which the idea of black life is segregated takes on a new emotional power in postbellum America. The idea of profligacy – whether social or subjective – makes of thriftiness a moral duty, in which the very notion of self-restraint is racially determined: the act of reining in, or better still, the act of self-repression, encodes a social hygiene whose sources are racial and, therefore, not natural. Hence, the failure of blacks to acquire the skills necessary for the accumulation of capital or money is the result of a specific kind of civic failure, according to which the bestowal of liberty in postbellum America vanishes beneath another desire that precedes it, and that establishes blackness as the point where “a general looseness of the passions” matches a “propensity to gratify and satiate every thirst.”³ Where does this discourse of *bling bling* come from? From various sources, each of which institutes race as a moral value, as ideology: for the white bourgeois and worker, from the nineteenth century to the present, blackness is a degraded form of being that cannot as such conserve itself; or, it is seen as an impoverished way of being that can only be put to work as a supplementary *labor* (for of course work is niggerdom), which means that it cannot profit from itself as capital. In all these readings, blackness is seen as both exorbitant and impoverished, both decadent and deliriously perverse. Its lack of restraint suggests both the collapse of capitalist values and a threat that puts an end to civic duty: the substitution of private consumption for collective duty is here linked to a more general anxiety about an *entity* driven to negate the very idea of accumulation – hence the extravagant excess of a being that is seen to come from a nihilistic, menacing, undeserving need to consume *everything*. So when Tocqueville spoke of the virtues of thrift as

“interest rightly understood,” the word “rightly” denotes the racial recognition of both a frugality that liberates and a black consumption that can only enslave.⁴ Desires and passions are “masters which it is necessary to contend with,” he continues, but the slave has “learned only to submit and obey.” Or again: if freedom is “the end [*telos*] of all just restraint,” excess can never be free, for whatever the cost to ethics and the state, freedom can, paradoxically, only be just when it freely constrains or inhibits itself.⁵ In the history of race in America, decadence is not only the effect of bourgeois notions of excess but also the effect of the perceived *unconstraints* of black being and desire.

It is therefore not surprising perhaps that a black counterdiscourse emerges in which blacks are urged to “cultivate honesty, punctuality, propriety of conduct.”⁶ If to be rightfully bourgeois means that one must cultivate signs of righteous self-government, which are taken as a natural fact, the belief seems to be that blacks can only earn their rightful place in society by turning en masse to a market-led devotion of thrift: in these counterdiscourses, blackness is thus identified as an active, rather than docile, labor, whose gratification is derived from the subjugation to market values.

What is new here is the idea of black utilitarianism, which Washington and other writers introduced and described.⁷ In the field of such rhetorical labor, masculinity, conceived as the productive form, is contrasted to the feminine space of thrift, which is the duty of *the one who consumes*. Here in the spending of thrifts real black men work; they are not castrated sojourners in the marketplace of capital.

A second response, however, challenges the very discourse of thrift and the conditions that lead blacks to utter it. Opposing “nigga” to the very idea of work, and first of all, to racial capital’s reproduction, this challenge reveals a commitment that is itself decadent. In serving his identity, the nigga breaks with any utilitarian concept of blackness. Niggas represent what thrift *represses*; as a signifier, “nigga” subverts every utilitarian classification of blacks as laboring being. Inasmuch as “niggerdom” (so properly named) implies the literalizing of blackness *as* work, niggas compel us to conceive of black discourse no longer in terms of a utilitarian and consequently slavish nomenclature, but as the very exercise of an extravagant expenditure; for example, *bling bling*, which is doubtless the nigga’s most persistent sign, belongs structurally to decadence⁸; this is, one might say, its scandal, and it is this scandal which unites blackness and jouissance, so that each moment of expense is

both absolutely enjoyed and absolutely meaningless. We can even, with a certain temerity, give this decadence a precise definition; hence, it is not, or at least not primarily, a question of saying that the nigga contests the institution of capital, or that it ignores its necessary conservatism, but of acknowledging that *bling bling* is completely opposed to the moral version of racial uplift, whose usefulness consists in its subjugation to the figuration of labor. Labor in itself is not the repression of blackness, but neither is there anything particularly liberating about it; if capitalist labor produces a failure to liberate blackness from slavish desire, it is so for two reasons:

1. The nigga, whatever its political status, is always in excess of the idealizations of bourgeois opinion. As such, the nigga questions the status of restraint in black history and culture, however virtuous or prudential it may be; confronting the conflation of black moral life with the parsimonious conservation of civic manhood, nigga describes a world that is in excess of the salvific habits of wise saving; instead of thrift and economic betterment, niggas “know” that cash money *is* desire: by which is meant a freedom that is not restricted to an idealized, deferred consummation, but a preparation for the *bling bling* that is zero sum. Rather than read desire “symbolically” – or “niggardly” – we can say that nigga does not refer to a temporal verb, but to a presence that cannot be identified and gathered into a presence, a category *that cannot be put to work as a meaningful category*. This is to say, to be nigga is not to reduce desire to use-value, or to treat black life as the expression of what is meaningfully, usefully knowable. We can call this nonrestricted meaning a categorical shift from duty to surplus, since it involves a displacement from *telos* to *eros*, corpus to jouissance. Nigga is nowise an anxiety about work as a system of accumulation and deferral. On the contrary, nigga expresses experience not as a limit-work, but as a rapid transversal with respect to the codes of consumption. The writings of Iceberg Slim are exemplary here, in that they contain the whole image-repertoire of this transition shorn of morality or humanism. Or again: in nigga narratives (*Pimp*; *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*), the moment of conversion (from slave to free, black to human) is the consequence of a profound dissolution, and not the cause of a wrong to be sublated or made symbolically useful. The insistence here is on the existential force conveyed by a *nausea* produced by the social death of which it is composed, the point being to confront this dehiscence to the point of suffocation rather than censor it or render its emptiness into a dream of its

salvation. Nigga is the being that corpses itself; it feeds on its own phantom, and presages its return as a kind of darkness.

2. This is why nigga is a product of social death, even though s/he is not the one who is socially dead. Indeed, it is “black folk [who] have killed themselves by striving to conserve themselves in a willful affect – the productive labor of modern subjects, a.k.a. work.”⁹ As Ronald Judy explains, black folk have gone the way of all nonproductive consumption: their history is the result of what happens when the “nigger loses value as human capital” (212). That demise has led to two different worlds: one that is nigga, and the other that remains nigger; one that is seen as a nihilistic infestation – usually by its anti-black representation – the other that conserves itself as if it were nothing but exchange value; one that refuses being as a form of debt (a peonage that must be endlessly deferred), the other that holds up desire as a commodified demand rather than a non-commodified transgression. For Judy, the failure to *think* nigga derives from a failure to think beyond the representation of work, beyond its cultural and institutional hegemony. Further, in the wish to rename the nigger become-thing as “Negro,” Judy locates an historical paralipsis that represses or disavows the rebellious force of the nigga: in their devotion to neoliberal political economy, niggers have sold themselves, or they have executed themselves as subjects of debt, which means that they are used up, socially dead; but being the human-*cum*-things that they are, money cannot liberate them – in the world of hypercommodification, niggers are worth virtually nothing, and yet they are, nonetheless, endlessly disposable as such. To the extent that niggas know that “experience is essentially unfungible,” they also know that affects are not values, and that such knowledge is “the residual of the nonproductive work of translating experience into affect” (228). The nigga-affect functions to release “anger, rage, intense pleasure”: a force that expends itself as the “existential task” of its being (228, 229). Nigga is the incessant psychic work of this task.

These observations suggest that the central problem of modern black life exactly coincides with what we might call the “slavishness” of its manifestation: just as nigger defines the field of a slavish desire, so modern black subjects are trying, by various experiments, to establish desire from a position that is not always indebted. The goal of this effort is to substitute the history of a servile labor (with slavery as referent) for a decadence that is no longer dominated by the idea of capital as alibi: that is, one that is no longer enslaved to accumulation. Judy seems to speak approvingly of the nigga,

not as a figure for rethinking race and gender, but as an ontological force for unbinding the fetishes and fantasies that impoverish black mental and social life. Unbinding, which is doubtless also a form of unshackling, is the exploration of potentialities without the constraint or compulsion to make them profitable or realizable. Is this, then, just an anti-bourgeois version of Washington’s utilitarianism? It seems to me necessary to say that nigga cannot be read as uplift in Washington’s sense, for such readability is always slavish. But to see the current operation of blackness as conforming to a nigga model of transvaluation is no less slavish perhaps, and in ways seemingly blind to the decidedly masculine form of its restoration (does the history of nigga allow a more heterogeneous sign or operation?). And where does the movement asserting that “black lives matter” fall in this debate – on the side of conservation, or on the side of a nigga’s irremissible expenditure?

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12/12

1

Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), 111. Hereafter, page numbers will appear in-line.

2

Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics*, vol. 17, no. 2 (1987): 64–81; 67, 66. Hereafter, page numbers will appear in-line.

3

New Jersey Journal, quoted in Arthur Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 143–44.

4

Tocqueville also wrote the following on the demands of freedom facing the newly freed: “a thousand new desires beset him, and he has not the knowledge and energy necessary to resist them.” Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1945), 2:129; 1:344.

5

William Ellery Channing, *A Selection from the Works of William E. Channing D. D.* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1855), 21.

6

Colored American, May 6, 1837.

7

Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 63.

8

For examples, see Thomas Hauser, “How bling-bling took over the ring,” *The Guardian*, January 9, 2005 <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2005/jan/09/boxing.features>; and Jay Smooth, “Bling Etymology,” HipHopMusic.Com, April, 26, 2003 http://hiphopmusic.com/new/2003/04/bling_etymology/.

9

Ronald Judy, “On the Question of Nigga Authenticity,” *Boundary 2*, vol. 21, no. 3 (Autumn 1994): 212. Hereafter, page numbers will appear in-line.

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