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Expecting Blows: Sylvia Wynter, Sociogeny, and Exceeding Marxist Social Form

Cover Page Footnote

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In her 2006 interview with Greg Thomas, Sylvia Wynter is asked to return to the memory of a shared scene, the conference “Engaging Walter Rodney’s Legacies,” in which Thomas recalls Wynter forewarning “I expect blows” (2006a, 27–8). The history of antagonism, the almost preordained violence coiled in Wynter’s studied expectation, exposes deepening fault lines in the reception of Wynter’s expansive archaeology of the human. In unpacking the preconditions of this scene, and its Marxist, Caribbean, and anti-colonial entanglements, Wynter reflects on how she came to critically assess the way that “no order can exist except as it exists within the logic of a formulation of a general order of existence” (30). Rather than connect her theorization of a “general order of existence” directly to a conflict with Rodney or the presumed Marxist internationalist orientation of the conference audience, organized in November 1998 by student-led Walter Rodney Study Group and convened at SUNY Binghamton, Wynter indexes the long process of coming to be “impelled” to think within, beyond, and against Marxist and Caribbean thought. Her eventual rejection of Third Worldism as an explanatory frame for blackness, the human, and their more generative conditions—her realization, in this sense, that “there wasn’t any ‘Third World’ thing”—is recapitulated instead through her critical diagnosis of world-systems theory as a limited “economic apparatus,” unmoored from its epistemic foundation (29–30). Here, as elsewhere across her work, she opens a different order of questioning, seeking to transform the presumed economy in which terms like solidarity radiate and are made meaningful. In capital punctuation, the transcription of Wynter’s interview proceeds: “THE HERESY THAT I’M PUTTING FORWARD IS THAT CAPITALISM IS ITSELF A FUNCTION OF THE REPRODUCTION OF ‘MAN,’ THAT ‘MAN’

WHOSE CONCEPTION WE INSTITUTE IN OUR DISCIPLINES. So then you can understand why I'd expect blows!?!” (30).

Wynter is no stranger to conflict. From the start, her writing called for a “revolutionary assault” against those “acquiescent” critics who “reflect and parallel the inauthenticity of the university and its society” (1968, 24 and 30).¹ Instead of reconstructing the particular acquiescence of Wynter’s audience in 1998 and the intellectual-political contexts that preceded them, this article explores what remains incendiary about Wynter’s ontological formulations from the perspective of the question of “social form” in the critique of political economy. Here I read those who think at the radical edges of Marxist criticism, but from whom a Wynterian “politics of being” (2003, 319) nonetheless anticipates agonistic dead-ends. Rummaging through contemporary strands of Marxist critique, from world-systems to value-form theory, I engage Wynter’s generative break from Marxism, and its English feudal and industrial centers of gravity, through her Hegelian echoes in the task of “beginning from the beginning” (2006a, 29). By beginning with the plantation, instead of the factory, Wynter immediately accesses dimensions that have only blinked into Marxist view through generations of theoretical and political reconstruction: the reproduction of subjectivity, the relevance of theology and metaphysics, the problem of desire, the historical and categorical relation of force to the structure of wage-labor and its social surround. I argue Wynter’s attention to blackness, not as an identity but as a non-identical provocation of being, rearranges political economic thought to account for the resistances and repetitions that go by the name of race. The importance of “non-being” to the appearance of race undergirds her critical-methodological “sociogenic principle” by disclosing “being” as glimpsed in negation, in the

violent moments it presents to us its own conditions for inhabiting political, historical, and material form.

The first section addresses the deconstructive promise of Marxist critiques of social form for interpreting Wynter, while the following two sections confront the limits of this promise and the ways Wynter’s “sociogenic principle,” in deciphering the meaning-making codes adaptively inhabited and enjoyed by successive social epochs, bends to the tune of a different analytic. Extrapolating from the uneven relationship between world-systems and value-form theory, I track how strategies for expanding the historical and philosophical purchase of “free labor” through a wider spectrum of violence and dependency, including the analytic “racial capitalism,” have provided Marxist analysis inroads that, for better and worse, “confidently explained colonial exploitation in the Caribbean and proposed an alternative, revolutionary model of change” (White 2010, 132–33). Reading Wynter’s disenchantment with certain Marxist revolutionary seductions, I advance an interpretive critique of what I have been calling, along with Tapji Garba, the “labor theory of slavery” (2020, 772–74; Sorentino 2019). While Nick Nesbitt (2015) diagnoses “the failure of twentieth-century revolutionary anticolonialism *to be Marxist enough*” (143, emphasis added), Wynter reads Marxism itself as not going far enough in its critical engagement with the social form of the plantation. If slavery exceeds the problem-frame of labor to which it is typically tethered, then new formulations that resist the critical impulse to theorize slavery in its immediacy with capitalism (as its pre-history or pre-condition) might better access why slavery’s afterlife is not so easily abolished. Across the breadth of her work, Wynter can be seen as demonstrating these underexplored possibilities in her speculative displacement of

capitalist totality as the determinant frame for understanding our social conditions and their emancipatory transformation.

In the final section, I turn to how Wynter was able to accommodate such a displacement, not by pluralizing Marxist categories or more creatively conjoining the histories of race with capitalism, but by positing a new relational totality predicated on slavery as an expansive problem of form *and* content. I elaborate why Wynter's political-theoretical orchestration of race, slavery, and the human stays with negation as the liminal condition blackness incarnates, mining the promises of Marxist methods of exposition and engagement with form's material politics, while expanding a conceptual critique of labor as a way the "overrepresentation of Man as if it were the human" congeals (Wynter 2003, 267). As such, I read Wynter's sociogenic principle as a methodological *radicalization* of Marxist social form and an experiment in "*epistemic daring*" (Kamugisha 2019, 187). Wynter's critique invites conflict because it exposes conflict: the political-methodological prioritization of the plantation over the factory identifies blackness at the breach between theory and history, method of presentation and mode of inquiry, the negativity the critique of political economy is meant to collectivize and transcend but which falters in the face of the continued compulsive brutality of anti-black violence. Anti-blackness names a violence that is always just beyond the historical materialist horizon—the open possibility of material activity cannot represent the peculiar negativity blackness imputes to slaveness. Here we might demarcate a formal difference between violence that appears as racial (which is also to say classed), tethered to the valuation of human social forms that inscribe the problems and possibilities of labor, and anti-black violence that flows from the problems of freedom, history, life, and death that both race and labor, for Wynter, were sociogenically meant to

subdue. Wynter's principled self-defense against anticipated blows may be considered, then, less the protection of a stated historical-intellectual substance, whether race or the plantation, and more the call to activate an epistemic liminality for a creative sort of combustion she calls poiesis and amplifies through her critique of the conditions of racial blackness.

Social Form

Marxist critique has long established that free labor is caught up in the exercise of violence. Although underscored by the contractual freedom and juridical equality Marx theologizes as the “Edenic rights of man” (1976, 280) and Wynter early in her writing conjures as the “mythological charter of the commercial and industrial bourgeoisie on their rise to hegemony” (1979, 103), labor ushers violence in through the backdoor. Capitalism's inversion of appearance and essence, where domination seems to come from without, from the naturalized money-from, both veils and constitutes exploitation *through the form of labor itself*. In these terms, labor under capitalism is most comprehensively considered a “social form,” distinguished, paradoxically, by its atomization.² Other inversions proliferate under capitalist “form-determination”: the social character of money becomes immiseration's cause, mediated structural relations appear as immediate, a table “stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas” (Marx 1976, 163).³ While this topsy-turvy structure seems to invite the romantic return to a prior order—back to the concrete, to nature or the subject, away from mystification and objectification—such desired returns miss the “double character” of labor and the commodity.

It is not enough to dispel the “misty realm of religion” and objectify the subject of history; doing so further entrenches dualism without

activating its dialectic. Marx's critique of the present instead seeks to comprehend the dynamic web that generates these distinctions—freedom and domination, the individual and social, material and immaterial, the concrete and abstract, past and present—not as the metaphysical ground deployed *for* capitalism but as contradictions expressive *of* capitalism.⁴ Though labor “expresses an immeasurably ancient relation valid in all forms of society,” it “achieves practical truth as an abstraction only as a category of the most modern society” (Marx 1973, 105). The categorical generalization of labor through expanded production and exchange reflects the historical actualization of forms that were previously inchoate—moving from the various specificities of artisanal production (a weaver engaged in the act of cloth-making, a builder in the erection of houses) to labor as an abstraction, now qualitatively interchangeable with any other product that comes to market. Though this abstraction—labor “as such”—is historically new, Marx's method foregrounds the social activity of history (humans adaptively activating and diminishing capacities in interchange with nature (Jaffe 2016)) in ways that can facilitate backwards and comparative reconceptualizations of domination characteristic of other times and places. Marx's more critical telos does not then mean, however, that labor is the subject of history: labor, at least in this reading of Marx, cannot save us unless it “grasps *itself* as the ground of its own oppression” (Arthur 2004a, 101; emphasis added).

This sketch already suggests not altogether surprising similarities between Marx and Wynter. Despite their diverging emphases (for Wynter, the symbolic over the material, the slave over the laborer, the sociogenic principle over social form), both pursue theoretical modes of inquiry that account for how seemingly empty reality principles are simultaneously *relational* principles that come to reside over the reproduction of historical

content and consciousness. These conditions pull the rug out from the transcendental ground of criticism and action, a problem reflectively engaged with in Wynter's liminal critique of Caribbean and postcolonial liberation projects as producing "more blindness than insights, more error than truth, more destruction than growth, and more repression than liberation" (Henry 2000, 124) and in Marxism's immanent critique as it shifts from the presupposed revolutionary subject to the challenges requisite for "liberation from the automatism of an irrational mode of socialization" (Elbe 2013). Both Wynter and Marx recognize that the occult character of social reproduction, the "mechanisms by means of which we have been able to invert cause and effect, allowing us to repress the recognition of our collective production of our modes of social reality" (Wynter 2003, 273), is double-edged. For Marx, the violence elaborated by separability from the social nonetheless unleashes "free individuality" and real possibilities for creation—"universal capacities" that can become the ground for re-imagined human potential (1973, 158). Marx's object of critique is thus also its subject, his method both primed by capitalism's contradictions and pointing to avenues therein for its immanent undoing. In Wynter's critical engagement with what her 1984 "The Ceremony Must Be Found" advances as the "Janus-faced" revolution of Renaissance humanism, social contests over the orchestration of meaning and matter—playing out in the church, the sciences, and seafaring—activate a totalizing violence. The heretical effort to emancipate human purpose from medieval and scholastic theodicy provided one path towards freedom but responded with anxiety to freedom's groundless form, reinterring theologically absolute questions in the answers provided by degodded Man and its racialized others.

Wynter's 2015 callback essay "The Ceremony Found" reflects from the perspective of this mutated secular "aporia" (189–92) to unfold aesthetic conditions for emancipating the humanist heresy from its vested role in violence's reproduction. Her poetic sweep borrows liberally from Aimé Césaire to solicit a "science of the word," from Louis Althusser to examine the role of intellectual production in replicating social structures, and from Asmarom Legesse to amplify the revolutionary potential of "liminal" subjectivity.⁵ Wynter's "liminal" position subsists in the "structural contradiction between lived experience and the grammar of representation" (1982, 36). Liminality, being negatively defined, cannot positively contribute to a social order without contributing to its wreckage, as with the way "African elites" become "the new bourgeoisie," instead of prophets of a Third World revolution (Wynter 1992, 85). Wynter biographically grounds these "regressive dialectics" (Henry 124–29; Paquette 2020, 143–44) in her self-described "trauma" while under the roof of "orthodox Marxist" and then president Cheddi Jagan during the 1961 riots in Guyana (Scott and Wynter 139–41)—when development economists taxed commodities used by black Guyanese, leaving Indian commodities untaxed, it accentuated for her existing strains on triangulating black, Third World, and Marxist struggle. Wynter underscores similar tensions across the sweep of her lived history from the 1980 assassination of Walter Rodney (Rodriguez 2015, 139–40) to Grenada's 1983 revolutionary collapse and the U.S. invasion (Roberts 2006, 180–82). To begin to explain these political catastrophes, Wynter sets her theoretical sights on the destruction of the episteme, not its recomposition through "a sense of a shared community, of solidarity...that did not exist" (Scott and Wynter 141).

It is in this reflexive spirit that Wynter began to draw attention to what, in her 900-page unpublished *Black Metamorphosis*, compiled in layers across the 1970s and early 80s, is a crucial expansion of Marx's often circulated "Life is not determined by consciousness but consciousness by life" (Marx and Engels 181) into its reformulation, some fourteen years later, in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their *social* being that determines their consciousness" (1970, 21).⁶ In underscoring the social element of the interface between existence and consciousness, Wynter provides the groundwork for what her later work accesses through Frantz Fanon's "Beside phylogeny and ontogeny stands sociogeny" (1967, 13) as a sociogenic *principle* (Wynter 1991; Wynter 2001). Her shorthand conceptualization of "the overrepresentation of Man as if it were the human" (2003, 267) stages "all the disciplinary discourses of our present order of knowledge" through the labor question and "the *a priori* basis of this biocentric, *homo oeconomicus* descriptive statement" (2006b, 129). In doing so, Wynter compresses the historical development and standardization of the economic world-system into a socially reflexive theory in ways that seem to square with Marx's understanding of "the social individual" as "the great foundation-stone of production and of wealth" (1973, 705). The sociogenic principle works as both a global organizing principle and mode of inquiry into how what seems self-evident comes to (materially and aesthetically) be accepted as self-evident in order for subjects to sustain their own oppression.

Wynter's critique of Marx might thus find accommodating reception with heretical strains like the "New Marx Reading," whose reconstruction upends given categories of political economy and their inheritance in neo-Ricardian "substantialism" (Elbe). Though this new line of interpretation

did not find direct engagement with Wynter, who often restricts her criticism to “Orthodox Marxism,” explicating the irreducibility of her project requires counterposing Wynter with Marx at his best—his least linear and empiricist, his most reflexive and dialectical. This “New Marx Reading” departs from the often staid humanism and historicism that dominated Leninist and Gramscian-influenced readings of mode of production to apprehend labor through “form development,” understood as the critical method for deciphering social concepts and practices as complexly immanent to capitalism’s mode of production. For value-form theorists, we can generally say that “the critique of political economy amounts to a critique of ontological conceptions of economic categories” (Bonfeld 2014, 3); in Wynter’s accent, modes of being human, “as inscribed in the terms of each culture’s descriptive statement, will necessarily give rise to their varying respective modalities of adaptive truths-for, or epistemes, up to and including our contemporary own” (2003, 269). There is no general economy, no “eternal natural form of social labour” (Marx, *Contribution* 60)—we can at best understand transcendent categories as divinations, elaborated in and through social conditions. Marx and Wynter each herald the inauguration of complexly figured “new sciences,” as the “product of the historical movement” which has “associated itself consciously with it” (Marx 2000, 230), and whose revelations expose hairline liminal fractures toward the art of governing “consciously, and therefore consensually, the narratively instituted purposes that govern us” (Wynter 1991, 278).⁷

Given their conceptual resonances and methodological overlaps, one could almost be forgiven for thinking Wynter and Marx simply have different historical starting points and units of analysis from which to synthesize a unified theory. Though Marx’s theoretical-historical center of gravity orients itself around the enclosure of the commons and the

abstract form of labor crystallized on the factory floor, manifold interpretations from world-systems theory to Black Marxism have returned to close textual readings of Marx to complicate the centrality of the wage, expand the English scene, and return historical materialism to Marx's more robust sense of the "whole world of commodities" (1976, 159). Wynter herself recognizes that "Marx did not overlook the role of the plantation," but she maintains that neglect of "the black New World" remains the central "oversight" that looms over the struggle against capitalism today (n.d., 104). To correct this oversight, as we will see, it is necessary to go beyond the functional reintegration of the social reality of slavery to capitalism and instead recompose slavery as a problem of the highest philosophical, political, and methodological order.

But if slavery is historically coeval with capitalism, functioning for wage labor as its "pedestal" (Marx 1976, 925) and "just as much the pivot of bourgeois industry as machinery, credits, etc." (Marx 2000, 221), then how to make good on Marx's claim that "slavery is an economic category of the greatest importance" (221)? This question, when tilted to Wynter's black New World, could lead us to ask why the particular contents of slavery occupy the form that they do: not only why commodities and workers take on the appearance of the value-form, but also why theological principles manifest themselves in the "this-worldly" form of Man. "The secret of capitalism," Wynter proposes, "is to be found not in the factory but in the plantation" (n.d., 582), where what is disclosed are the contours of the sociogenic principle, where Marx's "social form" takes on more immediately expansive overtones. In following sections, we will see how "racial capitalism" as an analytic presupposes that Marxism be effectively "stretched" (Fanon 1967, 40) and how Wynter's reading of the plantation moves diagonally away from this presupposition.

Stretching

The difference between the capitalist social form and all others hinges, for Marx, on the way its necessary fiction becomes socially inscribed: the “freedom” to alienate labor, however formalistic and parodic, requires that free laborers do not become commodities themselves. Marx (1976) writes: “the proprietor of labour-power must always sell it for a limited period only, for if he were to sell it in a lump, once and for all, he would be selling himself, converting himself from a free man into a slave, from an owner of a commodity into a commodity” (271).⁸ This requirement—the seemingly unbridgeable theoretical distance between laborer and slave—facilitates labor-power’s capacity to express, through contract, the monetary form. Surplus value compels its distinct mode of exploitation through the mechanisms of this contract, as well as the formal freedom and equality it presupposes. Capitalism’s social world is thus mediated by the ideal (in the consciousness of the worker and critic) and the real (in terms of relative capacity to produce surplus-value) distance from the slave.

Because slavery has been formally abolished, and slaves integrated into the world of the exploitable and disposed, it is assumed that slavery retains theoretical interest only as capitalism’s pre-history or anomaly (Sorrentino 20–21). Marx (1973) claims even the “purely industrial slavery” that is “*Negro slavery*” “*presupposes wage labour*,” for if this slavery were not surrounded by and enmeshed in a world-economy, it would devolve back into its pre-capitalist forms (224). Only when “the business in which slaves are used is conducted by capitalists” (Marx 1968, 302–3) are slaves in the American South “drawn into a world market dominated by the capitalist mode of production” (and even, though in a much more indirect fashion, “contribute to production of surplus-value”

(1976, 345; Banaji 2011, 143)). Marx's slavery can be capitalist, then, only contingently: the slave-form is reduced to the bare history of force and the racial-form chalked up to the ruse of false-consciousness.

Marx's historical starting point, it bears repeating, is not an empirical window into the world of capitalism; it constitutes an analytic that both provides a theoretical entry into our understanding of the problematic and potential pressure points for transformation. This is, of course, Marx's dialectical promise and limit, what enables his relational critique to *stretch* without breaking. If Marx's critique of capitalism can indeed accompany the slave-form as sensitively as the labor-form, then it would be the case, or so it would seem, that Wynter would have no cause to expect sustained blows. But this synthetic palliative is wrapped up, following sections will argue, in echoes of historicism that under-diagnose its own irrational animating kernel. Fanon's own suggestion to stretch Marx when confronted with the "colonial problem" is instead immediately followed by an extended imperative: "Everything up to and including the very nature of precapitalist society, so well explained by Marx, must here be thought out again" (1963, 40). Wynter's shift to the sociogenic principle is caught up in, hastening and clarifying, an order of total rethinking.

This rethinking shakes the foundations of Wynter's *Black Metamorphosis*, as its composition and constitution changes with her travels across the Americas, and as her critique moves from Orthodox Marxism to the hegemony of the labor frame, where the "factory model of exploitation" became the privileged form of exploitation that "applied to free-wage labour, universalizing this form and marginalizing all other forms of exploitation that were necessary to the production and reproduction of capitalism as a mode of domination" (n.d., 580; "Categories" 64).⁹ Although the manuscript opens by proposing a "unified operation, in which

the plantation was an intrinsic and functional part of a capitalist system” (105), midway through the draft itself metamorphizes, as Wynter interrupts herself: “I would like at this point to contradict an earlier formation” (430). First accepting the terms of the base-superstructure division (see 33–4), here her *Black Metamorphosis* not only moves to more thoroughly reconcile the cultural with the economic, she also theorizes the marginalization of the former by the latter as “capitalism’s central strategy of domination,” one that Marxism “continues” (430).¹⁰ Wynter reads capitalism’s strategy of domination as marginalizing both culture and slavery in the same breath, and the remainder of her life’s work is geared towards moving beyond a *description* and towards a new unifying *explanation*.

Wynter’s work from the 1980s onward draws from her sustained cultural criticism to foreground an “onto-epistemic approach to history” (Henry 126), beginning with the European Middle Ages. Reining in Scholastic excess and returning the world to creaturely understanding and control, the humanist revolution redescribed contingency as transformative potential instead of the mark of the sinful and fallen. In Wynter’s reading, the poetic reclamation of the earth from the heavens, spurred by Copernicus and Columbus’s dual discoveries, immanentized history by activating lay people as the subject of their own politically and commercially described destinies (2003, 275–76). But in unleashing newly homogenizing geographical orientations, underpinned by renewed celebrations of homogeneous substance (the globe and galaxy) and accompanied by unified subjective scenes—which Wynter gathers together as Man1 (theo-political) and Man2 (bio-economic)—the revolution on behalf of intellectual inventiveness could only transpose, not transform, its inherited dialectic of transcendence and immanence or, in Wynter’s

recurrent refrain, the tension between the “other-worldly” and “this-worldly.” The problem confronting the invention of godless Man was “that of finding the necessarily non-transcendental mechanism by which the first purely secular criterion of being...could be *absolutized*” (1987, 220). Absent God, the durable criteria for absolutizing being from the humanist revolt through Darwin and brain science has been found in tethering excess and indeterminacy to a “series of signifying others,” “whose existential reality now function to *absolutize* the secular criteria of being of which they were the ostensive negation” (220). In the “epochal threshold shift to the secular,” this general form of racial otherness becomes the “infrascendental oppositional principle” (1990, 362) that secures “the nonsupernatural but no less extrahuman ground” (2003, 264) for the biological reinscription of being. Race’s generalizability, as we will see, is predicated on disavowing its particularist and absent (black) origins.

Labor is here already enfolded in a plot whose themes and spacing fall out of Marx’s composite picture. If Wynter’s sociogenic principle describes how the racial principle hijacks reality, inscribing sense and self with its transcendental guarantee, it also harnesses previous forms by reoccupying them, grounding the “earlier mortal/immortal, natural/supernatural, human/the ancestors, the gods/God distinction” through its “this-worldly” doubles (264). To understand why these terms are not ahistorical, Marx’s social form can be instructive. Wynter’s doubles appear out of the peculiarity of secular logics and, like Marx’s sense of labor, the forms they throw up—the native, the African American, the global poor—provide a generalized philosophy of history only insofar as they are understood as theorized through present demands. It is through the gathering force of the reigning secular operation of power, which we might name anti-blackness, as coordinated by slavery, that one can begin

to attend to the continued relevance of race and its ritualized violence despite all reasonable evidence to the contrary. Darwinian-Malthusian Man, to take Wynter's second bio-economic iteration, now finds wealth legitimated through its formalization of "Lack" (2006b, 128): poverty and scarcity doubling as signs of dysselection. Wynter is called to compose a scene with a different archive and emphasis, one that moves "beyond the Absolutism of our present economic categories, as in the fourteenth to the fifteenth centuries the lay humanists of Europe moved beyond that of the *theological* categories of Scholasticism; and the nineteenth century Classical economists moved beyond that of the *political* categories of the earlier epistemological order" (1994, 66). Wynter's sociogenic principle thus puts pressure not on the efficacy of the critique of political economy for describing reality but on its structural tendency to describe *all* reality.¹¹ Her critique of "Orthodox Marxism" is one lever in a multi-faceted critique of orthodoxy and origin as they inform a transcendental horizon for being, beginning with the heretical challenge posed by humanism to Christian theology—its "release of rhetorical man from the margins" (1984, 25).

Though Marxism remains a primary referent (and "Orthodox Marxism" a central target), Wynter's sublation of Marx can, in this sense of overturning, be thought to exceed his frame of reference without abandoning it, as Marx famously proceeded to turn Hegel. *Black Metamorphosis's* creative process of rejection and enfolding is doubled across the long trajectory of Wynter's work, from her engagement in Marxist party politics to her role as founding editor of *Social Text* with Fredric Jameson (Roberts 171–73), and manifests in a 1985 interview as a taking leave of Marxism: "For a good many years I had tried to cling, sometimes tenuously, to the Marxist tradition. But then my own experience kept contradicting the theory. And while liberalism can be self-correcting,

Marxism cannot. You take or leave it all in one piece. I had to leave it” (Qtd. in White 2010, 135). More recently, Wynter clarifies that she does not abandon but instead recontextualizes Marxism: “It was not a matter of negating the Marxian paradigm but of realizing that it was one aspect of something that was larger” (Scott and Wynter 2000, 142). The sociogenic principle provides the explanatory entry towards this “something larger,” articulated with the recognition that she “would still need some concept that could carry over Marx’s formidable insights, like his ideas of *activity*, of *productivity*, of something that one is *instituting*” (200). This active sense of instituting that Wynter conveys from Marx is itself a kind of transcendental necessity for critique only insofar as one reads blackness as substance instead of the problem thought and action (including, reflexively, Wynter’s own) organizes its intelligibility around.

The general oscillation across and within Wynter’s work can be engaged as the more abiding aesthetic problem of the extimate structure of slavery that carries over and shapes the totality of social fields. When Wynter (n.d.) expresses the “Black/white code” as “*the central inscription and division that generates all the other hierarchies*,” and slavery as the unspoken “secret” (582) that makes its theoretical integration into capitalism impossible, that leaves its structure impenetrable to the legal and intellectual forces of abolition, the question becomes pitched at a different, autopoietic order of priority than that of Marxism or “racial capitalism.” Instead of slavery being adjunctified to capitalism, Wynter’s slavery was made global because it consolidated and preserved the unthought as its central constitutive feature—manifest in the explosive and never legitimated “soldering” of blackness to slaveness (Sexton 2018, 308). This new abstraction of slavery at the level of ontology was the expression, in Wynter’s frame, of the immanent working through of signs

of Christian theological collapse, over which the bioeconomic description of man came to preside. Because Wynter understands the economic to be the way the unthought is socially expressed in figures of man, the soldering of blackness and slaveness not only accompanies capitalism and racism; the attempt to materialize blackness as the sign of negation logically and historically prefigures and accompanies them.

In wrestling with Wynter's intellectual, political, and methodological response to Marxism, one assertion can be advanced: her change in origin and orientation registers more than just a shift in emphasis. Wynter's turn to the disavowed terms that heterodox Marxism seeks to resuscitate effects neither a formal inversion nor a recuperative reconstruction. Her radicalization solicits a revalorization, one that retains Marxism's interest in social forms but that, in prioritizing the plantation and the negativity blackness incarnates, works to reimagine the terms through which Marx's critique can be made legible. In grappling with why Wynter expects blows, let us delve further into how Marxists have complicated free labor as an analytic and examine the affordances and limitations this complication has provided.

Wage Labor and World-Systems

A number of debates internal to Marxism turn on how to theorize and manage the excesses that mark capitalism—excess relations of production, excess forms of coercion, the extra-economic as such. These debates have not taken up the *form* of slavery—the way slavery is globally and ontologically alchemized through the imperative of race—as a ground for questioning or problem of excess. Instead, the terms by which excesses are incorporated—whether slavery can be capitalist, whether slave-masters can be capitalists (Eugene Genovese, 1965, would say no),

slaves can be proletariats (C.L.R. James, 1989, and Sidney Mintz, 1978, would say yes), and what capitalism might actually be—continue to hinge on the centrality of wage-labor to capitalism’s definition.¹² These polarizing theoretical tendencies each offer different synthesizing subjects (of capitalism) as objects (of analysis): the “Political Marxist” line from Maurice Dobb, Ernesto Laclau, and Robert Brenner extends in characterizing the capitalist mode of production through the existence of wage-labor, while Paul Sweezy, Andre Gunder Frank, and Emmanuel Wallerstein identify capitalism as production for the global market.¹³ In tracking and anticipating these conversations, Wynter is often too quickly folded into the growing scholarly consensus whose global sensibility magnifies Eric Williams’ (1944) early conjuncture—in which, as a hub for production, consumption, and circulation, the transatlantic trade provided a “triple stimulus to British industry” (52).¹⁴

Though not quite a “counterdoctrine” in what we will read as Wynter’s Jamesian sense, some of the most dynamic Marxist explanations in the past decade lift off from the work of Williams to address what appears an ever-widening gap between the writing of history and theory. Racial capitalism marks just one of many snowballing attempts to integrate historical movements into an ever elastic “unity of the diverse,” take us upstream of “Political Marxism’s near Platonic conception of capitalism” (Anievas and Nicosifancioğlu 2015, 29–30), and return us to an already open Marx.¹⁵ Addressing excess capitalist violence has inaugurated the more deliberate 1) “decentering” of the geographical center of capitalism—Europe, and the English factory more concretely—to “ask what historical roles different world regions played in the making of capitalism(s)” (Yazdani and Menon 2020, 1); 2) “working through a *multiplicity* of forms of exploitation *based on wage-labour*” (Banaji 145),

whose distinctive features should no longer make capitalism historically or logically reducible to the wage form; and 3) fashioning of new conceptual conjectures, from “extended primitive accumulation” (Blackburn 1997, 515) to “colonial capitalism” (Ince 2018), in hopes of more adequately grasping the heterogeneity of Atlantic economies and the dramatic relations of force at their heart.

Wynter’s critique might seem a similar order of pluralization, in one formulation writing “Because of the multiple modes of coercion and of exploration, the factory model was only one of many models” (1992, 69) and in another situating exploitation among “multiple mechanisms of coercion and of domination” (2018, 31).¹⁶ Her continued engagement with world-systems theorizing certainly celebrates its effort, as she puts it, to “displace the metonymic substitution of the last phase of this global system for its entire historical development” and “deconstruct the masterdom of capital and labor mono-conceptions” (1992, 80–81).¹⁷ However, this double demand (displacement and deconstruction) is not invested in multiplying conceptualizable modes of oppression internal to capitalism. From Wynter’s (1987) critique of the “supra-ism” slide to endless reinscriptions of division apparent in “minority discourse” (236), we can surmise a critical stance towards certain contemporary operationalizations of identity politics. Here, Wynter’s criticism of the orthodox acceptance of ‘class’ representation extends to the cultural nationalist particularization of ‘race,’ whose reification of social structures tends to invert, without deconstructing, existent norms.¹⁸

Because both Political Marxism and world-systems theory’s heterodox extensions share certain terms, their encircling of free or unfree labor, capitalism or capitalisms, represent what Fanon (1967) in a displaced context calls “little family quarrels” (115). The questions they ask

come from similar lineages—they remain, in Wynter’s terms, rather firmly within a bio-economic descriptive statement (Man2)—and the problems they attend to revolve around ways of deepening or resolving this familial rift. This is no doubt true of intellectual contestation more generally, which produce and reproduce the ground through which they can be understood and extended. But the effects of such extensions bear repeating insofar as they come to conscript race: the incorporation of racial slavery remains contingent on a decision concerning the form and content of capitalism—the relative degree to which its production of surplus for circulation is tethered to its characteristic dissimulation of coercion.¹⁹ This *a priori* preemption holds even for world-systems theorizing, as in Robbie Shilliam’s observation of its tendency “to read the purpose of slavery as a functional contributor to the expanded reproduction of capitalism,” instead of theorizing slavery as a problematic in and for-itself (2009, 82). Slaves, in Marx’s treatment, feature as tacit externalities for the larger project of providing meaning and purpose to critical inquiry and revolutionary struggle. The various incorporative concessions that Marxists grant on behalf of the slave—that, for example, “Marx may have overestimated the ‘silent compulsion’ at the expense of ‘extra-economic force’” (Mohajer and Yazdani 2020, 233)—do not provide enough groundwork to puncture why such silent compulsion is compelling nor how it might be produced in, of, and through raced relationships with force.

The analytic of “racial capitalism” can equally serve as a ruse. Wynter would likely agree with Cedric Robinson’s (2010) reframing of capitalism, where it is no longer a negation of feudalism but part of “the larger tapestry of the modern world’s political and economic relations” (10). For Robinson, however, this continuity is grounded on a substantialist identity—“racialism”—*carried through* successively deformed

historical periods by the spirit of “European Civilization.” Approvingly citing Charles Verlinden, Robinson attributes changes in racialism’s organization of slavery to quantity more than quality: “The only important change was that the white victims of slavery were replaced by a much greater number of African Negroes, captured in raids or bought by traders” (Qtd. in 16).²⁰ Hierarchies of belonging, when transmitted across successive stages, can be “adapted to the political and material exigencies of the moment” but the underlying substance remains the same, which is why Robinson can also draw a relatively straight line from Aristotle’s natural slave to Marx (xxix), despite Marx’s transformation of Aristotle’s metaphysics being crucial to his immanent critique of capitalism (Jaffe).

Wynter’s reading of the morphology of historical concepts, by contrast, takes its model from Hans Blumenberg’s “reoccupation thesis,” where what is continuous are the questions that reappear across epochs, not necessarily the answers (Wynter 1984, 21). The movement of freedom from spiritual to material redemption is facilitated by the “this-worldly” transmutation of “enslavement to Original sin” to enslavement “to the irrational aspects of mankind’s human nature,” which rearranges the social whole and its auto-instituting ways of being human (Wynter 2003, 288). As I will endeavor to show in the final section, it is the qualitative shift that comes with the abstraction of slavery via blackness that enables Wynter’s critical appraisal of the instituting modes of being human. Her historically specific reflexivity, as well as attentiveness to social form, is lost on Robinson’s more explicit rejection of Marx’s “scientific elegance and interpretive economy demanded by theory” (xxix), his reduction of social motivation to “greed” (118), and his linear, almost mechanistic belief that racialism’s continuity, despite being seemingly intractable, can be progressively unveiled by history (66; Sorentino 26-27).

To return the political urgency and scope of world-systems theorizing to the problems posed by the value-form, Marxist critique, including its stretching in racial capitalism, needs to engage the production of freedom that abstract labor holds out as a powerful measure and that Marxism manifests as a promise, but that, in Wynter's estimation, "can not account for the radically different quality of black experience *even in those areas where the parallels between the condition of the proletariat and the conditions of the Negro were clear*" (n.d., 562; emphasis added). Because these parallels (impoverishment, increased exposure to death, diminished resources for leisure, play, and creation) are genetically situated for Wynter, "a model of social relations first developed on the plantation as the relation between PURE WHITE and NEGRO" that became "the micro-model that was to be diffused throughout the global system" of capitalism (390), they require a different theoretical frame that can challenge the critique of capitalism through the register of form. Taking inspiration from C.L.R. James's "insistence on the seminal importance of the trade in African slaves," Wynter's *Black Metamorphosis*, and the publications it inspired and informed, bends in this direction to provide a more genetic account than what racial capitalism currently affords. Wynter (1992) mobilizes James's "counterdoctrine" through what she calls his "pieza conceptual frame" and draws theoretical focus to the commodification of persons through the act of writing—the ledger's inscription of a standardized unit of slave labor (quantified through "a man of twenty-five years, approximately, in good health") (81). By outlining the formal brutalization of slavery, Wynter argues, James engages in a "constant and sustained attempt to shift 'the system of abduction' first of colonial Liberalism, later of Stalinist and Trotskyist Marxism, and overall, of the

bourgeois cultural model and its underlying head/body, reason/instinct metaphors” (67).

If the pieza becomes a paradigm of sorts, “an ever-more general category of value, establishing equivalences between a wider variety of oppressed labor power” (82), it is the way “the ‘Negro’ functioned as the central symbolic inversion of human value” that sets this play in motion and gives *homo economicus* its distinctly striated and obfuscating character. James himself became more attentive to what he calls “the difficult relationship between the independent Negro movement and the revolutionary proletariat,” and though he didn’t quite come to theorize this difficulty (Eudell 52–53; Roberts 181–82; Robinson 278–86), Wynter routed James’s popularist poetics through her more intensive reading with black studies to unlock new worlds for her and James.²¹ Wynter anticipates inciting those who would see in this departure from Marxism a perversion of James, Rodney, and the intellectual legacy they are made to represent. However, Aaron Kamugisha argues that Wynter recognizes how the “secret of James’s thought extends beyond the categories advanced to comprehend him” (190). Wynter’s (n.d.) reading of “slave labor power existed in a continuum with free labor” (105) only insofar as the pieza’s zero-degree slicing of the human form enables the extensive capacities of alienation and exploitation to appear as capacities. Intersubjective relations with buyers and sellers, which Marx (1976) inscribes as “this race of peculiar commodity-owners” (275), are abstracted through the use and enjoyment of a commodity whose commodification is total. Without the slave, in other words, no capitalism, without social form no production, without blackness, no value.

Though part of the chorus whose refrain renders free labor insufficient for grasping capitalism’s global purview, Wynter does not, in

the final instance, seek to deepen an analysis of racial slavery as a feature of capitalism. The challenge to this system must account for how “production” as a concept and organizing frame minimizes, despite Marx’s best efforts, “the coordination of the broader life activities of the peoples of the globe,” a problem that for Wynter (1992) is “sustained by the same categorical system that displaced and repressed the importance of African slavery in the first phase of capitalist development” (82). To build from this description she posits a unifying theory of race that does not collapse into identity politics. If “minority discourse” is to represent a real revolutionary challenge, it “can *not* be merely another voice in the present ongoing conversation or order of discourse” (1987, 233); it must find a way to disrupt and unsettle the desires producing this discourse. Attending to this difference—what Wynter does not do—permits us to witness in her work a shift whose first order of inversion is so disruptive of Marxist presuppositions (and Marx does have presuppositions) that its implications, I suspect, remain indeterminate for us still: what is required is to make available the terms appropriate to an analysis of *capitalism as a component of slavery*. In Wynter’s hands, capitalist social ontology is not an *effect* of productive forces. Its “totalitarian colonization of desire” is what needs explaining, theoretically and historically. Note the priority:

one must *first* explain the social, political and ideological processes of the society that ‘produced’ the worker as a man marked by the non-ownership of the means of production, as a man with the prescribed ego identity to enable him to accept the wage contract—except in moments of upheaval—as a ‘just’ exchange for the subordination of his right to self expression, self definition, to that of the bourgeoisie’s right to self expression, self definition. (n.d., 565)

While this refurbished analytical priority does not mean that Wynter takes on James's concept of the world revolutionary subject, incumbent as it is on Marxist humanism (Nesbitt 2019), it does not necessarily deny the social ontology of labor either. Wynter continues to interrogate the production of the labor frame: with "its theologization of material life, its production of the economic as its sole reality principle, its reduction of man to his productive capacity," labor can be conceived as the strategy, with real sociogenic effects, through which capitalism "controls and regiments the multiple layers of its world system" (n.d., 439).

Wynter's provocations, forwarded in the next section through the sociogenic principle, continue to raise questions concerning the focus on labor, and by extension capitalism, even as labor comes to be conceptually undermined, even when it is deconstructed, deflated, and rendered ideological, even as authors tilt their horizons to more directly encompass race, gender, and sexuality. Many Marxist critics can now argue with some confidence "the claim of waged work to analytical precedence in the developmental histories of capitalism no longer seems secure" (Eley 166), but if wage-labor's precedence no longer seems secure, why does it continue to secure itself in our conversations and orient our horizons? If the prime categories of the critique of political economy are inadequate, why maintain them even in the moment of challenging them?

I admit I feel conflicted as I try to hold in the frame these questions, without collapsing their problematic too quickly (too quickly into a new totality, ceding ground to prior terms or dissolved into a series of discrete events). Why is it that new *histories* of capitalism have not provided new *theorizations* of slavery? Why is it, in turn, that Marxist attempts to more fully incorporate the *history* of slavery have failed to produce anything but

weak *theorizations* of capitalism?²² Instead of dismissing this failure as the ritualized repetition of orthodoxy over and against heresy, we can ask what labor conceptually affords critique. If abstract labor, and its revelation in the money-form, does not encompass slavery, race, and anti-blackness without significant acrobatics then why maintain capitalism as the frame? If value-form in Marxist analysis points to what labor offers to questions of relation, process, and being—ways of being free, moving in the world, and comprehending social-historical existence and emancipation—why not facilitate a shift to questions of being more explicitly? Is there something lost, about labor, about capitalism, about historical processes, in this seemingly transcendental maneuver?²³ I raise these questions with an uneven mixture of sincerity and skepticism, as I strive to understand the need for retaining and centralizing the concept of labor, even as I spin my speculative web in other directions.

Sociogenic Form

What the previous sections explored as a component of Wynter's process of inquiry can here instead be sustained at the weight of a "method of presentation."²⁴ Wynter is driving towards an "autonomous frame of reference" which would work to "deconstruct and decode the underlying morphogenetic fantasy which dictates multiple modes of supremacy" (2018, 37–38). She proposes "classarchy" as the governing morphogenetic fantasy, or cultural imaginary of the group subject, which takes the "sovereignty of a middle class model of human identity" to be isomorphic with reality (32). Wynter's mutated version of universality generates a theoretical understanding of the ongoing plantation paradigm as the way "being" presents itself to subjectivity.²⁵ That this alternative—the plantation—is so scarcely conceived indicates the depth and durability

of the “morphogenetic fantasy” as well as the difficulty of an alternate theoretical construction that can address the origin and structure of racial attachments without collapsing these entirely into the attachments of capitalism. Instead of assuming the form of slavery as it relates to the content of racial capitalism and world-systems theory, Wynter then offers an analysis of the history of slavery through which both the transcendental slave (universalized as timeless) and the human (overrepresented as Man) congeal.

Wynter has had select company here: Elsa Goveia, one of Wynter’s earliest citational companions, worked to move from “a purely descriptive approach” to an explanatory one that grasps “the principle of social organisation which gave coherence to the life of the community,” identifying the “influence of this principle upon the nature of the cultural contact between African and European—slave and master—in an area where the nature of this contact has been of the greatest significance in determining the form and content of the society itself” (Qtd. in Chamberlain 2004, 174). Such a principled elaboration does not rest on integrating slavery into capitalism nor does it hope that historical context can save us. Indeed, the production of the being Wynter calls the slave’s “death in life” (*Black Metamorphosis*, 212) ushers in the secular organization of Man-as-transcendence that animates the peculiar repetitions of historical representation. To attend to this counter-intuitive bending of history, we need turn no further than how Marx’s curiously transhistorical slave has a life and death status that goes without saying. The slave’s “*existence*,” in Marx’s purview, is presupposed as “guaranteed even though it does not belong to him” (*Capital* 1031). We’ve seen how Marx displaces the conditions of the slave’s existence as pre-capitalist, turning his theoretical prowess to the “free worker.” The latter, in explicit

contrast to the slave, “is impelled by his wants. The consciousness (or better: the *idea*) of free self-determination, of liberty, makes a much better worker of the one than of the other, as does the related feeling (sense) of responsibility” (1031). Because the compelling freedom of labor, and its accompanying existential alternative in death, is not simply an illusion, but Marx’s fullest determinant of history, it remains Marxism’s enduring scene of interest. The existential ground of expropriation facilitates both the production of surplus value and the figuration of freedom.

This does not mean, of course, that we need to take Marx’s ahistorical slave at its word. For Wynter, it is at the asymptote between the slave and laborer that the “great civilizing influence of capital” (1973, 409) can be understood to make its mark. It is broadly recognized that the pieza form inscribes itself into the reality of labor by effecting, at minimum, the ruse of false consciousness by turning those divorced from their means of production into Du Boisian and Spinozian “willing slaves of capital” (Lordon 2014; Wynter n.d. 157–58; Eudell 51). Wynter, more maximally, approaches self-determination as an expression of “the hegemony of the labor conceptual frame (i.e., the frame of the struggle against capitalism)” (1992, 84) whose onto-epistemological effects do violence *through* the Marxist imaginary—a despotism not only suffered through, but reinforced, and disciplined in the self, in others, and in intersubjective mediation.²⁶ This mediation facilitates Wynter’s diagnosis of the “overrepresentation” of Man with respect to labor. Beginning with the plantation as the “embryonic form of monopoly capitalism,” Wynter discerns how “the Western world saw the image of its own future” and elevates “The series of stereotypes that it would project of the Negro” into “a form of exorcism, the exorcism of a nightmare that drew closer and closer” (n.d., 454).²⁷

Instead of posing history against theory, content against form, as if these distinctions mean something independent of their context, Wynter reads Renaissance humanism as a revolution *in form*, the forms of human and slave, sustained by a formlessness (or presupposed originary negation) that this matrix both produces and never quite exorcises.²⁸ If a Marxist philosophy of history takes as its starting point reconstructed abstractions, the same can be said (or at least explored) with respect to race. And yet race *and* slavery both continue to be apprehended according to an in-dwelling logics of identity (race and class, slavery and capitalism) in which appearance only ever has a veiling relationship with its presumably capitalist essence. Since there is no animating meta-principle at play, apart from economic functionalism or biological determinism, there is no theory that can come from racial slavery or its putative subjects of history unless they are transposed into laborers in a capitalist world-system. But race can only act as an ideological mechanism of class divide, as congealed “identity” instead of “non-identity,” if there is a prior formlessness, an empty space, that makes this divide compelling. This negative space, from the perspective of Wynter’s theoretical-historical reconstruction of the human, is blackness, the “liminal category of Negation, of Lack” (Qtd. in Roberts 183).²⁹

The holdover, Wynter observes, in the movement from one descriptive order to the next, in the slide from God to state to capitalism, from enslavement to sin to passion to scarcity (and the Christian, *homo politicus*, and *homo oeconomicus* salvific subjectivity this sin implies), is the ascriptive power both imputed and denied to the “Negro” (2001, 43–44). This figure appears on the global scene, for Wynter, as the foreclosed example of symbolic death *across* genres of the human—the marker of sin, irrationality, dysselection, and overpopulation—whose peculiarly

singular appearance-through-oblivion (a “polar negation, the absence of civilization, its void” (n.d. 382)) guarantees the translatable terms of social life and the pleasure-seeking and rewards-systems appropriate to materializing and maintaining this negation. Wynter’s prismatic account of the secular threshold, in particular, addresses blackness generated for medieval Islamic and Christian cartographers as the boundary marker that represents, in diverse and still unforeseen ways, “transgressive chaos” (1995, 21). Thus while race is just as subject to sociogenic critique as class, gender, and sexuality, Wynter thinks *with* blackness to interpret how this “ultimate mode of otherness based on ‘race’” generates “our present model of being ‘Man,’” and “subtypes of otherness” (42). As the “only *legitimately enslavable* population group” (11), blackness, in its non-synonymous echo with race, figures as Wynter’s theoretical-historic entry for the set of distinctions that would come to dominate modern man: the difference not only between capital and labor but also man and woman (1990; 2018) and settler and indigenous. On the latter point, Wynter’s “triadic model” in “1492” has blackness providing the “principle of similarity or of conspecificity that would come to bond, if on the terms of sharply unequal relations, the incoming Spanish settlers with the indigenous peoples” (1995, 11). While Marxism tends to bond slave and indigenous together as disposable labor central to capitalist accumulation and dispossession, Wynter points to a different bond—that of the “hereditarily free,” albeit grievously unequal, subjects whom the indigenous were ultimately decided to be (11). Blackness serves as the negative category that capacitates others, even in their various forms of reduced or diminished capacity (the indigenous peoples of America being famously posed as children).

Race as superstructure arises from class relations, yes (as Robinson writes, becoming “the rationalization for the domination, exploitation, and/or extermination of non-‘Europeans’” (27)), but race as social form is dependent on the difference between the laborer and slave: race is the way blackness *appears* for the sociogenic principle of political economy but does not need to be reduced to political economy. This tension is one way of accounting, more generally, for the appeal of Marxism and for the difficulty in stretching it. Nesbitt (2019), for example, has recently repurposed James on the slave as proletariat to explain the experience of emancipated slaves in the French Caribbean, where they become progressively proletarianized as they are forced to enter into the wage contract (9). But the hyper-exploitation of the slave post-emancipation, framed as “free labor,” can be thought, too, as a mode of appearance for the perfection of blackness, which, following emancipation, finds its replicating principle in sociogenic form itself instead of codified law (Sorrentino 30–33). As negative presupposition, that which is posited to be outside of history *because* of history, blackness is reproduced by the labor of the pre- and post-emancipation slave not only through direct force but also the forced facilitation of a philosophy of history and political theory of freedom that remains our critical inheritance. Both inside and outside form, blackness formalizes the formlessness for which race legitimizes the content—filling in reasons for scarcity, poverty, and dysselection, demonstrating and re-demonstrating death as imminent negation. The compulsive exorcisms of blackness provide the serial figure of excess and go some way towards explaining why labor remains operative even when haunted by remainders of its theodicy. Blackness produces, in other words, the world as social form through its recursively enforced formlessness.

Against the grain of historical materialism, Wynter's borrowing from sociogeny more profoundly integrates the intoxication of formalism into the movement of history as a central feature of why history cannot make its own conditions of production known to itself. Historical reproduction, Wynter muses in her interview with David Scott, depends precisely on its refusal to ask after "the code, the law of the code, the principle, which functions as the ground of the history that will be narrated and existentially lived." Instead, "the paradox here, of course, is that it cannot itself be historicized within the terms of the ethnohistory to which it will give rise: that code/mode must remain...unhistoricizable" (2000, 197–98).³⁰ This is also, not incidentally, Marx's problem with so-called primitive accumulation, which theologizes its origins:

the accumulation of capital presupposes surplus-value; surplus-value presupposes capitalistic production; capitalistic production presupposes the availability of considerable masses of capital and labour-power in the hands of commodity producers. The whole movement, therefore, seems to turn around in a never-ending circle, which we can only get out of by assuming a primitive accumulation...which precedes capitalistic accumulation; an accumulation which is not the result of the capitalistic mode of production but its point of departure. (1976, 873)

If the historical is not transparent to itself, it accumulates organizing principles by securing faith in the forms through which its possibility can be translated, instantiating the human as its subject and banishing the groundlessness of its truth-claims and the conditions of formlessness (blackness) through which it makes its appearance on the world stage. The role of blackness in eternalizing lack, in this regard, works as the motor of history. Anti-blackness gives the laborer the possibility of

meaning, it imputes to the slave the impossibilities the social order rejects, and it reveals for social form an outside through which its referential terms find reproductive ground.

A reconstructive logic can be provided as follows: the problem of blackness-as-slavery unfolds at the axis of non-coincidence, where race fails to secure itself, where the organization of racial form is driven by the very problem of indeterminacy (non-being) it was constructed to mediate, order, and constrain. The problem of slavery and capitalism repeats this indeterminacy, relaying why attempts to integrate slavery into proliferating capitalisms, racial or otherwise, are marked by their failed totality—uneven, contradictory, multiple, formalist, functionalist. This then is also a way to describe and diagnose why the excess of the slave to labor, even and especially at the moment of emancipation, requires more than the incorporation of race into history, or slavery into capitalism: the failure of capitalism to contain the slave remains capitalism's central drive—to render the lack of the laborer a possibility. The incommensurability between a theory of capitalism and a theory of racial slavery can be conceived, following this reading of Wynter, as a problem *internal* to slavery. Racial slavery marks the realization of a violent mechanism that captures both the historical expression of indeterminate social form and the cache for the drive towards transcendence (the other-worldly) in the policed disembodiment of blackness. It is this tension—the theological workings of black death—that racial capitalism describes but cannot explain.

The neglect of slavery and race as matters of social form, when asked through the sociogenic principle, likewise returns the problem to an expression of available sense-making as an avenue of pleasure-seeking—pleasure here being found in the modulation of compulsive drives. The

labor form, precisely in its attempt to suture the subject onto the commodity-form without remainder, attempts to make being coincident with appearance, where the “masterer of scarcity” (2003, 320–21) fulfils the mastery of form, where those that fail are condemned to assume the burden of representing otherwise. If the “identity of labor is not the norm,” but, in Wynter’s (1992) reading of Fanon, the laborer’s opposite, then “the Bondsman, the Lumpen, and the *damnes de la terre*” concretize blackness by never quite being incorporated into labor and being instead formally haunted by the ways (including, for Wynter, the neuro-reward pathways) they are condemned to “accept their inculcated zero value of identity, their own nothingness” (75).³¹ The ever-shifting human form, and its overdetermination as self-determination, works as a compensatory container for this impossibility insofar as laboring subjects find self-satisfaction in the face of their continued domination. Wynter’s pointed interest in opioid reward and punishment systems (drawn from Marx’s “opiate of the masses”) indexes why even such unstable states feel pleasurable (2001, 50; 2015, 218–20; McKittrick 2021, 58–59). We can, ultimately, situate the blows Wynter expected as that much more intense and pervasive because her theory provokes this excessive kernel.

Conclusion: Beginning from the Beginning

Wynter recollects that with the 1984 “The Ceremony Must Be Found,” she “was crossing a frontier” (2006a, 31). This article has demarcated the frontier as the movement from factory to plantation insofar as the plantation materializes new social forms embodied in the human. Returning to the scene of Wynter’s expectation and those with whom her work was composed in a strained intimacy, Wynter addresses Marxism as a kind of seduction for generations of anti-colonial thought—the ways

“Marx’s then prophetic-poetic emancipatory project...had been, for so long, the *only* ostensibly ecumenically human emancipatory project around” (Wynter and McKittrick 2014, 40). The trick to understanding why Wynter cannot be absorbed into Marxist terms, to why even an open Marxism seems reluctant, even hostile, to her order of questioning, begins by both staying with slavery and providing an account for why slavery cannot be stayed with. It requires a historical materialist philosophy of race *and* its un-materializable excess as a matter of form and its routing of enjoyment. In asking Marxist theorists to give up on history, the globe, or labor as guiding subjects, Wynter is asking to reroute attachments of being and to confront negation always anew.

At this register, we can likewise approach what Wynter (2006a) means by the drive “to go back to the origin, rethinking everything” and why “Beginning from that beginning then began to change everything” (29). While the activist movements Wynter (2003) addresses as “the Colonial Question, the ‘Native’ (i.e. nonwhite) and the Negro Question” have been sorted into “subsets of the Marxian Labor issue,” Wynter’s intellectual, poetic, and political enterprise draws its strength from redescribing these global movements “in the terms of an issue that is specific to them—yet one that has hitherto had no name, seeing that it cannot exist as an ‘object of knowledge’ within the terms of our present order of knowledge” (312–13). To begin at the beginning, without denomination but with political and aesthetic activity as a guide, means Marx and Hegel can remain a referent but not the ur-referent against which to discipline other vantages into political-methodological lock-step. Wynter’s autonomous frame of reference does not shy away from the boogeyman of total social history. Instead, her redescription points to how “it is out of the New World black experience—the earliest and most

sustained experience of the culture of production as a mode of domination—that a more universal mode of exploitation can be theoretically constructed” (n.d., 583). Wynter finds emancipatory currents in “black revolt” from Myal to Marley that not only revolutionize the subject of Marxism, but revolutionize the “constitution of reality,” “its deconstruction of the social norm” (n.d., 924). While Marx’s capital takes for granted the distinctions between the forced labor of the slave and the veiled labor of the worker, Wynter thematizes the auto-poetic and auto-instituting processes that set them apart in order to more comprehensively combust what conditions their reality.

With respect to Wynter’s (n.d.) challenge to Marx, then, the poetics of deconstruction has only just begun: “The history of the cultural colonization, of the nigger-breaking of the Western proletariat, still remains to be written. It will be a complex and difficult history to write” (577). What was true in the 1970s remains true today. Her 2014 interview with McKittrick meditates on the challenge of invoking Césaire’s new science “without falling into the traps laid down by our present system of knowledge, which means that I am often afraid that I will not be able to get it all across” (18). The difficulty of this history will not be recovered by the steady proliferation of archival detail, for “If invention is confined to the historical, then endless self-creation can only be extended as a servile representation—a mimetic mode of what was experientially felt to be imprisoning—and so always already trapped inside a predefined meaning of what counts as ‘history’” (Scott and Wynter 2000, 194). It will not be achieved by a simple stretching of the frame through which history is interpreted and the empirical concretized, but by what this stretching beckons: her “risky and rebellious project of undoing what we know” (McKittrick 72), her rethinking of everything. Because both identity-based

and materialist theories contain their own calcification, this difficult history will involve a conceptual upending along the lines of the critique of classical political economy. It will extend to identity politics as it is currently fashioned insofar as it understands identity as a movement that can intensify blackness as poetic *non*-identity.

That Wynter has not written a new volume of *Capital* along these reformulated lines leaves open a question: is such a text yet to come—a door Wynter opens and beckons towards—or is this grand synthesis rendered irrelevant by the problem of a negation, a formlessness, that will always undo it? The instability of this question—the theoretical relationship to historical reconstruction as an endeavor yet-to-come, what Wynter confesses she fears she cannot get across—convenes Wynter’s immanent form of black aesthetic devotion, written as a new science of the word: “For to *name* the world is to *conceptualize* the world; and to conceptualize the world is an expression of an active relation” (1976, 87).

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¹ Edwards (2001) reads the polemical style of Wynter’s early essays, in particular, in the “exigencies of battle” characterizing Caribbean cultural criticism in the 1970s (27).

² See Marx (1973) wax on “this spontaneous interconnection” which is “independent of the knowing and willing of individuals, and which presupposes their reciprocal independence and indifference,” being “precisely the beauty and greatness” of capitalism (161).

³ For a contemporary overview of “form-determination,” see Arthur (2004b, 1–16).

⁴ “It is as ridiculous,” Marx (1973) writes, “to yearn for a return to that original fullness as it is to believe that with this complete emptiness history has come to a standstill. The bourgeois viewpoint has never advanced beyond this antithesis between itself and this romantic viewpoint, and therefore the latter will accompany it as legitimate antithesis up to its blessed end” (162). Postone’s aside is especially generative in this respect: “by grounding the contradictory character of the social formation in the dualistic forms expressed by the categories of the commodity and capital, Marx implies that structurally based social contradiction is specific to capitalism. In light of this analysis, the notion that reality or social relations in general are essentially contradictory and dialectical can only be assumed metaphysically, not explained” (2009, 217–18).

⁵ On Wynter and Césaire, see Wynter and McKittrick (2015, 63–6; 70–3) and Wynter (2003, 328; 2015, 209–10; 2018, 52). On Althusser, see Wynter (2015, 187 and 202). On Legesse and liminality, see Wynter (1984, 39; 1987, 237; 1994, 66; 2018, 36).

⁶ See Wynter (n.d., 561–62).

⁷ See also Althusser’s philosophical reading of this “new science” in *Reading Capital* 15, as well as an interpretation of Wynter’s reading in Alagraa.

⁸ For how medieval Christianity primed these arrangements, see Capener (2021).

⁹ See White (2010); Cunningham (2016, 121–23); Eudell (2016, 49–55); and McKittrick (154–56) for analyses of the document as cleaved in two and the importance of black studies in propelling this shift.

¹⁰ See also Hall (2016, 74–96).

¹¹ See likewise Robinson’s (2000) evaluation of a particular Marxist presumption “that their project is identical with world-historical development” (2).

¹² See also Nesbitt’s (2019) reading of the proletariat in James’s *World Revolution*.

¹³ My reading of this debate is informed by Tomich (2004, 32–55), as well as Anievas and Neroncioğlu (2015, 13–27).

¹⁴ In amplifying slavery as the “pivot” of industry, Marx (2000) provides the bare bones of the thesis Williams concretizes: “Without slavery you have no cotton; without cotton you have no modern industry. It is slavery that gave the colonies their value; it is the colonies that created world trade, and it is world trade that is the precondition of large-scale industry” (221).

¹⁵ See Hall’s conceptualization of “Marxism without Guarantees” (1986) which calls for a “necessary openness of historical development to

practice and struggle” (42). Trotsky’s Uneven and Combined Development has been revitalized as this sort of opening; see Anievas and Nicosiflis (43–63) and Shilliam (2009).

¹⁶ On an absorption of Wynter’s critique into that of “colonial capitalism,” see Bohrer (2020).

¹⁷ For Wynter’s engagement with Wallerstein, see n.d., 106–7 and 561–62; 2015, 187 and 202.

¹⁸ Wynter writes “the particularly of an ethnic Black nationalism taken alone could no more have fitted the unique black situation than the integrationist class code” (n.d., 822). Paquette (2020) provides an instructive overview of how Wynter’s sense of Négritude exceeds identity politics by existing “outside of the self–other binary that orders a particular world” (147).

¹⁹ In Nesbitt’s (2019) estimation, “the a priori question at stake—whether the wealth produced by plantation slavery enabled the initiation of and transition to capitalism—is incapable of furnishing an adequate response to the debate” (24).

²⁰ Robinson does object to using numerical measurements to ascertain the way slavery developed capitalism (112–16).

²¹ For Kamugisha, “The quarter century that separated the writing of James’s and Wynter’s texts appears as a chasm rather than a generation, with the civil rights movement, black power, and the advent of black studies creating conditions of possibility for Wynter that James could not have dreamed of in 1950” (169). See also Robinson’s ambiguous endnote 148 on Wynter and James (398–99).

²² I agree with Nesbitt’s (2019) assessment that slavery has “never been addressed in terms adequate to Marx’s categorial, structural analysis in *Capital*” (11–12).

²³ See Henry’s concern with the “the imprecision of this epistemic totality compared to the mode of economic production” (139–40).

²⁴ See Marx’s (1976) famous comments to this end: “Of course the method of presentation must differ in form from that of inquiry. The latter has to appropriate the material in detail, to analyse its different forms of development and to track down their inner connection. Only after this work has been done can the real movement be appropriately presented. If this is done successfully, if the life of the subject-matter is now reflected back in the ideas, then it may appear as if we have before us an *a priori* construction” (102).

²⁵ Afro-pessimism, as one extension of this theoretical orientation, has certainly been critiqued for the ways its theoretical narrative is “unmoored

from time and space by a ruthless disregard for material historical processes” in Olaloku-Teriba (2018, 100). Against this critique, Afro-pessimism can be forwarded as a method that, in many ways like Marx’s own, seeks to avoid approaches that would either find historical phenomena self-explanatory or cede ground to *a priori* categorical structures. Wynter helps us see a way towards a general *theory* of slavery and not (as it is often accused of failing to provide) a *history* of slavery. This conceptual tension with historiography is meant to be critical, offering new insights into forms of thought (from race to history to the human) that have long petrified. Writes Sexton: “Black existence does not represent the total reality of the racial formation—it is not the beginning and the end of the story—but it does relate to the totality; it indicates the (repressed) truth of the political and economic system” (2010, 48). This means, too, that “black particularism” can be seen to open “the possibility of providing a transcultural perspective” (Wynter 1998, 281).

²⁶ Wynter (n.d.) quotes Jean Baudrillard to this effect: “the economic violence capital inflicted on him in the equivalence of the wage and labour power is nothing next to the symbolic violence inflicted on him by his definition as a productive force” (561).

²⁷ Wynter echoes Césaire in citing the “climax” of such a nightmare in “the Auschwitz and Gulag archipelagos.”

²⁸ Drawing on Wynter’s “supplementary relations with Marxism and Pan-Africanism,” Henry argues that Wynter’s “engagement does not create new dualities between historicism and poeticism or reinforce old ones” (119). Theoretically, it is the perspective on what we have called social form and blackness that gives Wynter a most signal contribution.

²⁹ See Henry (128–36) and Paquette (142–45) for more on this negation.

³⁰ See a comparable expression in Sami Khatib’s psychoanalytically-inflected Marxism: “If form is time-bound and, in this sense, also the historical expression of the social production of time-as-form, we can think of form as a changing social relation, which contains its own unhistoricizable historicity while producing historical time. This peculiar historicity is unhistoricizable because the standard of historicization (time as chronometric measurement, diachronic sequentiality etc.) is itself produced by and through it” (2020, 85).

³¹ Hall argues that blackness “itself has no specific class connotation,” for it “exists ideologically only in relation to the contestation around those chains of meaning and the social forces involved in that contestation” (2016, 153).