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Nicholas Brady

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Slaughterhouse of the Flesh

Notes towards a General Economy of Antiblackness

Nicholas Brady

“Thus, despite the effort to contextualize and engage blackness as a production and performance, the sheer force of the utterance “black” seems to assert a primacy, quiddity, or materiality that exceeds the frame of this approach. The mention of this “force” is not an initial step in the construction of a metaphysics of blackness or an effort to locate an “essence” within these performances but merely an acknowledgment of the sheer weight of a history of terror that is palpable in the very utterance “black” and inseparable from the tortured body of the enslaved.”

-Saidiya Hartman

A common critique of theories of antiblackness is that the concept *ontologizes* racial formations, thus reifying racial difference as a transhistorical essence that cannot be resisted. Saidiya Hartman gave us a different way to think this relationship between ontology and blackness in her 1997 text *Scenes of Subjection*. In the epigraph, Hartman describes a force conjuring a “primacy, quiddity, or materiality that exceeds the frame of” theorizing blackness through performance. Hartman emphasizes that this force locked into our language for blackness is not ahistorical. In fact, the very materiality that exceeds the frame of performance is a direct product of a “human sequence written in blood”:

Brady, Slaughterhouse of the Flesh the history of anti-black racial terror.¹ Despite Hartman's refusal of metaphysics, the fact that she must refuse the language of metaphysics speaks to a problematic that cannot be simply shaken off. E. Patrick Johnson reapproaches this problematic in the wake of Hartman's intervention when he writes:

Blackness, however, is not only a pawn and consequence of performance, but it is also an effacement of it. The implication of this construction of blackness in relation to performance is not that performance, as suggested by its naysayers, is "anti-intellectual." Rather, it suggests that performance may not fully account for the ontology of race.

It is important to note the difference between how the authors use metaphysics and ontology. Ontology is a branch of metaphysics, dealing with fundamental question of being. As a discourse, race asserts and hierarchizes certain essences to different beings. Within the discourse of race, these essences and differences exist on a mythic plane, asserted as fundamental, material, and metaphysical (as that which is beyond physics, history, and change). It is this sense of metaphysics that Hartman refuses, a sense of blackness as something mythic, transhistorical, or outside of historical change. Racial formations are fundamentally historical. What Hartman locates as a materiality of blackness is a historical production. Yet, race operates paradoxically as a historical project that asserts itself through ontological principles. For this reason, Johnson states blackness effaces performance—the performance of blackness is a performance of a figure operating on an ontological, or non-performative, principle. Instead of ontologizing racial difference, the concept of antiblackness names and attempts to theorize this problematic between performance and ontology at the heart of race.

Instead of a closure (or reification), this paper will conceptualize this problematic as an opening towards something that exceeds and effaces both performance and ontology. We will do this by excavating some critical moments in Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*, in particular spots where she differentiates a theorization of antiblack violence from other theoretical paradigms of power. The second half of the paper will read antiblackness through Bataille's concept of general economy to better understand what Hartman describes as the simultaneous *pleasure of terror* and *terror of pleasure*. We

¹ Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *Black, White, and In Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 206.

will conclude by using the theoretical resources gleaned from these two readings to better understand how the negative force of antiblackness operates as a contingent, yet generative dynamic.

I

Hartman begins the first chapter of *Scenes* considering a purported ally of the slave instead of an enemy. Hartman begins with a letter written by John Rankin, an abolitionist, to his brother describing the staged spectacle of the slave suffering. Rankin describes watching these scenes of suffering and attempting to bring the pain of the slave close by imagining himself and his family as slaves. In his description to his brother the slaves themselves are lost and instead his own imagined body becomes the vehicle of indignation. Noting that this act of imagination ends in an outcry against the institution of slavery, Hartman reveals the ambivalence of this flight of empathy,

if this violence can become palpable and indignation can be fully aroused only through the masochistic fantasy, then it becomes clear that empathy is double-edged, for in making the other's suffering one's own, this suffering is occluded by the other's obliteration...²

This ambivalence does not necessarily negate his politics. Instead, Hartman uses this example to show that there is more to the violence of slavery than the spectacle that engrosses Rankin. The slave's flesh is open to the imaginative uses of non-slaves. Rankin's imagination performs a similar violence as the ledger: it reduces the slave body to a figuration that can be used in the non-slave's mind. Rankin also understands his audience and understands the suffering of the slave may not matter much to his brother. But his own suffering and the suffering of his family does matter. In this regard, Rankin's attempt to resist the violence of slavery *re-instantiates* it by re-marking the slave's suffering as illegible and the slave's body as a fungible "imaginative surface upon which the master and the nation came to understand themselves."³

Hartman's analysis reveals how oppositional forces can be libidinally united. These conflictual political positions – the slave-master and the abolitionist -- are both libidinally fed by the suffering of the slave, albeit via very different dynamics. Both the slavemaster and the abolitionist are bonded by their shared capacity to obliterate the slave's presence through the

² Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 19.

³ *Ibid.*, 7

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 spectacularization of black pain. Antiblackness allows a diverse array of political subjects to fashion a self from the slave's open vulnerability to terror. This dynamic reveals a "*diffusion* of terror" throughout the social worlds of nineteenth-century America.⁴

Thinking of blackness as "imaginative surface" illuminates how black flesh can be used for much more than labor and stereotype. In this sense, Hartman uses performance to shift the theorization of blackness away from identity: "blackness is defined here in terms of social relationality rather than identity: thus, blackness incorporates subjects normatively defined as black, the relations among blacks, whites, and others, and the practices that produce racial difference."⁵ Hartman's move performs two key delineations: (1) Hartman does not describe slavery as a bifurcated world between the plantation and the slave quarters -- the world of masters and the world of slaves, white world, and black world. Instead, Hartman stresses that blackness is a "contested figure at the very center of social struggle" shared by all political subjects. (2) Her use of "relation" does not collapse slavery into a pastoral picture of mutually implicated subjects. Instead, Hartman's analysis stresses the performativity of anti-black power -- the necessity to repeat the displays of gratuitous violence and the diffusion of this repetition throughout the social world, appearing in guises not immediately deemed terror. Hartman reveals the intimacy of terror —the violence of anti-blackness is not the violence of (only) separation and isolation, but the terror of touch, the inescapability and "double bind" of relationality.

Extending from these delineations, Hartman subordinates the Foucauldian heuristic of power relations (and the baggage of the power/resistance dialectic) in favor of theorizing a relation of domination founded on terror and repression. These quotidian relations of domination exceed the logic of a productive power relation that engender resistance, for "the operations of power appear more repressive than productive, and the attendant forms of subjection seem intent upon preventing the captive from gaining any measure of agency that is not met with punishment..."⁶ With this quote she cites the interview of Michel Foucault titled "The Ethic of Care for The Self as a Practice of Freedom." When asked if practices of liberty require spaces of liberation,

⁴ Ibid., 4

⁵ Ibid., 57.

⁶ For an analysis of the relationship between Hartman and theories of biopower and necropower, specifically Giorgio Agamben and Achille Mbembe, see Jared Sexton, "People-of-color-blindness notes on the afterlife of slavery," *Social Text* 28.2 (2010), 31-56.

Foucault agrees by differentiating relations of domination from relations of power. While relations of power are found across social relations and engender resistance, relations of domination arise when “an individual or a social group manages to block a field of relations of power.” In the case of antiblackness, the relation of power is blocked by the *performativity of terror*. Foucault agrees with Hartman that resistance becomes “extremely confined and limited” in a relation of domination. The relation of domination cannot simply be reversed through individual play or resistance, for each individual act that falls outside the master’s will is met with negating violence. According to Hartman, Blackness names this social antagonism produced from the persistent and gratuitous repetition and display of this negating violence. The force that explodes from the word “black” is due to this historically broad and deep distribution of racial terror across the social tapestry.

Yet, Hartman is threading a very fine needle with this point. Hartman’s analysis certainly aims to “cast doubts on the capaciousness of transgression” as a general rubric for analysis of the slave relation, yet she is not denying the existence of the long history of slave rebellion and resistance.⁷ Instead, she is pressing against the hegemony of slave agency as a necessary trope for radical historiographies of slavery.⁸ Hartman achieves this by revealing that agency was not only, or simply, denied, but also played a key role in the performativity of racial terror. Instead of denying the gift of agency to the subjects of her analysis, Hartman reveals agency as a key weapon in the arsenal of the slave master.

In this way, Hartman’s subordination of the Foucauldian conceptualization of relations of power does not mean its elimination. Instead, slavery combines relations of domination with relations of power into a double bind. Hartman shows us across disparate, interlocking sites such as the cuffle, the auction block, the slave quarters, and even the supposed areas of slave performance “outside” of the gaze of the master, that the performance of contentment and enjoyment were compulsory and produced through normalized violence. On the auction block, the value of slaves could fluctuate depending on their

⁷ One example of a critique of Hartman’s argument on agency comes from Jayna Brown, in her award-winning text *Babylon Girls: Black Woman Performers and the Shaping of the Modern*, where she writes, “such literal pessimism only holds firm if the power of the word is given sole dominion over the physical being... A body is never an abstract or empty vessel. Nor can individual gestures be completely controlled... It is through these forms of self-possession that the ‘truth in these limbs’ is evident; a body can never truly be owned” Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Woman Performers and the Shaping of the Modern*, (Duke University Press, 2008), 84-5.

⁸ Walter Johnson, “On Agency,” *Journal of Social History* 37, no.1 (2003), 113-124

Brady, Slaughterhouse of the Flesh performance, so there was economic incentive in compelling slave contentment. This cannot discount the economy of pleasure generated from the compulsion of slave performance. Here the very notion of possession, especially self-possession, is not made materially impossible, but is forced insofar as it works to double the slave's status as socially dead. The slave's will is simulated as contentment, seduction, and enjoyment. Self-possession is not a panacea that transcends the relation of domination – it is another site of contestation for the social struggle around blackness.

Outside of the work gained from a slave, the normalization of violence was used to weaponize the agency of the body against the slave to compel performances of contentment. Elaine Scarry clarifies the weaponization of the body as making it “emphatically and crushingly present by destroying it. It is in part this combination that makes torture, like any experience of great physical pain, mimetic of death...”⁹ This mimesis between pain and death is ontologized under the conditions of racial slavery where “the discursive constitution of blackness is the inescapable prison house of the flesh or the indelible drop of blood -- that is, the purportedly intractable and obdurate materiality of physiological difference.”¹⁰ Perhaps this prison house can also be called a slaughterhouse, where racial slavery repeats the violence of its genesis, “a theft of the body -- a willful and violent... severing of the captive body from its motive will...”¹¹ In this schema, anti-blackness is a system of gratuitous severing and cutting black flesh from “its active desire” echoing throughout the longue durée of the modern world. In an introduction to a special issue of *Black American Literature Forum*, written with Farah Jasmine Griffin, they describe this process of severing as organization, “The ‘truth’ of the body becomes evidence used against us. Fragmented, de-formed, and organ-ized – breasts, dicks, backs, hands, buttocks, and pussies are in circulation. The organ-ization of the body yields profits.”¹²

The materiality of the black position is not secured via the declaration of a mystical law ordained from above – it is produced through what Spillers describes as “human sequence(s) written in blood.”¹³ The global evisceration

⁹ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 49.

¹⁰ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 57.

¹¹ Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*, 206.

¹² Farah Jasmine Griffin and Saidiya Hartman, “Are You as Colored as that Negro?: The Politics of Being Seen in Julie Dash’s *Illusions*,” *Black American Literature Forum* 25. 2, (Summer, 1991), 361-373.

¹³ Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*, 67.

of bodies stolen from Africa and forcibly dragged across the world inscribes the flesh with meanings produced through “the sheer weight of a history of terror.” This bloody struggle of slave resistance and the repetition of gratuitous violence – violence in reaction to, and in excess of, resistance – produces a culture of seeing flesh through “these undecipherable markings on the captive body” – a “hieroglyphics of the flesh” endowing blackened flesh with new grammatical meaning in the modern social imagination. Blackness is not a metaphysical figure then, but a figure produced in the cultural seeing of flesh. Spillers theorizes the naked vulnerability of the captive as an analytical distinction between “body” and “flesh” that also maps onto a distinction between “captive and liberated subject-positions.” Here the liberated or free captors have bodies, as in socially recognized bodies: individuated and self-possessed, even if exploited and alienated. The captive is dispossessed and made into fungible items on the ledger: atomization as the shadow of the liberal individual. The captives are not in a non-relation with their captors and masters, instead the nature of their relation is a “theft of the body.” Relation itself becomes a terror most intimate – terror that is not mediated by social body relations. Captivity is a theft of bodies that severs the body from its “motive will.” This severance is not one action, but a structure of violence that negates the will of the slave in order – consume the being of the black, to make the slave’s being into “being for captor.” We might think of this severing as a dynamic of negation, a dynamic that is not only an absolute denial or prohibition of the slave’s will, but a pruning of its force to serve the structural position of the master. The subjectivity of the slave is not denied in some final sense, but the position of the slave produces singular dynamics of subjection that Spillers and Hartman point us to.

This severing of the body from its motive will reduces the body to flesh, what Spillers calls the “zero point of social conceptualization.” This phrase is interesting, even mystifying, for it seems to imply the flesh is nothing or represents the nothingness of the slave. Spillers’ use of this phrase is an embedded reference to and remixing of Roland Barthes’ concept of the “zero degree of writing.” Barthes writes of privative oppositions, one where there is a “marked” term opposed to an “unmarked” term, that are one of the most basic and fundamental aspects of language. The unmarked terms are not total absences, but the general forces of a language that do not have to be – or cannot be – marked. Barthes clarifies this point when he writes, “The zero degree is therefore not a total absence (this is a common mistake), it is a *significant absence*. We have here a pure differential state; the zero degree testifies to the power

Brady, Slaughterhouse of the Flesh held by any system of signs, of creating meaning ‘out of nothing.’”¹⁴ The zero point is a significant absence, an absence that is the condition of possibility for presence. We can also say that much like the digit “0” or “zero,” it is a theoretical or abstract concept that gives us the way to mark the necessity of absence to the overall system. To have a “body,” one must have flesh, the significant absence of the materiality of the body. Flesh represents the abstract materiality of the body, its naked reduction that can be represented on the ledger as a dash, line, or number. Flesh also represents the materiality of abstraction, the “destructive sensuality” of abstraction, that can turn “physical powerlessness” – a state that can be resisted or can change – into a general, epidermalized “powerlessness” that makes one flesh into their ultimate liability.

While Spillers imposes a clear distinction between “liberated and captive” positions that corresponds to the body/flesh distinction, Hartman offers a friendly amendment by shifting this distinction into a continuum of social death. In a note considering this distinction in defining “mortified flesh” as both this “zero degree of social conceptualization” and “the conditions of social death” Hartman writes further, “Although I do not distinguish between the body and the flesh as liberated and captive subject positions, I contend that the negation of the subject that results from such restricted recognition reinscribes the condition of social death.” (Hartman, note 57, 231). Considering the ambiguities in the law regarding the recognition of slaves, Hartman finds that the times where “slave agency” is recognized is where it can be criminalized in order to rationalize terror. Hartman’s slight difference refracts Spillers’ point that the captive position slides between “physical powerlessness” and “general powerlessness” into a different way to view social death. Instead of talking about social death as a blunt structure that absolutely isolates the slave from social and political conceptualization, Hartman highlights the double binds of subjectivity and recognition that were already apparent before emancipation released these dynamics fully into the body politic.

Hartman highlights how the law’s supposed intervention against gratuitous violence only multiplies the ways that the slave becomes powerless: “this designation of subjectivity utterly negated the possibility of a nonpunitive, inviolate, or pleasurable embodiment, and instead the black captive vanished in a chasm between object, criminal, pained body, and mortified flesh.” This continuum between subject and object, liberated and captive positions,

¹⁴ Barthes, Roland. *Elements of Semiology*. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1977), 77. (Emphasis added.)

produces a terror of movement and ambiguity where the slave is lost in the continuum figured as a chasm. The slave is not denied a social body but is held in perpetual deferral in the chasm between body and flesh, subject and object, marked and zero point.

II

Hartman's analysis produces a "history of the present," or a set of heuristics for understanding the way anti-black power operates in our contemporary moment. Hartman pays close attention to the dynamics of recognition produced in slavery to better understand why the emancipation project does not defeat the antiblackness within the institution of slavery but allows it flourish in new forms. For this reason, Hartman's analysis of the modes of subjection inherent to slavery helps us to understand why the shifting dynamics of its regime of labor does not necessarily shift the general structure of anti-blackness. In order to better conceptualize the economy of power/domination Hartman describes, we will explore Bataille's distinction between restricted and general economy. The different labor management and state recognition practices of the plantation nation are the restricted economies of plantation production that do not get to the depth of the general economy of consuming/expanding black being.

In *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, Georges Bataille attempts to make an economic theory of the flows of energy that exist in excess of classical economics. For Bataille, the field of economics focuses on the production of wealth from a scarcity of resources. This view on scarcity restricts the object of analysis to global resources that can be made productive for subsistence and wealth. Thus, classical economics cannot theorize the economy of forces that operate in excess of human need or value, it restricts the field to questions of utility and productivity. Bataille called these "restricted economies" that he distinguishes from general economy. The general economy is the movement of energies and celestial bodies that operate in excess of these restricted economies. For instance, for Bataille, the energy provided by the sun to the Earth is spent by the natural world without any sense of scarcity. In a view inspired by thermodynamics, he finds the economy that dictates the relation of energy is one of profitless – useless or unproductive – consumption and loss without resolution. When energy is converted from one state to another, a part is converted, and another part is lost as waste. This is not loss as "lack" or, to recall Barthes, a "total absence" but instead is a significant absence: an absence that is part of and central to the operation of the totality.

The operation of general economy does not view waste or loss as an unfortunate byproduct of productive processes, but instead sees profitless, useless consumption and waste as fundamental to life and existence itself. Waste is refigured as the luxury of consumption without the burden of utility. This is not to say scarcity is an illusion, but the problems of scarcity that human societies deal with are in an irresolvable tension with a larger economy of profitless consumption and loss that operate in the surround of our restricted concerns. This paper does not have room to comment on Bataille relationship to anthropology theories of potlatch, but his theory of social relations that organize their economies around largescale consumption and waste can help us to better understand slavery as something other than how it is described as peculiar, wasteful, or even backwards.

Economic historian Thomas Gowan noted in 1942 that the question of slavery's profitability raged for over 150 years without closure. Given the global complexity and long duration of the trans-atlantic slave trade, we find across the literature that profitability shifts given many different variables. The recent explosion of literature at the intersection of the emergent field of "History of Capitalism" and the historiography of slavery have shown how European empires worked to maximize profits on plantations using an array of nuanced economic tools. While the question of profitability is beyond the scope of this paper, we want to instead consider what the relationship of blackness to this economy is. In his piece "Europeans and the Rise and Fall of African Slavery in the Americas", David Eltis considers the "non-economic" reasons for using African slaves. He gets to this consideration by noting the "dog that did not bark" in the archive, or a hypothetical consideration on why white slaves were not preferred over African slaves in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Given the expense of trans-atlantic travel between 3 or 4 continents among other variables, Eltis asks why the profitability of enslaving Europeans in mass was not pursued before the slavery of Africans boomed as a multi-national industry. Against the view of mercantile capitalists as aspiring toward unrestrained profit-maximization, Eltis writes,

Profit-maximizing behavior occurred within agreed-upon limits, limits defined at least as much by shared values as by the resistance of the less-propriety classes... By the seventeenth century, enslavement of fellow Europeans was beyond the limits. More interesting, however, is that the peoples with the most advanced capitalist culture, the Dutch

and the English, were also the Europeans least likely to subject their own citizens to forced labor.¹⁵

Eltis considers these limits as rationalizations that exist outside the economic logic of productivity and profit, primarily the racialism that already exists in European thought that set limits on who would be considered socially dead and who would be recognized, even if through exploitation and servitude. Going with Eltis' line of thinking, we can resist his characterization of these reasons as "non-economic." Instead, it reveals that anti-blackness – the global structure of social death – is not necessarily, or even primarily, a consideration of profit but is an economy of consumption, both of profit and profitless variety.

Returning back to Spillers, the "destructive sensuality" of antiblackness consumes the flesh as "being for captor." We can differentiate how captivity severs the motive will from the body from labor exploitation where the work of the body is abstracted, exchanged, and exploited. For the captive, the flesh is not only forced to labor, but every movement is a struggle against the violence of ontological severance. This severance is never finished, but this fact demarcates the inescapability of this antagonism: a general antagonism of the flesh that is bound to repeat. The flesh becomes a "territory" for the captor and a site of general antagonism that operates almost fractally, repeating the antagonism at every scale of abstraction from social, somatic, psychic, etc. The struggle is a part of the pleasure of this relation of terror, the slave's scream is the music of this performative space of antagonism. The slave does not exchange an abstracted form of its work with the captor, the master, or captivity itself – instead it is worked to death. Forced to march across continents, through the "door of no return," jammed into holds, shuttled between lands, worlds, and positions – every step is the general antagonism of the flesh.

Spillers' concept of "being for captor" is not simply rhetorical or totalizing, we can think of this being as another way of thinking about flesh as abstracted, significant absence. This being stolen by the captor is the carnal being, the energy expended by the flesh – the material essence of every movement and moment of the flesh's existence. This carnal being is the lowest common denominator of all work done by one's flesh, pure work instead of exchanged labor. This work is consumed by the social worlds generated from anti-black captivity. Slavery is fundamentally a cannibalistic institution, and its violence produces what Spillers calls a culture of seeing skin, producing the meaning of

¹⁵ Eltis, David. "Europeans and the Rise and Fall of African Slavery in the Americas: An Interpretation." *The American Historical Review* 98, no. 5 (1993), 1423.

black skin as liability for black people and marked by the repetition of consumptive violence. Each lash, gash, cracked bone writes the generative rhetorical meanings of blackness in blood, Spillers calls this a “hieroglyphics of the flesh.” The glyph is a carving. Captivity carves and marks the meaning of blackness onto the flesh, epidermalizing its meaning into our cultural seeing of dark skin as black flesh. The flesh is the fundamental site, the zero point of the social relationality of blackness -- black flesh is what is at the center of this social struggle.

Hartman turns to another example of this social struggle over Black flesh in her third chapter, “Seduction and the Ruses of Power.” Slaves were barred from consideration as victims of rape because they were not covered by common law, yet they could be held criminally responsible for self-defense against rape. In the case of *State of Missouri v. Celia*, Celia was convicted for the murder of Robert Newsome, her master that raped her every day after he bought her. Across the archive Hartman finds the most compelling evidence of “slave agency” in these criminal records. Far from denying the “agency” of Celia though, Hartman attends to the nature of the response of Celia’s ethical act of self-defense. Criminalization is not simply a legitimization of the master’s violence, it is a technique of terror *through recognition*. The severing of motive will from the body does not operate by eliminating that will or desire – antiblackness must isolate or atomize its force. The Celia case is an example of how the relations of domination (terror) conjoin with the relations of power (recognition) to greatly circumscribe the space of revolt.

Hartman provides a reading of Celia’s last defiant act that displays her complicated ideas of performance and agency. Celia tells Newsome not to come back to her slave quarters, foretelling her readiness to defend herself. Hartman describes Celia’s act as attempting to erect a boundary, between the space she declared as hers and the master’s prerogative and violent pleasure. This “declaration of the limit” was an individual attempt to announce an antagonistic schema of pleasure, one where black flesh is not structurally beholden to the whims of the master. Her boundary was not respected, yet she does murder Newsome, erecting a momentary barrier. As Foucault described above, in a relation of domination the space of resistance such as the one Celia created would be “extremely confined and limited.” Celia’s declaration of the limit as an individual act is recognized as a criminal act – the act of a subject – and this recognition wins her the right to be held responsible for her own self-defense. Celia and her case show both the capaciousness of antiblackness and the radical possibility of Black negation. For what else is Celia’s declaration of the limit than the enactment of her monstrous capacity to declare the meaning

of “no.” The tragedy of Celia’s act, beyond the state-sanctioned violence that murdered her, was that her individual act was not able to find a collective enunciation of Black negation.

Hartman’s focus on a politics of delimitation points to the hardest pill to swallow in her text: that a global order of racial slavery cannot be properly redressed without a revolutionary event that would, at least, destroy the racist social order and abolish all vestiges of the slave relation.¹⁶ Her definition of “performing blackness” emphasizes that black performances cannot be considered discrete self-possessed objects but must be seen in their context: as enactments of a social antagonism whereby short-lived victories may shuttle a slave from one violent institution to another. Hartman’s analysis demands for us to think through black performance outside the language of transgression, agency, and self-possession because the imperative to save black lives demands an “event of epic and revolutionary proportions” -- an event that obliterates the language of anti-black liberalism that weaponized these terms against black flesh. Thinking with Bataille again we could say that Black life is not what is pursued by anti-blackness then -- black life is the waste of the general economy of anti-blackness. The material force of black flesh is the significant absence or zero point of this economy, the ethereal absence. The severing of the motive will from the flesh does not erase it but (*re*)figures it as a problem or the criminal excess to the law generated from the general economy of anti-blackness. Slave rebellions become an ultimate source of liability and anxiety for the restricted economies built on extracting production and wealth from black flesh. These rebellions revealed the general antagonism at the heart of this general economy.

Returning back to Hartman’s definition blackness as social relationality, we can understand the figure of blackness as en fleshed zero point, a significant absence that joins together the social at an elemental level. This significant absence is something like the old theories of “ether” as omnipresent element that joined together all other elements. Ether is also a word for a highly flammable substance, a substance that is used as an intermediary in industrial processes but also prone to spark and explode. The slave rebellion is the omnipresent significant absence across the long duration of modernity, an ethereal presence or absence. The slave rebellion is the possibility of a realization of the general antagonism of black flesh, a possibility that must be made impossible by the machinations of anti-black violence. The slave rebellion has grafted onto many other terms: crime, pathology, social problem, and riot. But against the seemingly obvious ground to disagree, I do not disagree with

¹⁶ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 77.

Brady, *Slaughterhouse of the Flesh* anyone, conservative or not, that says black revolt is criminal. Black rebellion is criminal, for we are always already against the law, against the world (even when we are its strongest proponents). To argue against this claim is to attempt addition by way of subtraction – the power of black revolt is in the illegitimacy and confrontation with the law’s hegemony. This is the blackness of power – the black power that has never and can never be known in this world. What would it have taken for Celia to have the capacity to form a boundary Newsome and the nation would be bound to respect? Celia murdered one master, so there would need to be a collective enunciation of Black negation willing to meet and sound off with her call. Any collective black declaration of the limit would demand nothing less than the end of the world as we know it.

Nicholas Brady is an Assistant Professor of Critical Black Studies at Bucknell University.